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A Review of *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* (2019)

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MODERN MONSTERS AND OCCULT BORDERLANDS: WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

Review by Emily Alder

Aldana Reyes, Xavier, ed. *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson*. British Library, 2019. Short stories.

This collection is a recent addition to the British Library's 'Tales of the Weird,' a flourishing new series offering a number of enticing volumes. Editor Xavier Aldana Reyes curates a succinct and purposeful set of Hodgson's short weird tales designed to showcase his distinctive version of the mode.

There have been Hodgson short story collections before, but they have not all remained in print or have limited availability. Even so, *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* is set apart, by its concision – ten stories, compared to which S. T. Joshi's *William Hope Hodgson* (2013) contained a not untypical nineteen stories, and two novels – its chronological arrangement, and its precise focus on its theme: the Weird, that borderland mode on the edges of other speculative genres. Aldana Reyes' introduction deftly contextualises Hodgson in relation to the weird tradition as encapsulated by the more familiar name of H. P. Lovecraft, and to the more familiar genres of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. Hodgson, writing at the *fin de siècle* between the Gothic revival of the 1890s and the pulp magazines of the 1920s, occupies a chronological and generic niche in which writers often get overlooked. This new edition helps to extend the accessibility and availability of a vital strand of Hodgson's work, supported by the rest of a series that stakes out the Weird's claims to recognition as a distinct popular mode.

Writing was Hodgson's third career after spending his youth as a sailor in the Merchant Marine, followed by a stint as a body-building instructor in Blackburn, Lancashire. Most of his publications date between 1904 and his death in World War One in 1918. Collected editions began within his lifetime; the tales of occult detective Carnacki, first featuring in *The Idler* in 1910, form an obvious grouping; six stories were collected as *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* in 1913. The volume was revived with an additional three tales in 1947 by Mycroft & Moran, and reprinted by Wordsworth Editions in 2006 as *The Casebook of Carnacki the Ghost Finder*, with a valuable introduction by David Stuart Davies. Yet here, for reasons I will explore, just four of the stories are singled out, and only three are grouped together. Another early collection, *Men of the Deep Waters* (1914), included a number of sea stories, plus two poems, while certain stories – notably "The Voice in the Night" (1907) – have been regularly reprinted and anthologised. There is naturally a degree of overlap between the stories included in *The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson* and in earlier Hodgson story collections, but there are also some key distinctions: the reasons for both are worth exploring.

Through chronological presentation of the stories, the collection at once samples Hodgson's best-known tales, different stages in his writing career, and his different ideas in the vein of the Weird. As the introduction explains, Hodgson's weird tales can be loosely grouped into the sea horror and the occult Carnacki tales. One effect of the chronological ordering is to mix up these groups – so that the Carnacki stories are not all in a single sequence, for example, and sea stories both begin and end the collection.

Juxtaposed in this way, the two types of story at first appear greatly contrasting. The Carnacki stories belong the niche mode of 'occult detective,' a Holmesian figure who investigates mysteries that may or may not concern genuine weird hauntings. There are other examples – E. and H. Heron's *Flaxman Low* (1898-1899), Algernon Blackwood's *John Silence* (1908), Dion Fortune's *Dr Taverner* (1922) – but Hodgson's series makes a distinct intervention. Carnacki's expertise with modern technology like cameras and audio recording equipment combines with extensive research into the occult, both the archaic and the new. Where Blackwood keeps *Silence's* psychic training mysterious and unspecified (as suits the character's origins in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), Hodgson constructs a fantastic bibliography of texts stretching back into the past, named and cited regularly by Carnacki. One favourite is the *Sigsand Manuscript*, whose claims and methods he has tested, verified, and updated: a pentacle of chalk, garlic, and water, for example, is electrically enhanced as a defence against outer monstrosities. Bringing occult traditions and rediscovered ancient relics (a ring in 'The Gateway of the Monster,' a hidden inscription in 'The Whistling Room') into the contemporary, everyday world aligns Hodgson's technique with Lovecraft's (think of the bas-relief in 'The Call of Cthulhu' [1928]) and cements the Carnacki stories as weird tales. In the Weird, the 'supernatural' is 'natural' – the unknowable, the insanely terrifying, the shocking knowledge that overturns everything we thought we knew about space and time, reality and history – these are all part of the world and can never be dismissed as 'super' anything.

