

'The Stone Axe from Way Back': A Mutable Magical Object in Folklore and Fiction

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Abstract

Objects of 'magic' and folklore do not always begin their lives as such. Often, they are natural objects or mundane artefacts, crafted for utilitarian purposes, which become objects of magic through processes of reutilization and redefinition. This is a process poignantly explored by fantasy writer Alan Garner in many – if not all – of his works, from the owl service to the weirdstone, but as a theme it is captured most overtly in his 1973 novel *Red Shift*. This paper offers a commentary on this novel, exploring how Garner uses fiction and folklore to illustrate the mutability and multiple-authorship of the magical object.

He stumbled into the house. His fists were a ball of mud. She poured water over his hands into the bowl. The earth fell away. He was holding a smooth shape.

"I found it! I've found one! In the bank! Luck, Madge!"

It was polished, grey-green, and looked like an axe head made of stone (Garner 1973, 50)

It is now widely recognized in folkloristics that, as archaeologist Chris Fowler observes, 'Artefacts, like people, are multiply-authored' (2004, 65). An object is a product not just of its maker, but of the various users, finders, keepers, discarders, and concealers whose hands it may pass through during its life course. And those individuals, though separated by time, become enchainned to each other through their sharing of the artefact, while through its multiple authorship, the artefact itself shifts mutably from one context to another; from one meaning to another. It has a complex biography (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Houlbrook 2014).

Objects of 'magic' and folklore do not always begin their lives as such. Often they are natural objects or mundane artefacts, crafted for utilitarian purposes. The pumpkin in which Cinderella rides to the ball. The spindle upon which Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger. The poisoned apple of Snow White fame. They *become* rather than *are* objects of magic through processes of reutilization and redefinition. This is a process poignantly explored by fantasy writer Alan Garner in many – if not all – of his works, from the owl service to the

weirdstone. Indeed, many of the objects he pens are ‘characters in their own right’ (Edmonds & Garner 2016), but as a theme it is captured most overtly in his 1973 novel *Red Shift*. This paper offers a commentary on this novel, exploring how Garner uses fiction and folklore to illustrate both the mutability of the magical object and, conversely, its stability. Its stability in anchoring its multiple authors to each other, despite the centuries separating them.

Red Shift

Red Shift, first published in 1973 and adapted for television in 1978, is a story of three parts. These parts, chronologically distinct but artfully overlapping in the narrative of the novel, each have their central protagonist. Macey is a soldier and deserter in Roman Britain, who suffers from berserker fits; Thomas Rowley is a villager caught up in the English Civil War; and Tom is a 1970s teenager living with his parents in a caravan and desperate to maintain his long-distance relationship with girlfriend Jan. The three narratives are united by common themes: loneliness, despair, love; and also by geographical location, each story taking place in Garner’s home county of Cheshire, in and around Mow Cop. It is, however, the ‘stone axe from way back’ that provides the strongest anchor between the characters.

The axe head, dated to the Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age, begins this story old. It has already served its utilitarian purpose; it has already ‘lived’ at least a millennium before it makes its appearance in the novel. We do not know who owned it before or how it ended up where it did; we first see it with Macey, in Roman Britain. The soldier is in the midst of a berserker fit. Former cohort leader and fellow deserter Logan ‘saw him strike at the guard with something smooth held between his hands. The guard fell’ (Garner 1973, 24). Later, Logan observes, “‘You used the stone axe from way back’”, indicating that Macey somehow draws on the axe head to induce these berserker fits (1973, 26). Wanting to generate another so that he will fight, Logan suggests using the axe again, to which Macey replies, “‘No, sir, I can’t flip with no axe, no smooth hard axe. Not now.’” Towards the end of the novel, Logan and his other companions now dead, Macey deposits the axe head on the mound of Barthomley, an act which symbolizes his redemption and new-found freedom: ‘holding the axe close to him in its tatters...His way was a procession for the tattered thing under his arm’ (1973, 177).

Over a millennium later, now in the early modern period, Thomas Rowley finds the stone axe buried in the mound of Barthomley. Excited by the discovery, he presents it to his wife Margery: "I found it! I've found one! In the bank! Luck, Madge!" Describing it as a 'thunderstone', they believe it was caused by a lightning strike – "We had lightning, backend" – and will therefore bring them luck. "Lightning doesn't hit the same place twice" (1973, 49-51). Thomas plans to smash it and distribute the pieces to the other villagers, but Margery refuses, wrapping it protectively in her petticoat – the 'red shift' of the novel's title. "That wasn't made to be broken, wasn't that". Following the massacre in the church, Thomas and Margery flee, taking the axe head with them. Once they reach safety, Margery puts the axe head against Thomas's wound (1973, 180), and, when speaking of building themselves a new house at Mow Cop, says "And when it's built, you'll put the thunderstone in the chimney, for luck" (1973, 189).

