

## Chapter 8

# Superstition and Dreams

Scratch the Christian and you find the pagan — spoiled.

[Israel Zangwill, *Children of the Ghetto*]

The 'domains of dreamland' are those within which we either deceive or liberate ourselves, in which we have the opportunity to explore the past, present and future, to discover the forces of will and energy within us, and to use power and knowledge for good or evil ends.

[Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism. The Hidden Springs of Fiction*]

It is probable that Radnorshire is the richest mine of folklore in England and Wales.

[H.J. Massingham, *The Southern Marches*]

Romantic poets were taken with the notion of life as most fully lived in special states of consciousness to be best rendered through dream and imagery. . . .

[Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism. The Hidden Springs of Fiction*]

We may define Romantics as all who do not believe in the Fall of Man.

[T.E. Hulme, *Speculations. Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*]

There is no going so sweet as upon the old dreams of men.

[Edward Thomas, *The South Country*]

The wild girls of the last chapter, who crowded Kilvert's world and imagination, filled his senses and his spirit, had a supernatural dimension; they seemed half human and half nature-sprites. So much of his apprehension of landscape contains this supernatural dimension and this chapter will explore it. He can be seen not only blending elements of superstitious folklore with descriptions of places and people, but also blending himself with natural forms in much the same way as did the ancient peoples who once inhabited the locations in which he walked. One feels that he came close to joining the vernal revels of the Mouse Castle girls; that *Diary* entry closes with a vigorous statement of the power of Spring:

The air blew sweet from the mountains and tempered the heat of the sun. All round the brow of the hill the sloping woods budded into leaf, the birds sang in the thickets and the afternoon sun shone golden on the grassy knolls.<sup>1</sup>

Kilvert's sensuous feel in this passage for the sun will be examined later. It is worthwhile recalling here what has been said earlier about his response to landscape. It has been said that he *felt* landscapes rather than simply saw them, that he gave himself up entirely to the spirit of place (as Wordsworth and Robertson did), that he deliberately cultivated awareness of landscape in terms of memories structuring his consciousness, that places registered themselves unusually sharply on his senses, that he sought intensification and extension of awareness of people and things through landscape 'encounters', and that he believed Nature was permeated by a divine spirit. His characteristic blend of the sensuous and the spiritual, those twin strands of Romanticism, will be particularly apparent in this chapter, which examines *Diary* entries concerned with the supernatural, another aspect of his interest in unusual or heightened forms of consciousness.

His father recorded that one of his first memories was being told by a malicious girl older than himself that the reflection of the sun on a polished door handle was 'the eye of a spirit' watching him, and how similar stories told him by servants 'wrought havoc in [his] timid sensitive nature'. Even at the age of thirteen or fourteen, he remembered sitting alone in the house in the dark 'in an agony of terror at the thought of supernatural surroundings'.<sup>2</sup> Robert was also impressed by a

story told him by a parishioner whose husband was dying. She heard, while sitting downstairs, 'solemn music' coming from her husband's bedroom. Robert said he questioned her closely as to whether there could be a natural cause for the music but she was convinced it was a supernatural event. He indicated he was disposed to agree with her, for though he had not been able to prove her story, 'yet we know there are attendant angels . . . , that there is celestial music and . . . there is nothing to forbid exceptional communications from the other world'.<sup>3</sup> Kilvert's mother had a similar susceptibility and gave credence to a vivid dream she had when young:

It was about her first cousin Thersie Ashe. She dreamt that Thersie Ashe was going to be married. The wedding party drove up to the north door of Langley Church in a hearse. John Chambers was driving. The hearse stopped with a jolt and they all fell to dust. Then Death appeared and closed with my Mother in a mortal struggle. They wrestled all about the churchyard over the graves and among the tombs especially by Lessiter's tomb and the little child Warrilow's grave, and at last she conquered Death.<sup>4</sup>

Kilvert's recording of this dream, among many that appear in his diary, is indicative of the importance he had been encouraged to attach to them. Chapter three noted that Wesley defended superstition and found wisdom in it and that his evangelising flourished among the Celtic peoples of Cornwall because magic and folklore were especially strong there. He believed that it was possible to have spiritual experience of God through 'a new class of senses opened in your soul, not depending on organs of flesh and blood'. The senses made it possible to perceive the 'spiritual objects' of the 'invisible world'.<sup>5</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that Kilvert inherited a tendency to experience supernatural events. One commentator thought that his diary shows that he was psychic: 'His senses are abnormally acute. He was occasionally overwhelmed by psychic invasions'.<sup>6</sup> This could explain the following passage:

After dinner today I was seized with a strange fit of nervous restlessness such as I never felt before. I should think it must have been something like the peculiar restlessness that comes shortly before death. I could not

sit still or rest for a minute in any posture. The limbs all kept jumping and twitching and I should have liked to set to a run only I felt so weak and wretched. It was a strange uncomfortable feeling. . . .<sup>7</sup>

