

# Gypsy Tales of the Welsh Kale Wood Family

## *Reinvigorated and Humanized by Today's Storytellers*

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Frances Roberts Reilly is a Romani poet, storyteller, playwright, and award-winning filmmaker on human rights. She is of mixed Welsh Kale Gypsy-English heritage and a direct descendant of Abram Wood, a family noted for its musicians and storytellers. Her latest book is *Parramisha* (Cinnamon Press 2020). A Poetry Wales winner, she is published internationally. She contributes to the Roma Peoples Project at Columbia University and the European Roma Institute of Arts and Culture's Archive of Romani Women Filmmakers. She earned a degree in English Literature (Hons) at the University of Toronto.



Within a mid-nineteenth century stone-built museum located in a small Ontario town, I took the microphone to tell one of my family's Gypsy tales, "The Leaves That Hung but Never Grew." After all, I am a direct descendent of Abram Wood, the Welsh Kale storyteller and fiddler who brought this and many other stories with him when he arrived in Wales in the eighteenth century. Now here in Guelph and outside Wales, I was questioning how this story would be received by a Canadian audience. I need not have worried, for although I was next after the best-selling children's author Robert Munsch – a tough act to follow – he gave me two thumbs up and the reading was a success. The evening's storytelling ended over snacks and coffee. I was surprised at the interest and respect for my unfamiliar Gypsy tales from the other storytellers. It seems that we all share the same human story.

This article acknowledges a notable aspect, a caveat about permissions for citing the Welsh storytellers under investigation: namely, Peter Stevenson, Fiona Collins, and Daniel Morden, while not belonging to the Romani community, who have obtained explicit authorization from the Wood family to recount Gypsy tales. Conversely, Richard O'Neil, a Romanichal storyteller, adheres to a nomadic storytelling tradition that he has preserved dutifully as an ancient cultural heritage.

To get to the root of the issue of why others began tell our story about us Welsh Kale, we must look to the Victorian Lorists. Bob Dawson, Romani educator and author,<sup>[1]</sup> has a moderate point of view. He asserts that many of them (Lorists) "had the attitude of Victorian colonists meeting the strange natives, which certainly does not excuse them, but it was the custom of its time. There was also sexual exploitation which was not excusable." He clarifies that "not all Victorian Lorists engaged in such questionable practices – some were very honourable."

As a member of an oral culture, my Romani ancestor Abram Wood carried our Gypsy tales with him during his diasporic travels – the *lungo drom*. The origins of these tales are unknown, yet they were memorized as per the traditions of our oral culture. A handful of the tales were recorded by John Roberts, a fluent speaker of Romanes, Welsh, and English who was taught reading and writing in the army. His letters containing Welsh Kale Gypsy tales, addressed to Lorist Francis Hindes Groom, contained tales that Groom published with the aid of his wife, Esmeralda Locke, in the book *In Gipsy Tents* in 1889.

However, not all Lorists worked to preserve the original material, content, or spirit of the tales in question. Common practices such as whitewashing the Romanes language and editing out the more gruesome details within the stories were used to suit Victorian morality. Our Romani stories are *not* as new today as they were when they were first told because they have been bowdlerized and their authentic meanings and teachings mislaid. The impact of such alterations reach beyond literature and storytelling, "precisely because it shapes the public imagination. It's a complex network of misinformation, racism, and prejudice" (Potter forthcoming).

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dawson is the author of over 20 books on Romany Gypsies. He is an educationalist, genealogist, and president of the Romany and Traveller Family History Society.

Enter today's contemporary storytellers who are no longer misled by a fragmented mish-mash of secondary sources for our Gypsy tales. They are taking up the challenge of reclaiming and reimagining what has been mislaid, intentionally or unintentionally. Respect for oral storytelling comes from storyteller, author, and children's storytelling workshop leader, Richard O'Neil. He has lived a traditional Romani nomadic life, stating that "some stories will always remain secret and never be put into books." When sharing these secret stories, he will change the names and even the location. It is this secrecy that anthropologist Judith Okely is correct in identifying as "our personal and political autonomy" as Welsh Roma (Okely 1996, 09). Therefore, the sensitivity for cultural accuracy required when telling our Gypsy Tales is a huge responsibility "to make sure you do no harm to your community or give away their power," according to my personal conversation with Richard O'Neil.