Three centuries later see Tom and Jan spending precious time alone together in a roofless cottage on Mow Cop. They find the axe head in the chimney and Jan, declaring it beautiful, asks if they can keep it. "This is it. My real and special thing." She dubs it a 'Bunty', which we later learn was the name of her childhood pet budgerigar, and they decide to take it in turns to look after it: "then we'll never be apart: this in your hand" (1973, 100-101). Later, as their relationship begins to break apart, Tom sells the axe head to the British Museum, using the money to spend the weekend with Jan. "It wasn't a Bunty. It was an artefact. Not a toy. It was three thousand five hundred years old...It's where it should be" (1973, 162-163). Jan does not agree, and on their final meeting, accuses Tom: "You sold the Bunty. You sold what I'd lacked. And you knew" (1973, 187).

The Perforated Axe

The hand axe of *Red Shift* is, like the novel's landscapes, a very real and tangible thing. 'The polished stone was found near a spring at Adders Moss on Alderley Edge,' explains Garner. 'It's another piece of the Bronze Age, a Perforated Axe with a carefully realized form...probably a deliberate deposit. A funeral. A buried hatchet. A gift to local gods. Maybe all of these...' (Edmonds and Garner 2016). To Garner, this piece of prehistory, kept in his home, still looked at, still touched (Garner, pers. comm. February 2018), is inspiration: 'I use material objects as talismans, as a lens or focal point to give the numinous a physical

expression. They carry a particular kind of weight. They help me to turn things over' (Edmonds and Garner 2016).

In this way, Garner is much like Macey. He finds himself holding a piece of the past, mysterious, elusive. Giving it a new meaning. As archaeologist Mark Edmonds notes, 'even in prehistory, there were people pausing, picking up old stone and making it anew' (2016, 75). The axe head of *Red Shift* has a different name and thus meaning in each age: Macey refers to it as the 'moon's axe edge'; Thomas and Margery, the 'thunderstone'; and Jan, 'the Bunty'. To Garner, it is a 'a Perforated Axe' but also a 'lens or focal point'. In Macey's time it is 'tattered'; in Jan's time, 'beautiful'. Garner recognizes better than most that beauty grows 'through events and time' (Edmonds and Garner 2016). And it is to these events and time that this paper now turns.

The Thunderstone

Thunderstones pepper the pages of folklore studies. So well documented are they that a full exploration here would be redundant, but a brief overview is useful for understanding Thomas and Margery's engagement with the hand axe. When Margery declares that when they build themselves a house, Thomas will put the thunderstone in the chimney for luck (1973, 189), she is drawing on a centuries old belief. It has been suggested that from as early as the pre-Roman Iron Age, the purposes of Stone Age tools such as axes, sickles, spearheads, and arrowheads – long obsolete – had been forgotten (Merrifield 1987, 15). When they were found by chance, buried in the earth, they were no longer recognized as artefacts crafted by human hands for human work. Instead, they were perceived as supernatural objects, widely believed to be of celestial origin by peoples from as far afield as Europe, America, Asia, and Africa (Trigger 1996, 94; Johanson 2009, 129).

The thunderstone was believed to travel down from the sky and into the ground through a striking lightning bolt, to resurface some time later (Penney 1976; Hoggard 2004, 182; Johanson 2009; Gilligan 2017). The perceived otherworldly origins of these prehistoric tools led to their being imbued with magical attributes. Some appear to have been used simply as good luck charms and talismans, while others were employed in popular medicine, which would fit with Margery placing the axe head against Thomas's wound (1973, 180). Ralph Merrifield detailed this in his work *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*:

In Cornwall the water in which a 'thunder-axe' had been boiled was drunk as a cure for rheumatism, and in Ireland one was passed around among neighbours to put in cattle troughs as a preservative against cattle disease. There was a similar belief in the north of England, and in Brittany axes were thrown into wells to purify the water or to secure a continued supply in time of drought (1987, 13)

The most common purpose of a thunderstone, however, was to protect the house, property and family against lightning and fire, as it had originated in a striking lightning bolt.