The nurturing of a personality already given naturally to psychic experiences included a massive exposure to the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott. Kilvert was very familiar with Scott's work<sup>8</sup> but he has not been identified as a major influence on the diarist, though, in the matter of superstitious belief (as well as in other matters), he very probably was one. Kilvert's sister Emily suggested that the Kilvert children had many of Scott's novels read to them by their father: 'Papa used to tell us such splendid stories round the fire on winter evenings. I think he knew all the Waverley novels by heart'.<sup>9</sup> Evangelicals distrusted fiction in general but Scott was an exception because his fictional world was safe.<sup>10</sup> Kilvert (and Scott and Wordsworth) generally preferred landscapes to be inhabited.<sup>11</sup> In his work as a young lawyer, Scott made excursions into Liddesdale in the Scottish Borders<sup>12</sup> and acquired 'intimate acquaintance with the living manners of these unsophisticated regions', which provided material for his writing later. Wherever he went, he gathered 'songs and tunes, and occasionally more tangible relics of antiquity'. . . .<sup>13</sup> It was from Scott in this mode that Kilvert learnt to create a landscape that lived in terms of the traditions, legends, superstitions, songs and dialect of its inhabitants. Virginia Woolf underlined how closely Scott's peasants are identified with their landscape: 'Images, anecdotes, illustrations, drawn from sea, sky and earth, race and bubble from their lips'.<sup>14</sup> Her comment indicates the way some modern critics, as well as nineteenth-century ones, have drawn attention to the importance in Scott's work of landscape as an integrated entity — locations and their inhabitants. Basic to his vision of landscape was sympathy with Scottish peasants, a quality which Carlyle recognised: the novels had, he said, 'a sunshiny freshness and picturesqueness, brilliant paintings of scenery and figures . . . a wide sympathy with man'.<sup>15</sup> Ruskin made this ability to create living landscape a central element in his evaluation of Scott: he didn't look at scenery as a dead thing but 'as having an animation and pathos *of its own* . . . an animation which Scott loves and sympathises with, as he would with a

fellow creature, forgetting himself altogether . . . before what seems to him the power of landscape'.<sup>16</sup> He singled out Scott as a man 'who feels [landscape] most deeply'.<sup>17</sup>

Scott located the story of *The Antiquary* in 'the class of society who are the last to feel the influence of that general polish which assimilates to each other the manners of different nations'. His reason for this concerned his perception of the language used by people of this class who, he said, were 'less restrained by the habit of suppressing their feelings'. They were inclined to express 'the higher and more violent passions . . . in the . . . most powerful language'. This was especially true, he said, 'of the Scottish peasantry'. 'The antique force and simplicity of their language . . . , in the mouths of those of an elevated understanding, gives pathos to their grief, and dignity to their resentment'. He acknowledged that he was indebted for these ideas to Wordsworth, which must have meant the latter's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>18</sup> The profound significance of these poems for Kilvert (many of which are marked by a supernatural dimension) has been explored in previous chapters. Thus, from both Wordsworth and Scott he developed a perspective on landscape that valued peasant traditions, including importantly the ballads and the folklore in which peasant life was distilled. When he collected ballads and dialect words he was following Scott's example.<sup>19</sup> Kilvert's diary is dominated by memory and his folklore collection can be seen as part of his effort to memorialise the way of life of a peasantry for whom the passing down of stories was a vital activity. It was particularly important for him to record the oral culture of his Clyro community because it reflected the passionate, mystical involvement of the Celts with Nature. The Celts were, above all, for him a people in harmony with Nature.

He came to recognise that one of the deepest roots of peasant life, especially for those that lived in remote regions, was superstition because it was of ancient origin and reflected man's basic response to natural forms.<sup>20</sup> He would have sympathised with Wordsworth's statement in *The Wishing-Gate*: 'Yet how forlorn, should ye depart, / Ye superstitions of the heart, / How poor were human life.' The stories told Kilvert by parishioners often fascinated him exactly because they expressed superstitious understandings. One *Diary* entry of disturbing power and sheer strangeness seems to be connected

to his attitude towards superstition. The entry describes what he called the 'grey old men of Moccas', the ancient oak trees in the Moccas Park of Sir George Cornwall (Kilvert's squire when he was Vicar of Bredwardine on the Wye). These trees 'stand waiting and watching century after century, biding God's time with both feet in the grave and yet tiring down and seeing out generation after generation. . . .' Here the oaks stand for the ineradicable, irresistible force of the past that intrudes on and shapes the present, a force of Nature in comparison with which human beings are powerless. Faced with such power, the inevitable response of people is to do what the ancient Celts did and that is to make the oaks into deities and to regard them with the fear and awe they showed to other natural forms (the word 'Druid' means 'oak-knowers').<sup>21</sup> That Kilvert conceived of the oaks' power as essentially pagan and primitive is seen in his characterisation of the oaks as 'low-browed, . . . huge, strange, long-armed, deformed [and] misshapen', and always '*with such tales to tell [which] make the silver birches weep . . . and the long ears of the hares and rabbits stand on end.*'<sup>22</sup> The italicised words show that Kilvert habitually saw landscape as charged with stories, many of which were superstitious and frightening. At the same time the stories (often the same ones) could be romantic, pathetic and alluring.<sup>23</sup> Scott's novels bear witness to a similarly ambivalent attitude. For example, as Edie Ochiltree and Dousterswivel in *The Antiquary* dig for treasure at midnight in a ruined abbey, while the wind moans in the trees, Scott commented: 'In these sounds, superstition might have found ample gratification for that state of excited terror which she fears and yet loves'.<sup>24</sup> Kilvert showed himself willing to be simultaneously terrified and amused by superstitious stories: 'Joe Phillips entertained me with the terrors of the Llowes road at night, the black dog, the phantom horses etc which made my hair stand on end'.<sup>25</sup> Cottom emphasised the importance of superstition in Scott: 'Superstition is a major element in almost all of the Waverley novels. . . . Its significance goes beyond the fact that it is a characteristic topic in Scott's fiction', as well as in other Romantic works.<sup>26</sup> A debate goes on throughout *The Antiquary* about the supernatural, with Scott putting both sides of the question.