Here is the uniting undercurrent of this collection. Carnacki, spinning his tales in his London residence, is a world away from the uncharted remotes of the Pacific and the Atlantic. But sailors bring fabulous tales home too, and many of Hodgson's sea stories use a similar narrative framing. They, too, present radical new monstrous beings whose existence challenges conventional scientific knowledge. Such monsters are undeniably real in the world and yet still remain elusively beyond the reach of human comprehension and control. They include the organisms in the two 'fungus' stories featured here: "The Derelict" (1912) and "The Voice in the Night," virtual musts for any Hodgson collection foregrounding his Weird Horror tales. Fungus and mould, interstitial organisms neither plant nor animal that posed intriguing puzzles to *fin-de-siècle* biology, here gain the power to move, attract, consume, and transform; the human characters must recognise new forms of life and agency developing within the natural world (rather from outside its metaphysical boundaries) – and they must understand, as Carnacki does, a new set of relations between the human and the Other, in which the human rarely if ever dominates.

The same is true of those stories involving more recognisable sea creatures, often serpent- or squid-like. "A Tropical Horror" (1905), the first in the collection and Hodgson's second published

story, plunges us straight into a first-person, present-tense account of a ship terrorised by a giant sea monster which eats most of the crew. Comparing it to the eighth story, "The Thing in the Weeds" (1913), shows the development in Hodgson's style – the later story builds up suspense and uncertainty, delays identification of the monster, and presents a more convincing animal (a malevolent kraken) within the strange weedy habitat of the Sargasso Sea. The Sargasso as an alien world of alternative evolutionary development is a scenario Hodgson regularly uses – *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (1907) and "From the Tideless Sea" (1906), for example, also feature giant squid and other betentacled things.

The remaining two stories are interesting choices that fit neatly into neither category. "Out of the Storm" (1909), in fact, uses a Carnacki-like piece of experimental communication technology to record the story of a sailor who does *not* survive his encounter with a weird horror: the sea itself, revealed as a terrible, all-consuming god-like force. "The Riven Night" (published 1973) portrays a ship's encounter with yet another unknown ocean phenomenon: a violet chasm apparently opening into the spirit world, but which may conceal more sinister forces behind the appearance of the sailors' lost loved ones.

For Hodgson, the sea provided many resources for weird tales: uncharted islands and seascapes, unknown animal species, the otherworldly mysteries of the deeps, and a characteristic blurring of states. On the ocean, 'down' can look like 'up,' skies resemble water, mirages mingle with reality, and the boundary between life and death is fragile. These borderlands are reflected both in the experience of being at sea and in the superstitions and legends attendant on the Age of Sail. In his weird sea stories and the Carnacki tales, Hodgson combines ancient and folkloric traditions with the new technologies and modern occult and spiritualist philosophies, whether based on sea lore or on the family and local histories that lie behind "The Gateway of the Monster," "The Whistling Room," and "The Horse of the Invisible."

The Weird Tales of William Hope Hodgson makes for a thorough introduction to Hodgson as a writer of weird tales – these stories may be the most representative of his short weird works in their own right, but they also introduce key Hodgsonian ideas at work in his novels too. The idea of the sea as a borderland between states of existence is developed and sustained throughout *The Ghost Pirates* (1909), while the islands and waters through which the 'Glen Carrig' survivors struggle house a vibrant range of organic beasts, and the outer horrors glimpsed by Carnacki in 'The Hog' linger on and encroach the edges of human reality in *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Night Land* (1912).

The inclusion of Hodgson's work in this prominent series from the British Library is a welcome addition to collected editions of his fiction, as well as marking the increased recognition of this author's position in the development of the weird tale.

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Emily Alder is Lecturer in Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University, UK, and a member of the Young Academy of Scotland. Her research interests are interdisciplinary and lie in literature and science, environmental humanities, Children's Literature, and Weird, Gothic, and Science Fiction especially of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Her monograph, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de siècle* was published in 2020 by Palgrave Macmillan. Emily is Editor of the journal *Gothic Studies* and Membership Secretary of the British Society for Literature and Science.