"'Lightning doesn't hit the same place twice'," asserts Thomas Rowley. The thunderstones were therefore commonly concealed within buildings, often in places that would go undisturbed, such as immured within a wall or under the roof (Blinkenberg 1911, 1-2; Penney 1976, 70; Hoggard 2004, 182). Sonja Hukantaival, who has recorded many examples in Finland, notes that a high proportion are found in the hearth area, which she suggests may be explained 'by the thunderbolt's fire-controlling attributes' (2016, 184). In the same vein, Thomas and Margery conceal theirs up the chimneybreast, to be found over three centuries later by Tom and Jan.

There is evidence of such stones being discovered, concealed, rediscovered, and then ritually recycled. An unfinished Stone Age axe was delivered to the National Museum of Finland in 1974, having been found in a field at the end of the nineteenth century. The finder concealed it in the hearth of his house in Karvoskylä village, but it was later discovered immured in the sauna's hearth before being delivered to the museum by the village blacksmith (Hukantaival 2016, 183). Clearly these objects made their rounds, which is unsurprising when we consider how powerful they were believed to be. They would have been coveted items.

There is also archaeological evidence of deliberate fragmentation of thunderstones, as there is for many different forms of ritual deposits (cf. Oates 1966, 150; Talalay 1987; 1993; Chapman 2000; Brück 2006; Houlbrook 2017). Objects were divided and distributed to symbolize relationships and common bonds, much like modern-day friendship charm pendants shaped as matching halves of a love-heart. In terms of thunderstones being treated as such, one example is the stone adze found in 1863 in Vändra, Southwest Estonia, which was broken into pieces, probably to share out (Johanson 2009, 157). Again, this is unsurprising given the perceived protective potency of these objects. This was Thomas's original plan for his thunderstone: "'Fetch us me hammer," he said. "There'll be enough for everyone'" (1973, 50).

‘There’s Something in the Chimney’

Thunderstones are part of a much broader spectrum of objects that have been discovered tucked up chimneys. The houses of Britain have yielded hundreds – perhaps thousands – of mysterious items, from desiccated cats to individual shoes, that were once secreted away in the chimneybreast and hearth (cf. Hutton 2017). Their presence there is usually explained as a form of protection: malevolent supernatural beings, be they witches, demons, ghosts, or fairies, were believed to enter a house via the chimney. The hearth is therefore viewed as a vulnerable domestic area; an access point for those dangerous forces: an access point that needed guarding. Were these obscure objects – possibly seen as effective wards against, or traps for malignant intruders – therefore secreted away in hearths and fireplaces because of their structural vulnerability?

Garner recalls a meaning ascribed to a pair of horseshoes found in the chimney of his father’s house:

In the community of the Hough, when a couple were to be married, there was a discreet whip-round. And shortly before the wedding, the blacksmith would happen to be working late at night; and he would happen to find a bag of money by the door, enough to pay for two horseshoes. The smith made them. He made them so that they could not be put on a horse. They were made for the new couple; the symbol of their marriage, a union and a unity; the gift of the Hough.

The shoes were hung in the chimney as high as a man could reach, to protect the house and the people in it. My father said that every Sunday his father took them down and burnished them. Now they were pitted and rusted. But my father said I must keep them. And I do. Because I must (Edmonds and Garner 2016)

It is equally possible that the hearth was a popular place in which to conceal objects not because it was seen as an access point for negative forces, but because it was central to the home and the family – central in both the literal and metaphorical senses. We are all familiar with the clichéd image of the family from a bygone era assembled cosily around a roaring hearth, regaling tales and keeping warm during the long, dark winter evenings. Clichéd it may be, but it is no less true for it. In a time before central heating and television, families would congregate around the fire, and this led to its symbolic importance. When Robert St George was illustrating how the house represents the body in his *Conversing by Signs* (1998), he described the windows as the eyes, the timbers as the ribs, and the hearth as the heart.

If the hearth is the heart of the household, therefore, then it comes as no surprise that so many rituals and folkloric practices surround it. The significance of placing the Yule log in the hearth is well documented: to keep it lit in the hearth until it burnt away completely was considered good luck. Barry O'Reilly (2011), in his article on 'Hearth and Home', describes many hearth-related practices in post-medieval Ireland. When relocating, for example, the hearth fire in the new house should be lit by coals taken from the old house. Fire should not be removed from a house – unless to light the fire in a new house – and it is a note of pride, as well as evidence of familial continuity, if a family can claim that their hearth fire has been burning continuously for generations, covered in ashes every evening and rekindled every morning.