Superstition is given this dual aspect throughout Kilvert's *Diary*. He knew and respected the fact that the uneducated of his parishes paid serious attention to it. James Jones of

Clyro, the man Kilvert called 'the old wizard', 'had emerged from the atmosphere of charms, incantations, astrology and witchcraft' to embrace Christianity. In this passage, there is genuine tenderness towards Jones, partly because the old man was dying but importantly too because Kilvert recognised how it was that a human being could harbour belief in magic in order to come to terms with life's mysterious, frightening aspects. And this is because he acknowledged that part of him betrayed the same response, even though he, as an educated man, was quite conscious of the relationship between past and present as it concerned magic, that its irrationality was a stage in human development, that, as he put it, 'the days of magic and necromancy had gone by'.<sup>27</sup> It is generally accepted that the Enlightenment, the increased belief in reason and science in the eighteenth century, ushered magic out. Jones was born in 1793 so was 83 in 1876 when Kilvert was saying that he had put magic behind him. Another Clyro Jones — Thomas — was, however, still practising magic at this time and so was his wife, who was 30 years younger than he (he was 62 and she was 32). She suspected a neighbour of stealing her washing from the hedge:

She and her husband consulted the ordeal of the key and the Bible (turning the key in the Bible). The key said 'Bella Whitney'. Then Jones the jockey went to the brickyard and got some clay which he made into a ball. Inside the ball he put a live toad. The clay ball was either boiled or put into the fire and during the process . . . the toad was expected to scratch the name of the thief upon a piece of paper put into the clay ball along with him.<sup>28</sup>

Kilvert was repelled by this practice, noting that 'Some other horrible charm was used to discover the thief, the figure of a person being pricked out on a piece of clay. It is almost incredible'. On the other hand, he was not disposed to reject what he was told by an old Langley Burrell parishioner, William Halliday, who had been treated as a child to 'strange tales of ancient times [when] the world was once full of "witches, weasels (wizards) and wolves"'.<sup>29</sup> Kilvert clearly found credible the story the Langley Burrell schoolmistress, Miss Bland, told him about how her brother's death was predicted by a vision she had of a young man who passed her in the dusk,

running swiftly without a sound and his feet not [touching] the ground. . . . A day or two afterwards she heard that on the day and at the hour when she saw the young man running her brother was struck for death.<sup>30</sup>

Kilvert took seriously belief in fairies partly because he knew peasants whom he admired did. Hannah Whitney listened as a child to her grandparents telling 'their old world stories and tales of fairies *in whom they fully believed*.'<sup>31</sup> That Kilvert was prepared to repose some belief in fairies is evident from the entry he wrote at the time of the Franco-Prussian war: 'Today it was rumoured that Paris was about to capitulate. How prophetic was the old Welsh country dance taught to men by the fairies and called (why?) "The Downfall of Paris".'<sup>32</sup> It is evident, too, that he respected what David Price had to say about his experience of fairies: 'We don't see them now because we have more faith in the Lord Jesus and don't think of them. But I believe the fairies travel yet'.<sup>33</sup>

The way in which Kilvert scrupulously recorded these statements of belief in fairies indicates not only that he respected them, but that he himself recognised that fairies existed, or had existed. Chapter three showed his susceptibility to the mysterious and magical in Nature, his relish for the Arthurian legends and Bottrell's legends of ancient Cornwall, and his admiration of the imaginative Celt. If any doubt remains that he himself was a highly superstitious person, there are more *Diary* passages which dispel it. He had the characteristically evangelical belief in bibliomancy — the belief that whatever passage a person happened to open the Bible at had special significance for him. He had this experience one September morning in 1872 when he was about to embark with his mother on a sea journey down the Bristol Channel to Ilfracombe:

When I opened the Testament this morning, the first passage my eye fell on was this, "And falling into a place where two seas met they ran the ship aground. . . ." The next passage I lighted on was this, "There came down a great storm of wind . . . and the ship was filled with the violence of the waves". When my Mother heard of this ominous conjunction she doubted whether we had better go.<sup>34</sup>



The manner in which Kilvert can be seen entertaining both superstitions and Christian beliefs simultaneously is also illustrated in several entries that concern the Holy Thorn.<sup>35</sup>

The fusion of pagan and Christian in Kilvert's imagination corresponds to their fusion, as he saw it, in landscape, which for him was saturated with stories from the past that persisted into the present. Nowhere is this pervasiveness of the ancient past more powerfully conveyed than in his descriptions of landscape monuments of various kinds. The former pagan inhabitants of Wiltshire are recalled by 'the great silent White Horse on the hillside at Cherhill. . .'.<sup>36</sup> And there is Old Sarum: 'the strange sad mysterious deserted city, silent but for the voices of children at play amongst the bushes within the desolate mounds and broken walls'.<sup>37</sup> The similar phrasing here is important: the emphasis is on mystery that should remain mystery, on monuments rightly withholding their secrets. Kilvert's imagination was deeply stirred by the standing stone of Cross Ffordd, near Clyro, which was referred to in chapter one. One entry about the stone presents it starkly against 'a sheet of dazzling snow a solitary silent witness of some deed covenant or boundary'.<sup>38</sup> In its silence is an implication that to probe its origin would be an intrusion. In a powerful description, he also linked the stone, by means of the 'rude ancient stony road' that led from it, to a ruined cottage with the most unpleasant associations (ruined cottages usually elicited his sympathy):