We are fortunate to have a trio of splendid storytellers of Welsh Gypsy tales in Wales. The first of these is the multi-talented Peter Stevenson, who is also an illustrator, writer, artist, folklorist, filmmaker, crankiemaker, and lecturer. When did he first become aware of Abram Wood's Welsh Kale stories? He began to meet Welsh Romani in Aberystwyth and Machynlleth, and read books by the A.O.H and Eldra Jarman and E. Ernest Roberts when they were published. All this culminated in an invitation from Newtown Council to create a show about the life and stories of John Roberts, *Telynor Cymru* – Royal harpist.

Our second author is Daniel Morden, a professional storyteller. His popularity and strength as a storyteller of Welsh Kale tales comes from reimagining seven Gypsy tales attributed to Abram Wood. He has published the tales in his book, *Dark Tales from the Woods* published in 2006. The book garnered the Welsh Books Council's *Tir na n-Og Award*. Nowadays, Daniel tells these Gypsy tales internationally.

Fiona Collins rounds out our trio – a roster of three Welsh storytellers, plus O'Neil who is Romanichal. Recollecting how the Gypsy tales came to her through Daniel Morden, she first heard stories from Abram Wood's tradition when Daniel Morden toured a storytelling show with the musicians of the company *The Devil's Violin* in 2006. She learnt more about the provenance of the stories and the Wood family's connection to her adoptive home, just outside Corwen, north Wales. The stories had been collected by family, Nia Evans and Teleri Jarman.

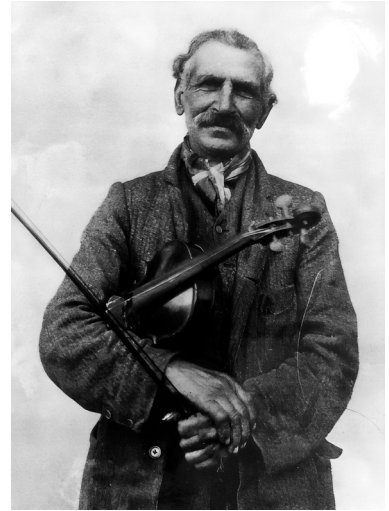
On visiting Teleri Jarman in Cardiff in 2015, I was enthused by her passion for our family's stories and tales. A teacher herself, Teleri regularly travelled throughout Wales, telling our Gypsy tales to schoolchildren. Her mother is Eldra Jarman (1917–2000), a great-granddaughter of Abram Wood and a fluent English and Romany speaker. She was an author and harpist. Eldra learned the Welsh language from her husband, A.O.H Jarman (1911–1998),<sup>[2]</sup> a professor of Welsh at University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire. She and her husband collaborated on research into the history of Roma in Wales, drawing on the work of Lorists, and she added her knowledge, which had been passed to her in the

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2 A.O.H Jarman, professor of Welsh at University College, Cardiff, where he specialized in the study of the earliest Welsh and Latin sources and made a distinguished contribution to their interpretation. Obituary available online: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-professor-a-o-h-jarman-1181263.html>

memories of her parents, both representing two major branches of Roma in Wales, the related families of Abram Wood (1699? –1799) and his great-grandson John Roberts. The resulting two volumes, *The Welsh Gypsies: Children of Abram Wood*, were published in 1998. The content is both intensely personal and of wide-ranging significance to the study of the lives and influence of Roma in Wales. Previously, Eldra wrote and published two books on Welsh Gypsy storytelling: *Y gof a'r Diafol* – The Blacksmith and the Devil (1989) and *Storiâu'r sipiwn i blant* – Gypsy Stories for Children (1991).

Five tales are printed in the book, *The Welsh Gypsies*, from which four are attributed to Matthew Wood and one to John Roberts (Jarman 1991, 160). These stories have evolved within the tribal imagination, deriving from many sources, including India in the earliest period of the diaspora some 1,000 to 1,600 years ago. Typically, some Welsh Gypsy stories do contain references to fortunetelling, hedgehog-hunting, and living in barns, but these are additions, although incidental. It was Lorist Dora Yates who admitted that the tales recited by Matthew Wood (1845–1929) had lost much both in transcriptions and translations. She describes Matthew's oral delivery that would “come tumbling from his lips at a terrific speed, almost too fast to be recorded,” adding that the style of the folk-tale was “peculiar to every Gypsy idiom in Europe [is] a succession of short, crisp sentences, consisting ... a single word, strongly accented: *rati'* – ‘night fell’ and *'chale', kedi' te chan'* – ‘they ate, meaning they made an end to eating’. Matthew's dramatized delivery was punctuated with ‘Lo’ and ‘Now’, the verbs also vividly presented” (Jarman, 1991, 160).