Similar practices can be found worldwide. The Russians, for example, had the *Domovoi*, the house god or spirit, who was believed to live in the ashes of the hearth; when a family relocated, they took some of the ashes with them, ensuring their *Domovoi* would accompany them to their new house (cf. Dmitrieva 1997; Warner 2002). While the Greeks and Romans had Hestia/Vesta as their guardian of the hearth (cf. Kajava 2004; Tsarkirgis 2007), so closely related to the domestic fire that Hesiod warned people against standing naked before the hearth so as not to offend the goddess (Hesiod *Works and Days*, 734).

The centrality of the hearth survived into the 20th century, with Edward Lovett observing in his 1925 *Magic in Modern London*, that 'in many cases, objects are hung over the mantelpiece for luck' (1925, 28). The examples he gives are of pieces of flint bearing uncanny resemblances to people or animals, placed on the mantelpiece "'for luck!" In short, a votive offering' (1925, 27). Other examples include horse shoes and horse brasses placed around the fireplace to ensure the luck of the household. It seems likely, therefore, that objects were secreted away within the fireplace for similar reasons – not just to keep the bad out, but to keep the good *in*.

Many of these concealed objects do not stay concealed. Just as Tom and Jan find 'something in the chimney' and decide to keep it – 'A memento of our visit' (1973, 100) – so too do people in reality. Often, the hidden objects are found by the occupants of the house when building work requires explorations into fireplaces and up chimneybreasts. Shoes are the most common find and, rather than disposing of them, many finders choose to keep and often display the object. When a university Media Relations Manager living in a Norfolk village discovered a shoe in the fireplace of her nineteenth-century house, she placed it in a

tin for protection, where it remains until she can find a glass case to display it in on the mantelpiece. This is exactly what another finder did with the shoe she discovered in her farmhouse in Geldeston, Norfolk: mounting it in a box-frame beside the fireplace in which it was found. While in Ilkley, Yorkshire, another woman has a child's shoe, which was discovered up the chimneybreast of her seventeenth-century farmhouse, on a purpose-built shelf above the fireplace. On proud display but as close as possible to its original place of concealment (Houlbrook Forthcoming).

The discovery of a concealed object naturally sparks curiosity about the person who originally secreted it away. The object itself thereby acts as a form of nodal point between concealer and finder. Siân Lincoln observes that houses, even the decrepit one in which Tom and Jan find themselves, 'can be understood as material spaces in which historical trails are left all over the places' (Lincoln 2014, 269). These historical or 'residual' trails can manifest themselves materially in the form of, for example, old wallpaper, layers of paint, and objects left in attics, under stairs, in sheds – and up chimneys.

Sometimes these residual trails are removed by the new inhabitant (wallpaper is stripped, walls painted over, objects discarded), but in some instances they are retained and rearticulated, and as Lincoln writes, 'When 'renaturalized' into a contemporary context these "things" take on new, alternative meanings' (Lincoln 2014, 269). The stone axe, concealed by Thomas and Margery, is one such material manifestation of a residual trail, which takes on new, alternative meanings when found by Tom and Jan. It is no longer a thunderstone hidden away to protect the house against lightning and bad luck. It is a memento of shared place and a token of romantic commitment: 'We found it in our real house. We'll take turns to look after it, then we'll never be apart' (1973, 101).

The stone axe thus becomes an object of enchainment between Tom and Jan, described by archaeologist John Chapman:

The exchange of inalienable objects means that an indissoluble link exists between all owners or users of an artefact and the artefact with its distinct biography. Thus, people are exchanging themselves as they exchange polished stone axes and painted ceramics, and the succeeding chain of personal relations through exchange, which will be termed 'enchainment', is a fundamental part of social life (2000, 5)

However, the stone axe is also an object of enchainment between Tom and Thomas, Jan and Margery. The concealed object is revealed, generating a 'web of connection' to use Isabel McBryde's phrase (1987, 261). Through their shared, albeit different,

engagements with the stone axe, both concealers and finders are 'bundled' together, to adopt an archaeological term, inextricably entangled despite the decades, even centuries, separating them (Pauketat 2013; Gruner 2015). As Edmonds writes, through the works of Garner 'we get a vivid evocation of simple objects shaping people and drawing one generation into another' (2016, 76).