The hindmost of these hovels has now gone idle, being now and having been for a long time before it was deserted unfit for human habitation. It has fallen into ruin, the window is gone and the roof has broken its back. The dirty white walls of the cabin look as if they had the leprosy, being straked with green stripes of moss and damp. The little old garden, neglected and grass-grown, lay along the margin of the rushing brook and dreary swamp. The little old garden gate still hung on its hinges over a waste of mud and a stagnant pool.<sup>39</sup>

It is as though he was unwilling to dwell *overtly* on the stone's pagan past and chose instead to express his repugnance by implication. What stands out in a third entry is his preoccupation with time and memory:

Turned aside into the meadow to look at the great stone of Cross Ffordd. It is a long time since I stood beside it, and I had forgotten that the stone was so large. I suppose no one will ever know now what the grey silent mysterious witness means, or why it was set there. Perhaps it could tell some strange wild tales and many generations have flowed and ebbed around it. There is something very solemn about these great solitary stones which stand about the country, monuments of some one or something, but the memory has perished and the history is forgotten.<sup>40</sup>

The stone is a repository of stories in which the lives of 'many generations' are distilled but, because no-one possesses the key to unlock it, the stone remains a mystery. A Britton or a Warner would have offered some conjecture as to its origins and purpose, but Kilvert was content that its secret remained inviolate.<sup>41</sup> It is an attitude that sharply differentiates his anti-quarianism from that of others. Explanations derived from history and archaeology would for him be a profanation of something sacred. Hence, 'there is something very *solemn* about these great solitary stones'. He employed 'solemn' about other ancient landscape monuments to indicate his sense of their sacredness, another thing he had learned from Robertson. It was noted in the introduction that Robertson juxtaposed the words 'solemn', 'awful' and 'holy' to designate experiences which provided insight into Nature's *mystery*. Stonehenge, Kilvert said, was 'a solemn awful place'.

The words he used to describe the barrows around Silbury Hill give the clearest evidence of his stance: 'Soon we came in sight of the first outlying barrow rising over a shoulder of the down, solemn, mysterious, holding its secret in unbroken silence and impenetrable mystery'.<sup>42</sup> The feeling here is one of relief that the barrow's secret is untold. Other features of the entry reveal more of his stance. A succession of details reiterate notions of stillness, solitude, virtual absence of all motion, as though he was consciously reproducing the effect of the passage in Wordsworth's *Peter Bell* (quoted in chapter six) in which the 'fair prospect' gave to the observer the sense that 'moving time had been / A thing as steadfast as the scene'. 'There was a ceaseless singing of larks in the vast empty expanse of the sky and down'. 'The monotony of the downs'

is relieved only by 'lonely clumps of trees'. The surrounding downs present the usual routines of agricultural life but there is a suggestion that time has almost stopped, a notion beloved of Victorian viewers of landscape. 'Teams of horses and oxen were crawling slowly along the great slopes at plough and harrow, and one team of four white oxen harrowing in the distance seemed scarcely to move at all'. The echo of Cowper's description in *The Task*, Book I, 159-162, is very strong. Cowper wrote: 'Thence with what pleasure have we just discerned / The distant plough slow-moving, and beside / His labouring team that swerved not from the tracks, / The sturdy swain diminished to a boy!.' The later details of Kilvert's passage reinforce the idea that both human and natural things come together in quiet veneration of the long dead incumbents of the barrows: 'The keen wind hummed a melancholy song among the telegraph wires and each post had its own peculiar measure and mournful song'. The theme of remembering the dead is given a final emphasis by 'The grey tower of Yatesbury Church [that] rose among the grove of trees . . .', linking earth and sky. The spirits, fairies, and ghosts that haunt Kilvert's landscapes may be seen as connected to this theme.<sup>43</sup>

The passage illustrates Kilvert's best and most characteristic writing, presenting as it does a landscape whose features seem to glow with the strange intensity of dream images. It was his intention to present it that way rather than in the conventional way of other writers with antiquarian interests.<sup>44</sup> He was not concerned to delve into the history of the barrows or of the Cross Ffordd stone. At Restormel Castle, one of his party hinted at a desire to know more of its history, and part of Kilvert concurred: 'So little is known of it, no one to show it, or explain it. . . .' But his dominant feeling was that he was an intruder there, that 'the old giant or king who lived there' had trustingly left his castle gate open and might at any moment return, so that Kilvert felt 'awe, expectation, a feeling almost of fear'. Nor did he want to probe Tintagel's history with antiquarian questions but simply to accept its mythic reality, its 'dream', that with his visit had 'come true'. He used the word 'solemn' on this occasion only about the graveyard nearby, but the castle too had solemnity because of its 'fabulously ancient, time-worn, rude weather-beaten masonry' that appeared indistinguishable from, and therefore as old as, the surrounding rock. The theme here is that such ancientness demands veneration for its own sake:

time itself is a sacred mystery. In all these passages, there is an element of the mourning, elegiac note that was commented on in chapter one.<sup>45</sup>

