

The Huntsmen of Fiction



Illustrations by Alan Hunter.

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INTRODUCTION: Those of you who have read the second issue of my own magazine, Balthus, will know that in that issue I wrote at some length upon the lore and legend of the Wild Hunt and related legends, freely sprinkling the dissertation with actual tales of these legends, all set in Britain. The original concept of that dissertation was to investigate one aspect of folk-lore, that is, the Wild Hunt, with respect to its use in fictional literature. I disposed of this idea, deciding to go into the folk-lore of the Wild Hunt at greater depth and, later, follow that article up with one of the Hunt's use in fiction. This is that article.

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The possible origin of the lore of the Wild Hunt, as Poul Anderson has stated*, lies back with the carrying off of the spirits of the dead by some supernatural being. In Greek mythology this being was Hermes (named Mercury in Roman myth) and in the Nordic or Teutonic pantheons it was Odin or Woden. The Wendigo is a well-known Northern American being and the Aztec's had their own death goddess, Tlazolteotl.

From these developed the supernatural concepts of the Furious Host and the

* "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" No. 2. The letter supplement to Balthus.

Wild Hunt, both concepts lying close together, so much so, that they overlap and merge to an extent that it is difficult to separate their effects in many legends. The Furious Host, as its name implies, is a clamorous host of unrestful spirits, more often than not foretelling of bad luck and death to those who hear them. Such as the Banshee is a member of the host - the pure, earlier Irish form of the Sidhe Bean being simply a conductor of the deads' spirits, as was Hermes, and the much altered, Anglicised version of a screaming hag being directly sprung from the Furious Host.

The Wild Hunt developed as such on the European continent in the form of Odin or Woden. The leading of the dead away on the night wind became wild debaucheries after wood nymphs and the spirits of fallen witches. The screech of the wind whipping through the tops of the tall Scandinavian forests was believed to be the cries of the dryads as they were pursued along the tree tops by a mounted Odin in hunt.

With the coming of the Christian religion many of the old legends were adapted. King Herod is said still to pursue the spirits of the babies he had slain, the Wandering Jew became a silent death portent, other Jews that were at the Crucifixion are said to haunt Cornish tin mines as the 'Knockers' while they are also supposed to inhabit the aerial bodies of the Seven Whistlers, although, as I have been told*, in some parts of England only six are ever to be seen and that the appearance of the seventh will foretell doom to Britain. There is also Gabriel's Hounds or Gabriel's Rackets, named after the noise they make - a pack of giant dogs that circumscribe aether. But, the most popular character for the role of the Wild Huntsman is Old Nick, chasing after the spirits of the doomed. The Devil was very early on associated with the Horned Beast and so, in his role as the Huntsman, he has been seen many a time - a horned horseman followed by a pack of horned, fiery-eyed hounds.

When the Wild Hunt was first used in fiction is impossible to say. Hunting has always been a very popular sport and so fantasies have long been built up around the hunt and number quite a few. Lord Dunsany wrote a number of such fantasies, such as "Thirteen at Table" and the unicorn hunts in "The King of Elfland's Daughter". Going back to the thirteenth century there are the hunts in Edmund Spenser's "Faerie Queen". Back even further is the Welsh Arthurian legend of "Culhwch and Olwen" in which there is the hunt of Twrch Trwyth; and so on. The first true use of the Wild Hunt in fiction, as far as I know, is in "Tregeagle:

* "Dark Horizons" No. 2. A review of Balthus 2 by Rosemary Pardoe.

or, Dozmare Poole" by John Penwarne which is a romanticisation of the old Cornish legend of Tregagle in which Tregagle's doom is to be hunted as sport by Satan:

"And styllle, as the Trav'lere pursues hys lone waye
In horroure, at nyghte o'er the waste,
He heares Syr Tregagle wyth shriekes rushe awaye,
He heares the Blacke Hunter pursuing hys preye,
And shrynktes at hys bugle's dread blaste."