The object as a time-travelling device, uniting strangers across centuries, is the central theme of another of Garner's works. In his short story *Feel Free*, protagonist Brian is studying an ancient Greek vase for schoolwork. He is struck by the connection he feels with the vase's artist, despite over two millennia separating them: 'when you touch it, and try to copy it, you're suddenly with him, - same as if you're watching over his shoulder and he's talking to you, showing you. So when I do a pot next, he'll be helping. It'll be his pot. And he's been dead two thousand years! What about that, eh?'" (Garner 1970, 15). In Brian's examination of the vase he finds a thumbprint in the clay and discovers that it matches his own, save for a scar-line. Later that day he accidentally cuts the ball of his thumb and now the match is perfect. As literary theorist Maria Nikolajeva writes, 'we guess that the two times have merged; Brian and the unknown potter become one; he goes into the depth of time or timelessness' (1989, 129). The same can be said of Macey, Thomas, and Tom, through their handling of the stone axe.

'Shut away: no touching: a label'

Not all found objects stay with their finders. Many are donated to museums and heritage centres (cf. Eastop 2006, 2007; Houlbrook and Shawcross Forthcoming), and this is precisely what Tom does. Not realising the importance of the stone axe as Jan's 'Bunty', as her talisman, he sells it to the British Museum. 'It wasn't a Bunty. It was an artefact. Not a toy. It was three thousand five hundred years old...It's in the British Museum. You can go and see it. It has a label and everything' (Garner 1973, 161). As Edmonds observes, once the stone axe is sold, 'the connection is broken' (2016, 73).

The accessioning of an object into a museum collection invariably and inevitably results in 'the loss of environmental context', as bemoaned by historian David Lowenthal (1985, 286). 'Museumizing' is the process of physically removing an object from its typical place of use and its typical group of users, consequently limiting or even prohibiting access

to it. 'In a glass case?' Jan asks. 'You can see it any time', Tom assures her. 'Touch?' 'Of course not' (Garner 1973, 161). The stone axe is no longer Jan's Bunty, to be held, carried, passed back and forth between the two of them. It is an exhibited museum artefact: 'an axe. Beaker Period. It was a votive axe. The best ever found' (Garner 1973, 160), and has transitioned into something to be looked at and studied rather than touched and held.

Accessioned objects undergo more than physical displacement though. They are also conceptually altered. Place an object within a glass cabinet and it becomes something 'other', something 'special'. This is an issue that has occupied many curators and museologists, with Crispin Paine noting a parallel between 'museumification' and 'sacralization' (2013, 2). When an object becomes a 'museum artefact' it 'acquires a new meaning, a new value, a new personality' (2013, 2). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms this process the 'museum effect' (1991, 410), with objects becoming 'enshrined' by their museum environments (1991, 386). Enshrined or entombed. As Sharon Macdonald asserts, a 'museum, for most objects, is a final resting place – a moment frozen in time for future contemplation' (2002, 92). Placing an object in a museum will probably increase its safety and thus extend its material life – Tom defends his selling of the stone axe by claiming 'The responsibility's too great . . . humping it around on the back of a bike' (1973, 161). However, it is no longer a 'living' object (Jones 2006, 120). Museum labels are, after all, commonly referred to as 'tombstones' by museum staff.

Charles Butler notes the frequency with which fantasy authors portray museums as a 'sterile setting', from Edith Nesbit in her 1906 *The Story of the Amulet* to Penelope Lively's 1970 *Astercote*. In fiction, he observes, 'To donate an object to a museum is to cede it to adult control. In such places artifacts are visible only behind glass, abstracted from time and their proper (usually magical) use' (2006, 50). The power and meaning of Macey's 'moon's axe edge'; of Thomas and Margery's 'thunderstone'; and of Jan's 'Bunty' is lost behind the glass and the label and the catalogue number.

Conclusion

This paper has explored Garner's illustration of the mutability of the magical object in fiction – and also in folklore. Garner's work communicates what folklorists have recognized for some time: lore and custom are not timeless, birthless fixtures. They are generated, adapted, accrued. The same is true of objects of folklore, those palimpsests of ritual and

belief. The 'stone axe from way back' may be, by definition, rigid and sturdy, but it is not a static object. It is fluid and mutable. It is a product not just of its anonymous prehistoric maker, but also of those finders, users and relinquishers who pass through its biography. The soldier who draws on its power for violence and surrenders it for redemption. The couple who carry it safely through a massacre and hide it within the fabric of their home for luck. The girl who cherishes it like a pet and the boy who lays it to rest in a glass case. Each character defines the object, each character is defined by the object, and each character is enchained to the other, anchored by that object – which is a character in its own right.

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