'The devout Christian lives the life of the Saviour in micro-cosm each year by acting out its main events'.<sup>46</sup> It is clear from headings to *Diary* entries that this applies to Kilvert and that to an extent he was influenced by Keble's *The Christian Year*, but at the same time he was something of a primitive in his response to the passage of the seasons, ever sensitive to changes in Nature's moods.<sup>47</sup> His approach to the seasons, as to natural forms, is an animistic one, feeling in his imagination and senses a spiritual presence in supposedly inanimate things. In this and in his belief in dreams and 'Providences', he displayed a pronounced sympathy towards the superstitious mind. In the headings to many *Diary* entries, he can be seen marking days and seasons significant in Celtic times, as though his nature demanded that he kept in touch with the original impulses of ancient peoples. He was obviously aware that many of our most hallowed festivals predated Christianity. 'Long ago, they marked the key dates of the Celtic rural year — for example, the days when planting began or when harvesting was completed'.<sup>48</sup> He was also aware that the Christian Church, recognising the hold that these festivals had on people from time immemorial, had wisely retained them while overlaying them with its own.<sup>49</sup> Thus, we find Kilvert recording Lammass Day, a corruption of 'Loaf Mass', which was 1 August and originally signified the festival of Lughnasad, when the Celts would make propitiatory offerings to the god Lugh in the hope of a good harvest. He also recorded Michaelmas (29 September), the end of harvest;<sup>50</sup> All Hallowsmas (1 November), the date that marked the Celtic festival of Samain, when ghosts and fairies roamed abroad and bonfires were lit to ensure the return of the sun;<sup>51</sup> Childermas (28 December), which occurred in a season when several pagan festivals were celebrated, many honouring the rebirth of the sun after the winter solstice;<sup>52</sup> Candlemas (2 February), which was the Celtic festival of Imbolc, the beginning of the lambing season.<sup>53</sup> The recognition Kilvert gave to key dates in the Saxon agricultural and pastoral year is seen most clearly in his use of 'monat' headings for *Diary* entries: Wolf Monat (New Year's Day), Lenat Monat (1 March), Barn Monat (1 August), Barley Monat (1 September), Wine Monat (1 October), Wind Monat (1 November).<sup>54</sup> He showed his awareness of the origin of these



*Rhos Goch Mill (with William Powell on the left)*

terms when he wrote in the entry for 1 November 1871: 'And true to its old Saxon name the month has come in howling. A wild wind is blowing tonight over valley and mountain'. He had an impassioned response to wind<sup>55</sup> and it can be shown that he evinced the same response to other elemental forces in Nature as they were marked in calendar dates and in folklore. Another way of expressing what is characteristic about his stance towards the seasons is to say that he was acutely conscious, as ancient peoples were, of *weather*.

A number of *Diary* entries indicate that he was drawn to water. One 'delicious day' in spring 1870, he decided to explore the lane parallel with the brook towards Painscastle and to 'discover the old Rhos Goch Mill'. He was drawn to it partly because it was 'picturesque' (he twice used that word about it).<sup>56</sup> He was as pleased with the Mill's inhabitants as he was with the Mill itself. In front of the house was 'a handsome young man with a fine open face, fresh complexion and dressed as a miller. . . .'<sup>57</sup> This was William Powell, who later married Caroline (Carrie) Gore of Whitty's Mill, Clyro. Kilvert was pleased by Powell's 'perfect politeness and well-bred courtesy'. The main reason for Kilvert's visit is then revealed. Apart from there being 'something very fascinating . . . about an old-fashioned flour mill on a brook' (it and its inhabitants were part of an ancient past, integral elements of



*Carrie Gore*

the landscape), the Mill came complete with legends: it was 'the place where the old miller sleeping in the mill trough used to see the fairies dancing of nights upon the mill floor'.<sup>58</sup>

Supernatural associations characterise most of the *Diary* passages concerning water and Kilvert's feeling about it takes us back to ancient times: 'As far back as the Bronze Age, . . .

people regarded water as one of the prime sources of life, rivers, springs and wells were frequently believed to be the dwelling places of the gods',<sup>59</sup> and became sacred places. The Wild Duck Pool that Hannah Whitney told Kilvert about was one of these places. Rituals were observed at this pool which very probably dated from ancient times, though they possessed a Christian overlay: 'To this pool the people used to come on Easter morning to see the sun dance and play in the water and the angels who were at the Resurrection playing backwards and forwards before the sun', Kilvert wrote.<sup>60</sup> On Easter Day 1870 he showed his awareness of the 'relics of doings and beliefs not belonging to the Christian religion [that clung] even to this, the greatest day in the church year'. One of these ancient rituals was to get up very early and climb a hill 'to see the sun dance on Easter morn'.<sup>61</sup> On this occasion, he forgot the water ritual: 'The mill pond was full, but I forgot to look at the sun to see if he was dancing as he is said to do on Easter morning'. He was honouring the traditional significance of sunlight on water when he wrote, in the middle of the entry celebrating the overwhelming meaning for him of the river Wye at Aberedw: 'the morning sun [was] shining like silver upon Llanbychlllyn Pool'.<sup>62</sup> This pool had significance also because the nearby Rocks of Pen Cwm were 'the last haunt of the fairies'.<sup>63</sup> The Wye itself had very strong supernatural associations for local people and Kilvert had assimilated these, building them into his image of the river. Palmer noted that the Wye was 'feared for its power' and had the reputation of 'wanting at least one human victim a year'.<sup>64</sup> In what he called a 'vision' one sleepless night, Kilvert saw himself as Builth's vicar, 'to the accompaniment of the rushing and roaring of torrents of rain'.<sup>65</sup> The untamed aspect of the Wye, which flows through Builth, fascinated him, as emerges in the talk he had with Edward Williams of Clyro: 'We talked of the extraordinarily wet weather and the floods. He said the Wye was a *wild river* (Kilvert's italics) and the valley was frequently flooded in the winter'.<sup>66</sup>