To be able to list all the stories in which the Wild Hunt, the Furious Host and all their various derivations are used is an impossible task. To search for such stories all fantastic literature ever written would have to be read and analysed, which is no mean task for any person, if not an impossible one. I have no hopes of attempting such a study, nor would I want to. I can only fall back on my meager readings in the fantastic genre and bring to notice those stories I can remember. The most important fact is that, considering the amount of written material I have consumed, the number of stories I can remember to contain some aspect of the Wild Hunt, let alone counting those that must have slipped my mind, is quite large, which only ascertains the fact that the use of folk-lore and legend in general in fantasy is quite substantial.

Above I have mentioned death portents; if we take out all the stories in the fantastic that contain some sign or some sort of familiar that portends trouble or death to some person then there would be a great gap left on the bookshelves. The portent is one of the main stays of the fantastic. The portent is never a stable creature, changing from story to story, disguised, even hidden in some cases, in the most elaborate manners. In Arthur Machen's "Green Round" the protagonist, Hillyer, after visiting a site of a fairy circle - the fairies in Machen's stories always being malign, malformed creatures - finds himself possessing a familiar that he does not see until near the end of his story, but which is described inconsistently by other people as varying between a horrible dwarf and a dark dog. This familiar manages to get Hillyer beaten up, thrown out of his rooms and nearly drives him mad. Much like a poltergeist, this familiar breaks windows and smashes vases and picture frames. On the other end of the scale is August Derleth's "The Shadow on the Sky" in which the portent of doom is the shadow in the sky, a shadow thrown across the clouds depicting a hanged man, the fate which comes to the unfortunate person who sees the shadow. This latter story is much like Poe's "The Judge's House".

Other variations of the death portent are such things as a beckoning hand appearing in different stories in such odd places as out of an empty ottoman in



which the protagonist of the story is finally compelled to climb into as if it were a coffin. The lid slams down and he finds that the ottoman is really to be his coffin. In some stories the hand is severed and in one particular story it is joined by other severed parts of the human anatomy, including an eye ball that watches as it drives the poor person who sees these ghastly relics to beat a hast retreat...through a fourth floor window.

The great majority of these portents are of a traditional form, as found in many folk tales, but there are more modern forms of portents, using modern technology and the products thereof to

manifest themselves. Two writers who have used modern forms of the portent to a fair extent are Fritz Leiber and Ray Bradbury. While Fritz Leiber's "The Hound" may harken back to traditional forms, his "Smoke Ghost" does not. He starts this latter tale off with an anxious person telling his secretary that beings of the supernatural, such as ghosts, nowadays would not be as those of earlier times. They should be 'updated', and goes on talking of the forms they would now take, trying to convince himself by his own words to his secretary how ridiculous such things would be, but he has already seen the smoke ghost:

"A phantom has resolved, myself to haunt.

It is a modern ghost, adroit and sly -

No thing of gauzy mist, or rattling bones,

Or clanking chains, or marrow-freezing moans

It's futile to gesticulate and cry:

"Bogone, accursed specter! Out, avaunt!"

To no such antics is this ghost inclined;

It occupies a corner of my mind."

L. Sprague de Camp "The Ghost".

Even more outre in their modernity are his stories, "The Black Gondolier" and "The Man who made Friends with Electricity". Both of these stories are bizarre in as much as in each there is a person who claims that a certain utility of modern technology, both a source of power, possesses sentience - in the former

story it is oil and in the latter, electricity. Within both stories these power sources double as their own portents; in the former story, which is set in Venice, New Mexico, an oil town, some unknown entity of oil is the Black Gondolier; in the latter story, the person is told of his own doom by the crackling electricity in the high voltage pilons above his house.

One of the greatest users of the traditional form of death portent is Joseph Sheridan LeFanu. He wrote a number of horror/fantasy stories based in Ireland in which he used basic ideas of folk-lore, such as witches, lycanthropy, death portents, curses, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena, constructing his own folk-lore which to exploit within his stories. Such tales are "A Legend of Dunoran", "The White Cat of Drumgunniol" and "Wicked Captain Walshaw". "The White Cat" is a good example of his tales as it exploits quite a few of those supernatural phenomena - a witch is wronged by a certain family and places a curse upon them that the male offsprings will die before their appointed times. The men-folk are foretold of their deaths by the appearance to them of a white cat which is the transformed spirit of the witch.

