

John Clark. *The Green Children of Woolpit: Chronicles, Fairies and Facts in Medieval England*. University of Exeter Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-80413-136-7. 260 pp.

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The interdisciplinary analysis of the “Green Children of Woolpit” phenomenon, as presented in John Clark’s comprehensive study, examines this medieval enigma documented in the 12th-century chronicles of William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall. This case has intrigued scholars and the public for centuries, resisting simple explanations and prompting diverse interpretations.

Clark’s work thoroughly investigates the historical transmission and contemporary retellings of this unusual incident through the frameworks of folklore, historiography, and speculative science. By critically analyzing primary source materials and situating them within their cultural milieu, the author addresses the challenges inherent in interpreting historical anomalies that intertwine extraordinary elements with mundane realities.

The author offers a detailed examination of medieval chroniclers’ methodologies in documenting and assessing “wondrous events” (p.190), emphasizing their dual roles as historians and narrators. The book’s interdisciplinary approach also includes analyses of liminality, otherworldly realms, and potential medical conditions that could explain the children’s distinctive green pigmentation.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction, recounting the narrative of the “Green Children of Woolpit”, a 12th-century event involving two children who reportedly emerged from subterranean origins in the English village of Woolpit with green-tinted skin. The author articulates their longstanding interest in this enigmatic narrative, which has been interpreted variously as folklore, a Fortean phenomenon, and a source of creative inspiration.

This chapter situates the Green Children narrative within the broader context of societal fascination with unexplained and paranormal phenomena. It outlines how different disciplines – folklorists, historians, and proponents of naturalistic or extraterrestrial explanations – have approached the story from distinct perspectives.

The author delineates the progression of their research project on the Green Children, transitioning from initial critiques of existing literature to an expansive interdisciplinary inquiry. This involved rigorous examination of original medieval texts, evaluation of scholarly interpretations, and tracing the narrative’s extensive literary and artistic legacy over centuries.

In describing the structure of the book, John Clark emphasizes key objectives: to disentangle the original historical accounts, provide contextual analysis, and explore why this peculiar incident continues to captivate public imagination across diverse cultural mediums. The painstaking, wide-ranging research undertaken is presented as essential to grappling with the “inherent inexplicability and unclassifiability” (p.4) of the Green Children phenomenon.

In Chapter 2 “The Story and Its Legacy”, John Clark reviews primary source chronicles by William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall. These chronicles offer detailed yet inconsistent information regarding the origins, behaviors, and eventual fate of the Green Children. Clark summarizes key details from both chroniclers’ accounts, highlighting notable inconsistencies.

Clark emphasizes that this unusual medieval account continues to fascinate and elude definitive explanation, serving as an “exemplum of the inherent problems of the historical method” (p.13). He refrains from offering a singular interpretation, instead valuing the preservation of the story’s intrinsic mystery and ambiguity.

Despite enduring interest in the Green Children, Clark notes that the tale likely faded from local memory for centuries until rediscovered by modern folklorists and historians. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the inherent challenges in interpreting and understanding this historical anomaly, as scholars and speculators have often sought to “place, comprehend, categorize and understand” (p.13) the

tale in ways that may not fully capture the original context and meaning.

Chapter 3 “Transmission” explores the historical transmission and modern retellings of the “Green Children of Woolpit” narrative. It traces how the story was disseminated through printed editions and manuscripts, as well as its incorporation into fiction, poetry, drama, and music in the 20th and 21st centuries. The chapter analyzes how contemporary authors have expanded upon the original accounts, introducing new elements while maintaining the core mystery of the Green Children’s origins.

Clark highlights how the story has been reimagined across diverse genres, from children’s literature to folk horror, reflecting its enduring appeal and adaptability. He concludes that the most effective retellings are those that resist explaining away the story’s enigmatic aspects, allowing the Green Children to retain their allure as intriguing strangers in an unfamiliar land.

