

*'Children are by nature romantics, until their imagination and creativity are suborned by the pressures of the dominant rationalist world.'*

# Alan Dyer Seeking a sense of place



If you go down to the woods today, you may well have a big surprise. Not teddy bears picnicking, but characters who appear to have materialised from a world of ancient myth and fairy tale: nymphs and satyrs, a wizard, a green man, even a firebird; as well as children stalking through the undergrowth in outlandish disguises, often covered with mud, imitating animals and trees.

Visitors to Killerton Park, a beautiful National Trust property near Exeter, have been encountering such phenomena over the last three years, and many must have questioned their eyesight. Yet it is not the first time that Killerton has been associated with such wonders: a few hundred years ago there were reported sightings of a fiery dragon flying to and from the volcanic hill (Dolbury Hill) at the centre of the estate, apparently guarding some sort of treasure.

## Confronting the dragon

It was really the dragon that started it all. Dragons have generally had a bad press: the

consensus of opinion seems to be that they represent the powerful, untamed forces of nature, both within ourselves and in the environment at large. So confronting them at numerous levels is important for us all!

Dragons fascinate children, and the idea of a quest for the Killerton Dragon proved a considerable attraction when the National Trust advertised for some young children (aged 8–12) to help with a new, experimental approach to environmental education.

Dragon Quest is based on the idea that children are by nature romantics, until their imagination and creativity are suborned by the pressures of the dominant rationalist world. There is no question that children love stories — the more imaginative the better — and that they are especially attracted to myths and fairy tales,

no doubt because, as Bruno Bettelheim and the Jungians have pointed out, they answer a deep psychological need in the growing child.

### 'Primitive' characteristics

Children also love physical activity; and if the stories and the activity can be brought together, all to the good. This is not new to the classroom, but it is not so common for children to be able to re-enact archetypal myths in costume in a natural environment not dissimilar to that of a tribal culture from which the stories first emerged.

In some respects, young children share many of the characteristics of so-called 'primitive' indigenous peoples: they have a strong tribal feeling; they are very physical; they relate to the world around them through their senses; they do not hide their emotions; their thought process is not yet rational; they make sense of the world by telling stories about it, and so on.

### Children and landscape

Dragon Quest also emerged from a perceived need to give children a 'sense of place' in the natural world, to become sensitive to beauty and to the unique character of certain natural landscapes. But it has always been found difficult to get young children to see, let alone appreciate, landscape: they tend to concentrate on what is close to them, and have difficulty in taking in a place as a whole.

This is easily addressed by the right programme in a beautiful sylvan setting — but the current challenge for the project is to find ways of achieving these aims for the vast majority of children in urban or inner-city schools, who do not have easy and regular access to beautiful natural landscapes.

Most myths are about certain special places and the role they play in the adventures of a hero or heroine, and the latter's success in their quest often depends on their sympathy with the natural world and the creatures in it. Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the many delightful stories associated with almost every distinctive feature in the British countryside. Indeed, so many of the stories associated with local place have been lost, forgotten, or modified by recent generations that part of the purpose of the project was to 're-story' the landscape.

### Sharing the idea

These views were shared by three people: myself, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Edu-

cation at the Rolle School of Education, University of Plymouth; John Hodgson, the National Trust's Education Advisor; and Tim Laycock, a professional folk singer/songwriter who is also an accomplished actor and storyteller. With financial support from the National Trust and practical help from Philip Hull, an ethnomusicologist, plus several arts students from the Faculty as well as the team of enthusiastic local children, they embarked on an extended experiment to test their theories.

The group met and worked together for a whole day on every other Saturday, plus regular weekend camps, over a period of some eighteen months. Many activities were tested, and, although the initial trial period has now ended, there are many more ideas in the pipeline yet to be tried out. John Hodgson and I continue to run the programme on a day-visit basis, which is designed to match the requirements of the individual schools.

### Contact with nature

For the most part, the children spent the sessions inside a mystic framework. While appropriate myths from all cultures were carefully selected and used, it was felt that a coherent overall storyline was needed, and an ancient Greek belief that Britain, the *Land Beyond the North Wind*, was some sort of paradise, fitted well with the National Trust's interest, as the children understood that they had the task of helping to restore the land to its Golden Age condition.

Much of the time was spent in the very beautiful environment of Killerton — in the woods and parkland, or by the river. One aim was to bring the children into intimate contact with nature, so, weather permitting, they were encouraged to wear minimal clothing: tee-shirt, gym shorts and bare feet, rather than the ubiquitous anorak, jeans, and trainers or wellies of the normal school party.

On occasion, when acting out a story, they added a simple Greek chiton to the basic wear so that they could feel heroically dressed for the part.

### 'Tuning-up'

The day's programme was generally divided into two: a period of 'tuning-up', followed by a period of 'tuning-in'. The first part of the day, the 'tuning-up' period, was given over to a range of exercises which aimed to tone up body, mind

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and senses (including the sixth and seventh senses!), and to bring the children into harmony with each other and with the natural environment. Some activities, such as archery, were introduced primarily as a bait to capture the children's imagination and channel the need for expressing any 'warlike' tendencies in a controlled way; others, often in the form of games, were carefully designed to stimulate creativity and develop sensitivity.