Now to turn to the Wild Hunt itself. Throughout fiction the Hunt has turned up in many forms in both prose and poetry. In poetry I know of only a few pieces that use the Hunt. One of such is John Penwarne's "Tregagle" as cited above. Traditional pieces mentioning the Hunt are quite a few, ranging from Alexander Montgomerie's "Scottish Fairy Rade" to Villemarqué's "Chants Populaires de la Bretagne". Even Wordsworth mentions the Hunt in its different facets:

"He the seven birds hath sees that never part,
Seen the seven whistlers on their mighty rounds,
And counted them! and oftentimes will start,
For overhead are sweeping Gabriel's hounds,
Doomed with their impious lord the flying hart,
To chase for ever on aerial grounds."

The most famous piece using the Wild Hunt must be John Masefield's "The Hounds of Hell" in which St. Withiel battles against the hordes of Hell:

"The saint stood still until they came
Baying to ring him round:
A horse whose flecking foam was flame;
And hound on yelling hound.
And jaws that dripped with bitter fire
Snarled at the saint to tear:
Piled hell-hounds, balder than the geier,
Leaping round him everywhere."

Other such poems are fairly scattered. Stanley McNail has used the Hunt, the rising of the dead, death portents, and the satanic hound in a few of his poems:

"Prepare yourselves, prepare yourselves,
For doors that open by themselves;
For trunks that lock without a sound,
For paw-marks of a great black hound..."

"What The Voice Said".

"...She bloodied her mouth, and gashed her face,
And rode a black hound to the trysting place."

"Three Sisters".

Joseph Payne Brennan uses the Greek Goddess Artemis (Roman Diana) in one of his poems. Goddess of hunting, she once caught a secret lover watching her at her toilet. She changed him into a white stag and let her hounds chase it down and tear it to pieces. The white stag has featured predominantly in the lore of the Wild Hunt, being symbolic in its way:

"The White Huntress

Never grows weary;
Her swift hounds
Race on phantom feet,
Tireless, never swerving.

She is inscrutable
She is never seen
Till the chase is ending,
Till the traveler turns
At the sound of silent baying.

He sees the pale hounds leaping,
And the tall white lady
Striding swiftly.

In her blind embrace
The blazing sun goes white."

"The White Huntress".

Though not strictly a 'fictional' piece, there is also the "Gurresange" by J.P. Jacobsen, a notable Danish poet and novelist of a century ago. This piece is based on the legend of the King Valdemar, possibly the fourth of that name, who, after an unfortunate series of events, was doomed until Judgement Day to

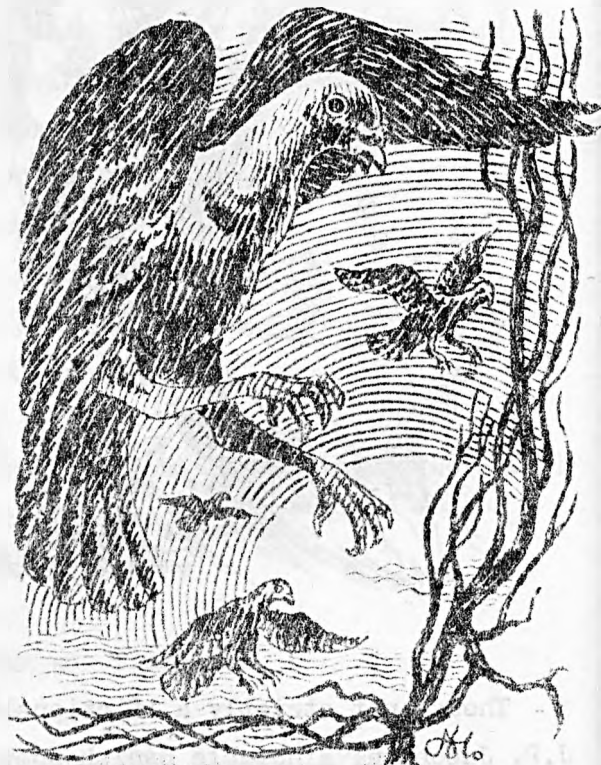
hunt each night with his men and hounds around the castle of Gurre. The following piece is from a translation of the "Gurresange" by Poul Anderson recently printed in the magazine, Amra:

"...Night raven swinging
And darkly winging,
And leafage foaming where hoofs are ringing,
So shall we hunt ev'ry night, they say,
Until that hunt on the Judgement Day".