In Chapter 4 “Interpretations”, John Clark explores various interpretations of the historical account of the Green Children of Woolpit. From a folkloristic perspective, the narrative has been analyzed as a traditional fairy tale, with the children posited as representatives of a “pygmy race” (p.45) that may have inhabited the region prior to the arrival of Celtic settlers. Historians have examined this account within the context of medieval historiography, considering how 12th-century chroniclers often incorporated fantastical elements into their historical narratives.

Some contemporary researchers have attempted to provide more mundane, scientific explanations for the children’s appearance, such as attributing it to chlorosis—a condition characterized by greenish skin due to iron deficiency – or suggesting they were Flemish immigrants. In contrast, writers influenced by Charles Fort’s ideas, often referred to as “fortean”, have embraced the story as a genuine anomaly, potentially linked to extraterrestrial or paranormal phenomena.

Clark also discusses potential connections between the story and early science fiction, noting that the children’s testimony about their “news from someplace and someone fundamentally, ontologically elsewhere”, (p.56) which is characteristic of the genre.

Overall, this chapter demonstrates the diverse range of interpretive frameworks applied to this medieval account, spanning folklore, history, speculative science, and fiction. This multifaceted analysis highlights the enduring fascination with unexplained phenomena and humanity’s tendency to seek rational explanations for seemingly irrational events.

Chapter 5 “The Chroniclers and the Texts” examines the contributions of two medieval historians, William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall, who provide primary accounts of the Green Children story. It explores their backgrounds, sources of information, and approaches to chronicling historical events and recording supernatural phenomena.

John Clark underscores that both William and Ralph were skilled storytellers interested in documenting remarkable occurrences – termed “marvels” and “prodigies.” They carefully evaluated the credibility of their witnesses and sources, reflect-

ing the medieval perspective that such wondrous events, while not necessarily miraculous, merited investigation and documentation.

The chapter also addresses the apparent independence of the two accounts while acknowledging that both historians may have drawn from common sources. This presents a valuable opportunity to compare and contrast the narratives to gain a deeper understanding of the chroniclers’ methods and perspectives. The author offers a nuanced exploration of the medieval historiographical context in which the Green Children story was recorded, emphasizing the chroniclers’ dual roles as historians and story tellers and their commitment to evaluating source reliability.

Chapter 6 “The Framing Narrative” presents a detailed scholarly analysis of the historical accounts concerning the enigmatic appearance of two green-skinned children in the village of Woolpit. Clark meticulously examines parallel narratives provided by two medieval chroniclers, William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall, to reconstruct the events and evaluate possible explanations for the children’s unusual skin coloration and behavior.

A central focus of this analysis is the children’s self-reported origins from a land they described as a “twilight realm” or “St. Martin’s Land.” Clark explores this claim within the framework of medieval concepts of the supernatural and “Otherworldly” realms. The chapter also investigates potential medical conditions, such as chlorosis and favism, that might account for the green pigmentation observed in the children.

Furthermore, Clark considers the hypothesis that the children were foreign travelers or immigrants, possibly from Flanders, based on descriptions of their unfamiliar clothing and language. The chapter rigorously evaluates historical evidence and scholarly hypotheses regarding the identity and origins of the Green Children of Woolpit.

Throughout the analysis, Clark demonstrates a nuanced understanding of medieval sources and the challenges inherent in interpreting historical accounts that blend extraordinary and mundane elements. The chapter offers a comprehensive and thought-provoking examination of this intriguing medieval mystery, supported by an extensive review of relevant literature and historical documentation.

Chapter 7, titled “The Children’s Story”, delves into the historical accounts and possible explanations surrounding the enigmatic appearance of the “Green Children of Woolpit” in 12th century Suffolk, England. This analysis is primarily based on the chronicles of Ralph of Coggeshall and William of Newburgh, who documented the children’s mysterious origins.

The chapter posits that the children’s narratives, elicited through persistent interrogation, likely reflect the impact of leading questions combined with imaginative responses under duress, akin to contemporary cases involving allegations of “Satanic abuse.” The children’s depiction of their homeland as a “green world” is suggested to be more a reaction to questioning than an accurate portrayal. Their description of a “sunless” land bears resemblance to medieval accounts of otherworldly realms, such as those described in Elidurus’s visions, but may

also result from suggestive questioning by their interrogators.