Matthew Wood

Daniel Morden followed an in-depth research approach. But first he needed permission to do so. He contacted a descendant of the Woods, Teleri Jarman, who willingly gave him permission to attempt to put flesh on the bones – to return these synopses to stories worth telling, with characters whom readers and listeners could care about. He went about this in two ways. He found more developed versions of the stories in European collections and drew inspiration from them. Sometimes he added characters, sometimes he removed episodes. Then he told the stories as often as possible, to as many kinds of audiences as he could find. In front of an audience, he discovered what was missing from a story. A new, more satisfying version soon evolved.

Fiona Collins tells most frequently the Wood stories “The Three Tasks” and “The Leaves That Hung but Never Grew,” saying, “I love them both.” What Fiona finds inspiring about these tales is that they are rich in traditional motifs, feature resourceful young women at their centres, and both bring a taste of the vibrant Welsh Kale culture to readers and listeners. How are these old Welsh Kale tales received by today's audiences? For Fiona, the answer is favourable. The more she tells and talks about the stories, especially locally, the more she learns about the Wood family. Indeed, the Wood family lore and knowledge run deep in the telling of our stories. Fiona doggedly pursued other sources, as it seems that today there are still family members who have collected the tales. For Fiona, this involved learning more from *Buddug*

*Medi* in Bala, who remembers the family and has many photos of them in her home. After they met through *Merched y Wawr* (Wales' version of the Women's Institute), Fiona was kindly invited to tea, where she was told some family memories.

We know that storytelling is universal to all cultures around the globe. What is the enduring strength and potency of oral storytelling? "It is about what's been passed down," Peter Stevenson observed in personal conversation in 2014. He tells the tales, noting the description of Matthew Wood telling a story. His was very powerful, he threw back his head and the words poured down. "At that moment, he was able to speak from the heart, connect with his audience through his passion and shared experiences, be spontaneous and follow his own ideas, referring to anything that occurred to him in a moment," said Stevenson in 2014. Contemporary audiences seem to understand that the tales provide strong links to the people who told these tales: Matthew of Elin Ddu (Black Ellen Wood), Abram Wood or John Roberts, and also the members of the Roberts, Wood, Vaughan, and Lee families.

Academia have likened these Gypsy tales to Brothers Grimm, stories which are a mix of local folk tales from Hesse-Kassel and stories from literary sources. The motifs in these tales are found almost everywhere, including Welsh and Welsh Romany tales. Readers will find the usual patterns and echoes of fairy tales: the number three is configured into trials, animals talk, maidens shape shift, magical helpers appear, witches are wicked, wise women are wisdom keepers, older brothers compete, disguised heroes appear, and so forth. Offering a world cultural perspective, Peter Stevenson references the *1001 Tales of the Arabian Nights* as appearing to be even closer to the Welsh Gypsy method of oral storytelling. The idea is that the storyteller knows hundreds, maybe thousands of motifs, and can piece them together in the moment of telling to create a long epic story. In this way Black Ellen Wood (1854–1945) was reputed to know 300 to 400 tales by heart by improvising from memory motifs that fit both audience and occasion.

An interesting aspect of Welsh Gypsy tales is the way our storytellers navigate those tales that lie outside of temporal time. What impact does this have on contemporary audiences? Fiona Collins, whose adopted country is Wales, looks to contemporary research about Gypsy, Romani, and Traveller community members who all experience a degree of *othering* and prejudice far beyond anything she has experienced. This is where empathy is central and applies globally to other storytellers and all humans as the only way to understand the personal experience as *others*. Peter Stevenson is equally empathetic, commenting that "unquestionably when stories are told, they create a sense of belonging (Stevenson 2023, 6). He likes the feeling of movement in Welsh Romany tales, of travelling across borders, and how it reflects the lives of travelling people.

Most of Daniel Morden's stories take place in a forest, with the dark woods serving as a liminal and undifferentiated ground of being, a place where our psyche has its first life experiences, a place of danger and ordeals, secrets, inversions, or as a sanctuary to hide and find safety within. Perhaps even serving as an *atchin tan* – stopping place. It is certainly a place outside of temporal time – an evocation and reminder of where a Romany Gypsy must learn to navigate a world of inversions that is often hostile to us. These tales nurture and sustain our collective memory.