Within fictional prose the Wild Hunt finds much more of a voice for itself. As I have said above, the Hunt takes on many forms, such as the host of the dead, originating from the early development of the lore. It appears in this form in such stories as Arthur Machen's "The Bowmen" in which St. George with the ghosts of the bowmen of Agincourt suddenly appear to give aid to the failing British soldiers at Mons in the First World War. Similarly, Ray Bradbury's "The Crowd" uses a spectral horde who somehow appear at car accidents as spectators. A reporter discovers them and realises who they are. To keep their secret they have to kill him, which they do in a car accident. As he lays there dying, the reporter sees their faces among the onlookers and realises that he will soon be among their number.

In very much the same way as the Seven Whistlers and the Whippoorwills supposedly contain the souls of the dead and act as death portents, so do Robert Erwin Howard's chilling "Pigeons of Hell":

"I've see men who swore they'd seen a flock of pigeons **that** were perched along the balusters just at sundown," said Buckner slowly. "Higgers, all of them except one man. A tramp. He was buildin' a fire in the yard, aimin' to camp there that night. I passed along there about sundown. He said something about seeing them pigeons. I came back by there the next morning. The ashes of his fire were there, and his tin cup, and skillet where he'd fried



pork, and his blankets looked like they'd been slept in. Nobody ever saw him again. That was twelve years ago. The niggers say they can see the pigeons, but no nigger would pass along this road between sundown and sun-up. They say the pigeons are the souls of the Blassenvilles, let out of hell at sunset. The niggers say the red glare in the west is the light from hell, because then the gates of hell are open, and the Blassenvilles fly out."

I suppose that I should mention Algernon Blackwood's story, "The Wendigo" upon which August Derleth modelled his addition to the Cthulhu pantheon of gods, Ithaqua. Although the Wendigo, in its legendary form, is part of the lore of the Wild Hunt, Blackwood's rendition of him is entirely divorced from that lore. In fact, although Derleth's Ithaqua is not truly a fictional piece of the Wild Hunt, it does have stronger ties with the Hunt than does Blackwood's Wendigo.

The first branch of the "Mabinogion" opens with Pwyll, Prince of Dyffed, out hunting. Whilst pursuing a stag he meets another hunter with a pack of shining white hounds with red ears. This huntsman is Arawn, Lord of Annwn, the Celtic Hades. Thus, Arawn the hunter is the Welsh collector of the souls of the dead. In Welsh legend Arawn is not an ogre, but a just being, though with thirsts of his own, as have most other deities. He is certainly nothing like Arawn of Annuvin, Lord of the Land of the Dead, who appears in Lloyd Alexander's five Taran books and in "Coll and his White Pig". Arawn of Alexander's books does not hunt himself but has Huntsmen, the Cauldren-born and the aerial gwythaints - the latter comparable to Gabriel's Hounds. In "Coll and his White Pig" a stag lures away the Huntsmen of Arawn from the prison of the oracular pig, Hen Wen, by letting them hunt him - harking back to the lore of the Wild Hunt.

In Arthur Machen's superb novelette, "The White People" Arawn again appears in a fairy story related within the novelette. Arawn appears to claim the soul of a young girl soon after her wedding. Though the concept of the fairy story is familiar, it is used to add to the culminating sense of evil throughout the novelette. The fairy story is therefore left in a mysterious, obscure form, outlining none of the motivations of Arawn or the other characters. This is also found in the other three fairy tales told within the novelette. The second of these stories is a typical Wild Hunt tale in which a young hunter is led by a pure white stag down into Annwn. Arawn's female counterpart, Mab, Queen of the fairies, is met in this tale.

One novel that I could not help but mention herein is that of Sarban's "The

Sound of his Horn". This fantasy begins with a break from a P.O.W. camp in Germany. An escaping naval officer is accidentally hit by some strange rays that, not only transports him a hundred years into the future, but into a parallel world where Germany won the Second World War and where the whole of Europe has been transformed into a game reserve. The person in charge of the reserve is one Count Hans von Hackelberg. For the Grand Huntsman the Count is aptly named as Woden, in the hunt, was often surnamed 'Hackelberg', an old word signifying mantle weaver because, at the hunt, he always wore a broad-brimmed hat and a wide mantle.