The reference to “St Martin’s Land” as their place of origin remains enigmatic and has led to various speculative interpretations, likely influenced by the cultural context of the questioners. The children’s account of traversing an underground passage to enter the human world resonates with folkloric themes of journeys to other realms and may also relate to local geological features like chalk pits and mines.

The chapter draws parallels with other medieval tales involving reversed seasons or instantaneous travel between worlds, suggesting that the story of the Green Children may represent a fusion of authentic experiences with familiar narrative tropes. Overall, this chapter provides a nuanced examination of the Green Children accounts, emphasizing the complexities involved in interpreting historical narratives that intertwine eyewitness testimony, folklore, and recorder biases.

Chapter 8 “Excursions” delves into various theoretical frameworks applied to the historical narrative of the Green Children. The analysis considers the hypothesis of an “Otherworldly” origin for these children, exploring connections to Welsh folklore and the legendary figure of Merlin. The chapter further examines the concept of liminality, as articulated in anthropology and rite of passage theory, as a perspective for interpreting the children’s experiences.

John Clark observes that medieval chroniclers who recorded the event likely interpreted the children’s appearance through existing folklore and supernatural paradigms. Nevertheless, the chapter advises caution against overinterpretation of historical accounts, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between fundamental observations and subsequent cultural interpretations.

Ultimately, the chapter concludes that while the story of the Green Children presents an intriguing mystery, there is no satisfactory single explanation that accounts for all the reported details. The author suggests that the event is best understood as a complex interaction between empirical observation, folk tradition, and the worldviews of the medieval observers.

Chapter 9 “Strangers in a Strange Land” explores the historical and cultural significance of the mysterious narrative of the Green Children. The author places this tale within the broader framework of medieval chroniclers’ accounts of “wondrous events” (p.190), emphasizing how the experiences of the children have been subject to extensive interpretation, speculation, and misunderstanding over time.

The chapter draws parallels between the circumstances of the Green Children and those of con-

temporary refugees and victims of abuse, illustrating how they have become “minor characters in larger narratives” (p.190) beyond their control. Additionally, it examines the concept of “quasi-ostension” (p.181), where the puzzling origins of the children are interpreted through the lens of fairy folklore.

Ultimately, the chapter presents the central argument that despite centuries of fascination and numerous retellings, fundamental questions about the Green Children – such as their origin, their green complexion, and their eventual fate – remain unresolved. It cautions against the tendency to burden these historical figures with layers of speculation and interpretation while acknowledging the enduring allure of their mysterious story.

An appendix accompanied this edition, comprising reliable sources and translations to facilitate informed analysis and discussion of this enigmatic folktale. The inclusion of these resources underscores the importance of rigorous scholarship in examining such historical narratives.

Concluding, Clark’s comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to this medieval mystery is commendable, skillfully navigating the complex interplay between historical accounts, folklore, and modern interpretations. Notably, the author resists providing a singular, definitive explanation for the Green Children’s origins and behaviors. Instead, he acknowledges the inherent ambiguity and “inexplicability” (p.4) of the case, highlighting the challenges in interpreting historical anomalies through contemporary frameworks. This methodology preserves the story’s mystery while avoiding overinterpretation.

The book’s exploration of diverse interpretive approaches, ranging from folkloristic to scientific, underscores the enduring fascination with unexplained phenomena and humanity’s tendency to seek rational explanations for the seemingly irrational. Clark’s careful consideration of these perspectives enriches our understanding of the cultural and historical significance of the Green Children narrative.

By maintaining an open, inquisitive mindset, Clark aligns with the scientific ethos when confronted with unexplained phenomena. His work invites readers to engage with the complexities of interpreting historical enigmas that defy easy categorization.

Overall, “The Green Children of Woolpit” is a meticulously researched and thoughtfully presented contribution to scholarly discourse on this intriguing medieval mystery. Clark’s interdisciplinary approach and commitment to preserving the story’s essential ambiguity make this book a valuable resource for historians, folklorists, and those captivated by the puzzling nature of this story.