The central character in many of these tales Welsh Kale tales is Jack, a rascally *chavo* – boy and survivor – who shows the reader his cunning and good fortune, succeeding in triumphing against powerful adversaries and winning gold and the pretty girl. Morden retells stories where Jack appears in “The Squirrel and the Fox,” “The Fiery Dragon,” and “The Green Man.” The traditional rule breaker, the *trickster*, appears in “The Master Thief.” In these tales, women have strong characters, practicality and wisdom, and often save the day. Mary the maid proves a wily and heroic adversary, spinning riddles and outwitting her handsome deadly suitor. Arwen is guided by her *Romni Dya* – mother – into listening to her dream that becomes a frame story – a story within a story – showing the power of storytelling to transform. An ancient woman guides Jack into his fortunes. The dark feminine is configured as a cruel, murderous, and devouring *chóvihánni* – witch. While there are princesses to woo and marry, they are certainly not Disneyfied nor cast as compliant.



The Green Man  
by Peter Stevenson

Peter Stevenson begins his telling of “The Green Man” by always illustrating the characters and landscape first.

It anchors his memory of real places and also his paintings of the characters he refers to when storytelling. His recent children’s book, *Illustrated Welsh Folk Tales for Young and Old*, features a whimsical “Green Man” illustrated on the cover. Peter illustrated *the Green Man* for a children’s book of Welsh folk tales because he wanted to ensure that Romany tradition was included, and the illustration process is essential to the entire book. He deliberately tried to show the fantasy and fun behind the story, rather than paint a recognizable Welsh landscape. Peter and I shared the stage at the Aberystwyth International Storytelling Festival in 2022. Before he told the “Green Man” story, he respectfully requested my permission as a family representative of the Abram Wood line.

Fiona Collins’s translation and telling of “The Three Tasks” began with Fiona reading through the original many times to get a sense of the tale and the style. She notes that a translation is not an exact copy but a rendering, as indeed, is an oral telling. As a bilingual storyteller, Fiona tells the story to keep the flavour of the Welsh for her listeners, both Welsh speakers and non-Welsh speakers alike.

In contemporary Wales, what role does storytelling play in arts and culture? Fiona Collins observes that contemporary Wales has two distinct cultures, each of which flourishes in one of the two official languages of Welsh and English, with little or no overlap or interplay between them. A pan-Wales report completed by the Romani Cultural & Arts Company in 2022 concurs. The Sites of Inclusion report compiled by Romani artist Daniel Baker raises the issue of exclusion of non-dominant communities from the arts, culture, and performance in Wales. It notes that the arts sector in Wales is locked into an older model of promoting a *unitary identity*. Despite changes in migration including migration of Roma from Europe and others now working in the arts sector, the report summarizes a largely ignored reality of the fundamental changes that Roma from Europe have brought to Welsh society. The reality of this new

reality of diversity for Dr Adrian Marsh, a researcher in Romani Studies<sup>[3]</sup> and a Welsh-born Romany, encourages people to recognize that Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities are part of diversity, as are other minority ethnic communities. Says Dr Marsh in conversation in 2022: “We have added our unique voice to Welsh culture and arts in many ways, not least in the field of traditional storytelling, harp music, dance, and performance.”

How does diversity play a role in nomadic storytelling? “It humanizes outsiders and is as simple and powerful as that,” comments Richard O’Neil. “In the U.K and Wales we have an amazing history and so many people are intrigued by it and often astounded to learn the many facts and links to history, from Flamenco music to Gypsy characters in Shakespeare’s works.”

These Gypsy tales have travelled far and wide, and they came to rest in Wales; however, the appeal of Welsh Gypsy tales is now international. These tales have captivated audiences beyond Wales and not only in Canada. When Daniel Morden began his process some years ago, Teleri Jarman and one other individual were telling these stories. Today, Gypsy tales are told all over the world. Ogutu Muraya is telling them in Kenya, Len Cabral and Alton Chung in the USA, Nuala Hayes in Ireland, Marin Milenaar in Amsterdam, Kathleen Rappolt in Germany, and Tom Van Mieghem in Belgium.

Our Welsh and Romanichal storytellers have succeeded in reinvigorating and reinventing cultural innovation and adaptation as part of diversity in contemporary society. We know there is not one singular definition of what it means to be Romani. Storytellers have transformed the Lorists’ narrowly defined and misinformed perpetuation of a fictional oneness into an art form that tells of our shared human experience. They have done so with humanity, empathy, and compassion while maintaining what it means not to be a trope in Romany tales.

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3 Dr. Adrian Marsh, researcher in Romani Studies and Romani Early Years, is of Romany-Traveller origins, who works with Roma, Gypsy, and Traveller communities in the CEE and SEE, Egypt, Sweden, Turkey, and the UK.



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