Even the Dulas, the little brook that flowed through Clyro, impressed him with its changeable nature. On 4 March 1870, he wrote: 'A wild stormy night. The Dulas, Clyro, roaring red, and the Wye surging broad yellow and stormy'.<sup>67</sup> He knew and felt deep in his own being why 'In ancient and pre-Christian times wells, springs, lakes and rivers were worshipped as gods . . . and

associated with them were purification ceremonies, sacrifice, . . . healing'.<sup>68</sup> Part of the aura of purity that surrounded 'the fatherless girl' of Penllan stemmed from his image of her going out after she had 'prayed towards the east . . . to draw water from the holy spring of St Mary's Well'.<sup>69</sup> There is a distinct element of water worship in the entries in which he described sea bathing. On 5 September 1872 he wrote: 'There was a delicious feeling of freedom in stripping in the open air and running down naked to the sea. . . .' His love of bathing naked was accompanied by fierce resistance to encumbering himself with drawers. While bathing at Shanklin, the waves were in harmony with him and 'stripped them off'.<sup>70</sup> Bathing at Seaton (Devon), he was insulted at being offered 'rags . . . a pair of very short red and white striped drawers to cover my nakedness'. However, 'unaccustomed to such things', he bathed naked.<sup>71</sup> Such determined nudism seems to have been founded on some principle and it may be found in his Quaker background. Stark noted 'how deeply the first Friends shocked the respectable part of society . . . through their nudism.'<sup>72</sup> (Kilvert showed something of this motive, taking delight at Seaton that he had 'set at nought the conventionalities of the place', while at Shanklin he argued: 'If ladies don't like to see men naked why don't they keep away from the sight?') To seventeenth-century Friends, going naked in the manner of the Hebrew prophets was a sign of faith and was recommended by Fox. He described how William Simpson 'went three years naked . . . as a Sign' to Cromwell and to priests, 'showing how God would strip them of their power.' Such behaviour was seen by Friends as testimony to God's 'naked truth' and as proof that they could deny their own will.<sup>73</sup> The ascetic aspect of this and its simple symbolism would have appealed to Kilvert.

The celebration of water and of spring that he saw enacted at Mouse Castle<sup>74</sup> took place, so he noted, on Easter Tuesday, as though he was conscious of the way the Christian season was grafted onto an older tradition. The spirits of the spring he saw on this occasion were benign, but supernatural forces attendant upon water also had a malign aspect for him. The Rhos Goch bog, where the cutting of peat left pits that filled with water, was an evil place. In the following passage, the superstitious element in his nature comes out strongly: 'Below lay the black and gloomy peat bog, the Rhos Goch, with the dark cold gleam of the stagnant water among its mawn pits,



the graves of children. This place has always had a strange singular irresistible fascination for me. I dread it yet I am drawn to it.<sup>75</sup> He visited a family who were mourning the death of a boy drowned in one of the pits. The episode deeply affected him because the original *Diary* concerning it was, Plomer tells us, 'a long account'. Throughout the surviving entry runs a superstitious thread reflecting in part the mind of Mrs Watkins, who told Kilvert the story. He wrote extensively about the Rhos Goch in his manuscript about Radnorshire legends and superstitions on which Mrs Essex Hope later based an article.<sup>76</sup> In his manuscript, he said that 'Rhos Goch always seemed to me a place of magic and marvel'. It was such statements, plus the affinity which he displayed with the superstitious Welsh people he knew, that led Mrs Hope to state: 'There must have been in him some touch of the Celtic spirit, some strain of mysticism. . . .'<sup>77</sup> He wrote admiringly of Radnorshire folk: 'everywhere they are credulous, highly imaginative and superstitious'.<sup>78</sup>

He had a mystical stance towards the sun as well as to water. The two elements came together on Midsummer Day (24 June), a date he usually marked in his diary, sometimes noting that it was also the day of St John the Baptist.<sup>79</sup> Just as there was always something physically and emotionally thrilling for him about contact with water and an awareness of its power for good or ill, so he was never happier than on days of glorious sunshine. As soon as the sun had acquired power at Easter, he became excited, seeing it as a form of rejoicing at Christ's resurrection. Thus, on Easter Day 1870 he wrote: 'As I had hoped, the day was cloudless, a glorious morning. My first thought was "Christ is Risen"'.<sup>80</sup> No doubt some of his feeling here derived from Malachi (4.2): 'The sun [son] of righteousness shall rise with healing in his wings.' Like Wordsworth and Robertson, he was very responsive to sunrises and sunsets, as for example on 20 September 1870 when he 'watched the sun set in a crimson ball behind the hills. . . . It was like seeing a sunset over the sea'.<sup>81</sup> Quite often *Diary* entries simply reflect the fact that he was a sun-worshipper and exhibited something of the response to it that we associate with people of ancient cultures for whom it was a central fact in their existence. The absence of it dashed his spirits, but not on Good Friday 1870 when he was delighted there was sunshine because 'so many Good Fridays [have been] dark and gloomy'. He then went to Hay



*John Constable, 'Stonehenge', 1820-35*

— 'The walk across the fields in the glowing hot sunshine'.<sup>82</sup> It is noticeable too that he steadily recorded the longest day in the summer, as though revelling in the luxury of having the maximum amount of light to enjoy and in the knowledge that the maximum amount of nurturing was taking place. When the longest day coincided with sunshine, he was ecstatic, as in 1873: 'A splendid summer's day, burning hot. . . .' In 1876, he was happy to note simply: 'Burning heat', while the entry for 1875 links sunshine with seasonal work: 'The longest day and a beautiful haymaking day'. In 1871, the absence of sun was deeply felt: 'The longest day, and one of the darkest dreariest coldest Junes that I ever remember'.<sup>83</sup> The pagan that lay just below the skin of his Anglican clergyman self becomes most visible in the passage commemorating Midsummer Day 1875:

The sun went down red under a delicate fringe of gold laced cloud, the beautiful Midsummer evening passed through twilight and gloaming into the exquisite warm soft Midsummer night, with its long light in the north slowly, softly lingering as Jupiter came out glorious in the south and flashed glittering through the tresses of the silver birches softly waving, and the high poplars rustled whispering and the Church clock at Draycot struck ten and I longed to sleep out of doors and dream my "Midsummer night's dream".