The arts — all the arts — were a major means of keeping sensitivity alive. The children invented names and stories for the outstanding features of the surrounding landscape; they composed songs, created dances, and performed with shadow puppets; they whittled wood and made pictures using only things found in the woods; and they decorated their own costumes (and bodies) with natural materials, including local muds and clays, as well as water-based make-up. They also spent time alone in the woods in their secret places, which they decorated with beautiful objects that they found: stones, twigs and leaves.

### 'Tuning-in'

After lunch, they 'tuned-in', usually by taking part in an adventure, which often took the form of living through a story from mythology. Once the story had been told, the children dramatised it themselves, often with great imagination. At other times they found themselves in small groups living out the role of fairy-tale hero, faced with a series of hazards presented by archetypal

'helpers' (such as an old wise woman, a wizard, or an animal, each in appropriate costume).

The round of the year was punctuated by ceremonies to mark the changing of the seasons. Often these followed traditional lines — was-sailing the apple trees in winter, welcoming the summer by crowning a May King and Queen and building a Robin Hood's bower for them — but at times the children created their own ceremonies.

### Special moments

There were also special moments of enchantment: as they circled a 700-year-old oak, soft flute music came from within the tree; then a musician, who might have stepped out of Celtic myth, arose at the top as if out of the very trunk, to lead them in a farandole round what was ever after known as 'The Dancing Tree'.

On another occasion, as they were collecting beautifully-coloured fallen leaves in the woods, they heard the soft call of a pipe in the distance. Slowly and silently a strange figure approached: a Green Man, decked in foliage and with green skin. The children, silent and round-eyed with wonder, were invited to add to his decoration with their leaves before he drifted away as the distant flute resumed its song: a moment which sent a thrill down everyone's spine.

The children also camped together, some using a traditional native American Indian tipi, others preferring to sleep under the stars; they enjoyed torchlight processions at dusk, and discovered that the woods at night are not frighte-

ning after all, but seem to come to life with a special quiet beauty.

### Widening the experience

Of course, it is one thing to run a pilot project with talented volunteer children and adequate funding, in beautiful wooded parkland — and certainly the model outlined here seems to be available only to a privileged few. So how can this approach work in the 'real world' of tight budgets, National Curriculum constraints and lack of easy access to extensive natural sights?

So far, the evidence would seem to suggest that it can be immensely successful, although we really need to devise a research programme to test such an assertion! The second stage of the project, trying out the approach with school parties of children aged between five and 13 on day visits to Killerton in Devon, Kingston Lacey in Dorset, and other locations has already demonstrated that the elements of the programme can be assembled in a variety of ways, at little expense, to awaken the enthusiasm of a whole class for at least a day, and to form the basis for extended projects and themes.

### The special landscape of cities

No matter if the school is rural, suburban, or inner-city, it still has its own landscape and stories associated with the locality — and we mustn't forget that cities have a very special landscape with its own wildlife. The area may not have a dragon myth (although you may be surprised to find just how many dragons live in Britain!), but there will be wonderful stories associated with the area which will act as a starting-point.

We feel that the traditional ways into the environment through science and geography are extended through such an approach, and teachers have reported that the programmes have particular relevance for language, history, art, drama, RE and other areas.

One of the project's principal aims was to encourage schools to take their children out into the natural world and really experience their regional landscape and wildlife at first hand. However, such visits are only ever possible infrequently, so much must be accomplished back at school or in the community. Myths, legends and stories from other cultures have enriched the experience, adding a global relevance within the local frame of reference.

The originators of the project, while conti-

ning to introduce children to new ideas, are now working together on a handbook. This not only outlines ideas and detailed organisational plans for activities throughout the different seasons, but includes a large resource section. This section contains stories, songs, lists of Celtic, Nordic and Greek names, and glossaries, as well as wider discussions of the place of myth and ceremony.

The project team feels that, with help, the approach can be used by a parent with one or two children as effectively as by a teacher with a class.

### A term's joint project

As a parallel to the 're-storying' project — and as an illustration of how possible it is for schools from an area to take this project on board for a term's work — a thousand school-children from 30 local schools were invited to Killerton on Midsummer's Day for a Festival of Myth and Legend.

The schools were divided into five groups to represent the continents, and each school worked on a particular myth or legend from 'their' continent. They were assisted by a team of professional actors and musicians which toured the schools and held workshop sessions. The day was both memorable and moving.

After the children's performances in the morning, everybody joined in a 'Dragon Masque' written by Tim Laycock. Rockets and explosions marked the finale when the Dolbury Dragon herself appeared from the hill to make us think about the *real* treasures of this world and what we need to do to protect them.

### The message

Certainly the reaction of the children to this approach, the effect on their behaviour, their increased sensitivity to nature, and their deep attachment to Killerton and its woods, have convinced the originators that it is worth 're-storying the landscape' in the minds of more children. The message from the children, teachers, and parents is that this experience is one of the best they have ever had, but the project must now move to the next stage of measuring its success.

Perhaps one of the best testimonies is that a number of the original 'questors', now teenagers, still come back to Killerton and bring parents, friends, and playmates to 'their' magical land.

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