

# The roots of treasure

The standing stone in the Scottish village of Murthly lay undisturbed for thousands of years until, or so the story goes, the local schoolmaster's sons took gunpowder to it. The boys dislodged the ancient stone to find a black dog sitting atop a treasure chest, just as the old tales had said. They took one look at the dark, terrifying animal and decided that they had better put the stone back and forget about the gold altogether.

As Jeremy Harte explores in *Treasures on Earth*, a preoccupation with hidden riches was once baked into the collective psyche of the British Isles, spawning countless folktales. Stories of mythical hoards, doomed quests and undiscovered riches abound, with treasure-hunters interrogating spirits or fighting beasts, and rarely finding what they are looking for. In these tales, the location of a hoard is as likely to be revealed in a dream as it is by someone stumbling on it by accident.

Folk tales are antithetical to modernity, and to some extent to modern scholarship. They are difficult to locate, date, quantify and reference. Versions have been recorded from the seventeenth century, but many preserve a much older oral tradition. In the case of the black dog of Murthly, the tale came from a village parishioner who passed it along to their reverend, who in turn told a collector in the 1970s – but dogs appear as treasure guardians in older stories. The genius of Harte and other surveyors of folklore is in their identification of patterns and local themes, through which this elusive body of literature can be somewhat organized.

The extent of folklore's regional differentiation is fascinating. In treasure stories, certain tropes crop up repeatedly in certain areas. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, treasure hunters in Welsh tales are often interrupted by bad weather, with storms thwarting their quest for the hoard. More mysteriously, in southern England there is a profusion of stories featuring golden coffins, a trope that is almost exclusive to the area. Harte calls folklore "obstinate and local", comparing it to the growth of trees: no sooner is one folk tradition cut back

somewhere than it springs up somewhere else, flourishing smugly.

The roots of treasure folklore are people's deepest fears and desires, the longing for life-changing wealth and the anxiety of anticipated loss. Harte knows this, always prioritizing the human story within tales of riches: "people are more interesting than gold".

## Notes

I have a feeling AI does not always listen to me. what do you think?