Midsummer was the season particularly associated with women because their fertility was identified with crop fertility: 'feminine love magic culminates during the solstice season. It is aimed exclusively at proliferating the species'.<sup>84</sup> Midsummer night was therefore the night when women would dream of their lovers and when supernatural beings — witches, fairies and mischievous spirits — were abroad.

His paganism is evident in the entry dealing with what is probably the most spectacular pagan landscape in Britain — Stonehenge, which he visited on 27 August 1875 with his friend Arthur Morres.<sup>85</sup> Among various influences that pushed Kilvert into making a 'pilgrimage' to this ancient site was Howitt, who had declared that it was 'worth a long pilgrimage to see' because of its 'lonely grandeur' and 'savage and mysterious antiquity.'<sup>86</sup> Though it was a hot, sunny day, there is a melancholy oppressive air to Kilvert's description of it. The Plain 'heaved mournfully with the great and solemn barrows' (one theme of the description is Kilvert's fellow-feeling with the dead). The main theme centres around his awareness that Stonehenge was a Temple to the Sun: 'The Sun was present at the service in his Temple and the place was filled with his glory'. Kilvert, too, was present as a sun-worshipper. His awareness was informed by the knowledge that the pagan urge to worship a force of Nature had been superseded by Christianity: 'a purer faith' which had compelled the stones into 'reluctant acknowledgement and worship of One Greater than They'. He nevertheless showed respect for what he evidently saw as a profoundly religious impulse on the part of the pagans whose shrine it was:

It seemed to be holy ground and the very Acre of God. . . .<sup>87</sup> It is a solemn awful place. As I entered the charmed circle of the sombre Stones I instinctively uncovered my head. It was like entering a great Cathedral Church. A great silent service was going on and the Stones inaudibly whispered to each other the grand secret.

His sense that the stones were alive is reinforced by his likening them to 'ancient giants who suddenly became silent and stiffened into stone directly anyone approached'. That he felt at this moment in close touch with the whole tradition of ancient belief, with historical memory immanent in landscape,

is clear from what follows: the giants 'might at any moment become alive again at certain seasons, as at midnight and on Old Christmas and Midsummer's Eve. . . .' There are signs that his description was influenced by his uncle Francis's poem, *Stonehenge*, which speaks of 'rocks Cyclopean, as by Giants' hands/ In a rude Temple's forms disposed'. Francis also stressed that pagan worship involved 'rites impure' (human sacrifices) but that their 'false Religion' had been superseded by 'the Sun of Righteousness'. However, like Kilvert, he acknowledged his religious inheritance since we are, he said, 'the progeny of Pagan Sires'.<sup>88</sup>

It is in the Radnorshire sections of the *Diary* that Kilvert's preoccupation with superstitious stories is most intense and this is because its people were Celtic in origin and, like their Cornish cousins, particularly superstitious. It is worthwhile to examine his view of accidents in relation to superstition. There is a clear suggestion in the entry in which he recorded two tragic accidents in Radnorshire that some mysterious, malign power in Nature lay behind them, and he added meaningfully: 'There have been many dreadful accidents and strange adventures on these hills'.<sup>89</sup> One measure of the importance he attached to accidents is the large number of entries (39) that appear under this heading in Plomer's index, to which must be added 9 and 13 respectively under the headings Floods and Shipwrecks. Kilvert clearly felt a compulsion to record such events and this is because he saw a meaning in them. However, it was also Evangelicalism that taught him to see God's hand in 'accidents', or in what religious people call 'Providence'. The concept of Providence denotes the 'continued community between God, humanity and world'.<sup>90</sup> 'It was a belief of nearly every Evangelical that even the slightest happenings . . . are acts of an immanent God protecting or chastising his people'.<sup>91</sup> 'Evangelicals could discern a special providence in the most trivial occasions'.<sup>92</sup> In a discussion of Providence by a number of London-based Evangelical clergymen, the Rev John Newton observed: 'A knock at a door, or a turning a corner, may be events which lead to important consequences. There is no such thing as an accident'.<sup>93</sup> Kilvert confirmed he had assimilated this doctrine when he wrote: 'God . . . plans every little incident of life'.<sup>94</sup>

To those like Kilvert with a strong religious faith, the attribution of daily events to divine Providence would not have

seemed a surrender of rationality, which might be said to be the basis of superstition, but rather a religiously orthodox version of pre-Christian attitudes. Belief in the significance of dreams, another of his preoccupations (29 references in Plomer's index), was a more problematic area of experience. In Christian thought, dreams are regarded ambivalently because they stand between rationality and inspiration. In the Old Testament, prophets and patriarchs receive messages through dreams, while the New Testament has a tradition of revelatory dreams. The Church was in a dilemma over dreams, on the one hand valuing the revelatory kind but on the other condemning those that encouraged superstition and diabolical practices.<sup>95</sup> It is useful to know what other *Evangelical* clergymen thought of dreams as a guide to Kilvert's thinking. The issue came up for discussion — framed as 'What is the morality and use of dreams?' — by the influential London group on 29 October 1798. The Rev Goode began with this couplet: 'My waking dreams are best concealed; For little good, much ill they yield'. The Rev Patrick thought that if what was dreamed was 'consonant with God's word', it should not be despised and that dreams were not evil if dreamed by good men. The Rev Cecil stated: 'Dreams are one of God's witnesses in the world . . . a witness to his being and providence. . . . A sort of half-way house to the other world: a porch to the spiritual world'. From the Rev Clayton came this statement to close the discussion: 'Dreams are not to be despised. There is much in Scripture about them. God avails himself of every avenue'.<sup>96</sup>

Like the Romantic poets, Kilvert was drawn to symbols because they were a feature both of dreams and poetry. The period in which he was being educated by his uncle Francis in poetic literature no doubt saw the beginning of his preoccupation with the Romantic view of dreams. Uncle Francis grew to maturity in the early 1800s when dreams were of great interest to writers, scientists and philosophers<sup>97</sup> and was likely, especially with his interest in antiquarianism, to have been influenced by this movement. It was Coleridge in particular who saw links between dreaming and poetic, imaginative creativity, as part of his concern with different levels of consciousness. Byron, too, shared this interest and Kilvert was always quoting Byron's poem *The Dream*,<sup>98</sup> which reflects many of the controversial opinions about dreams of the early 1800 period. A further indication of the seriousness of Kilvert's interest in dreams is that when writing of them he carefully distinguished between different kinds. It

has been noted that he habitually used 'dream' and 'vision' in the Romantic manner to denote the imaginative apprehension of landscapes such as the ancient mansion of Yaverland, rugged Cornish scenes and the Rocks of Aberedw. The most powerful memories had the quality of intensity that existed, so Romantics (and Kilvert) believed, in the child's perception of natural forms, the perception Wordsworth characterised as 'the glory and freshness of a *dream*'. The memories Kilvert had of his Hardenhuish childhood, described in chapter five, had this intensity, clarity and vibrancy, as did his perception of the 'glowing roses of the Vicarage lawn'. He used both 'dream' and 'vision' in connection with an experience he had in Dolgelly on 12 June 1871: 'I have always had a vision of coming into a Welsh town about sunset and seeing the children playing on the bridge and this evening the dream came true'. In moments like this he was fully awake but also strongly aware of a persistent memory. A memory of something he had been told probably overshadowed the *Diary* entry in which he had a vision of 'a crew of dead men . . . kicking football and my great-grandfather, who has been in his grave nearly a hundred years, was looking on'.<sup>99</sup>

Coleridge considered that dreaming, superstition and witchcraft were connected complementary phenomena and he sought, as Kilvert did, explanations for the appearance of ghosts, visions and supernatural occurrences.<sup>100</sup> Coleridge's poem, *Frost at Midnight*, focuses on dreaming, particularly the state of consciousness between waking and dreaming. Examples of *waking* dreams, some of them precisely defined as such, are to be found in *Kilvert's Diary*. On 15 September 1871, for example, he recorded: 'Lying in bed this morning dozing, half awake and half asleep, I composed my speech of thanks at my wedding breakfast'. The dream recounted to him by John Hatherell was, Kilvert noted, a 'waking' one.<sup>101</sup> And to confirm that distinctions between dreams meant something to Kilvert, he underlined in the case of another parishioner's experience 'It was not a dream, she said, she was broad awake'.<sup>102</sup> The experience of his own, when he 'seemed to see' pretty girls sitting at the windows of his grandfather's house three hundred years, before was another waking dream. Sometimes, it is evident that Kilvert knew that some of his dreams originated from evil sources.<sup>103</sup>

It was noted at the end of chapter three that Kilvert conceived

of his diary, in part, as a journey into his own inner landscape; it is appropriate to see his intense preoccupation with dreams and superstition as complementary to this search for self. The Romantics sought insights into their own identity by studying various modes of consciousness, one of which was dreams. Their distrust of the rational led them naturally to study and to respect so-called 'primitive' consciousness, and superstition and dreams are concerned with the submerged, irrational elements of the mind. Certainly dreams were one of the states of consciousness that interested Kilvert because they seemed to offer insights into a reality that would otherwise remain hidden. (Mesmerism interested him for similar reasons.)

This chapter has covered further aspects of Kilvert's view of the internal and external landscape of the past, particularly with its inheritance of superstition, the supernatural 'stories' symbolised by the Moccas oaks and the monuments of ancient, pre-Christian people, both of which exercised mysterious power over him. His attitude to the relation between past and present owes a lot to Scott, who demarcated them clearly while simultaneously blurring them.<sup>104</sup> He blurred them, as Kilvert did, by showing how, through superstition, folklore, ballads, ruins and dialect, the past persisted into the present.<sup>105</sup> For Kilvert, the key to the mystery of the individual self and of the land lay in the web of memories which constituted the eternal landscape of the past. Although he declined to probe the deepest sources of his own personality,<sup>106</sup> his concern with the superstitious dimension of the life of the Wiltshire and Radnorshire peasants indicates a willingness to probe them in others' lives. It was the Radnorshire ones who had the 'rich folklore and deep vein of superstition' which, as chapter three noted, he found specially fascinating in their Celtic brothers of Cornwall. He entirely concurred with his father's belief that 'there is nothing to forbid exceptional communications from the other world'.<sup>107</sup> Superstition was an important channel by which the living were united with the dead and with the ancient past in bonds of sympathy and recognition. This concern with what Kilvert liked to call the *primitive* past<sup>108</sup> was essentially Romantic, as was his tendency to portray the ancestors of the peasants he knew as 'Noble Savages' living free, simple and natural lives. To journey back imaginatively into their beliefs, their consciousness, was part of Kilvert's 'passion for the past' that was seen earlier as a strong element in his depiction of landscape, a journey into the heart of mystery.