This description of Woden in the hunt also fits Oden as we find him in Poul Anderson's tragedy, "The Broken Sword" in which he appears at times in the Wild Hunt. Freda foolishly makes a bond with Oden to aid her, the reward he wants, she does not realise at the time, is to be the illegitimate son conceived between her and her brother, Skafloc:

"About midnight, far away, she heard a horn. Something of its scream ran cold through her. The horn sounded again, louder, nearer, through skirling wind and grinding surf. She heard hounds bay, like none that she knew. Hoofbeats rushed through the night, filling the sky with their haste.

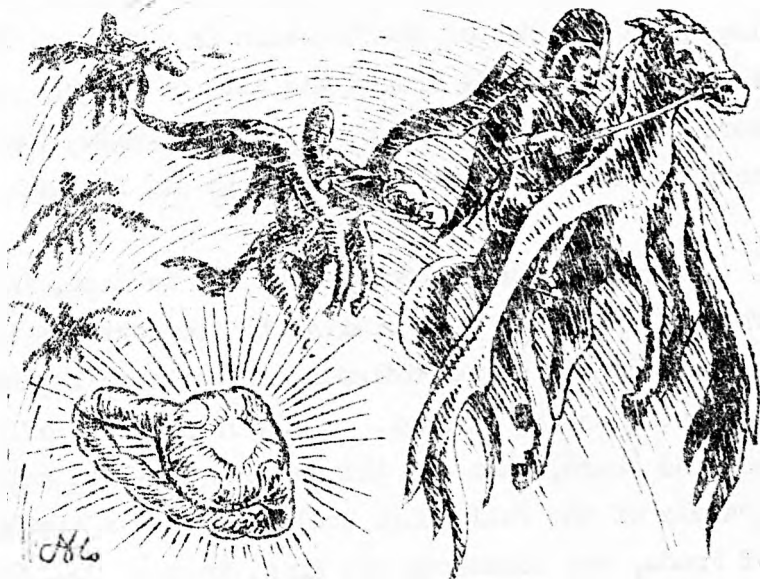
The Asgard's Ride, the Wild Hunt - Freda lay in a shroud of fear. How could it be that no one else stirred? Her babe wailed at her breast.

The wind rattled the shutters."



In Alan Garner's "The Moon of Gomrath" there is a wealth of lore of the Hunt used - the Einheriar, who were the bodyguard of the Norse gods; the Herlathing, a name derived from the band of King Herla; Garanhir, the stalking person, the horned beast; and so on. As a coincidence, in William Croft Dickson's "Borrobil", the two children who enter the past through the Beltane ring are told a tale by Borrobil, explaining the sound of invisible horses that pass them by. The tale is identical to that of King Herla's, although Herla is replaced in the tale by a king named Eochaid. Now, Eochaid is found to be a

king of Ulster folk-lore and a tale is told of a chess game between him and a king Midhir. Midhir happens to be one of Alan Garner's Wild Hunt.



Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" uses much folk-lore from the Norse, Teutonic and Celtic cycles of myth. It is not surprising, therefore, that it also incorporates the Wild Hunt into its plot. Yet, the Hunt does not appear once, but in three different forms. Two of these forms can clearly be appreciated, but I do not think that the third form may be as obvious as the others without some explanation.

The most obvious of the three forms is the Nazgul, the Black Riders, the Nine. Much like Lloyd Alexander's Arawn, the Nazgul do the hunting for Sauron. The Nine are perfectly formed as the Wild Huntsmen. Also, the fact that they take to the air on those winged creatures, much like the Valkyrie of the Norse legends - collectors of doomed souls they epitomise.

The second form is the troupe of the dead, the Men of the Mountains; those not yet dead until they fulfil the oath they broke, to fight against Sauron:

"Over the land there lies a long shadow,
westward reaching wings of darkness.
The Tower trembles; to the tombs of kings
doom approaches. The Dead awaken;
for the hour is come for the oathbreakers:
at the Stone of Erech they shall stand again
and hear a horn in the hills ringing there.
Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them
from the grey twilight, the forgotten people?
The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.
From the North shall he come, need shall drive him:
he shall pass the Looer to the Paths of the Dead."

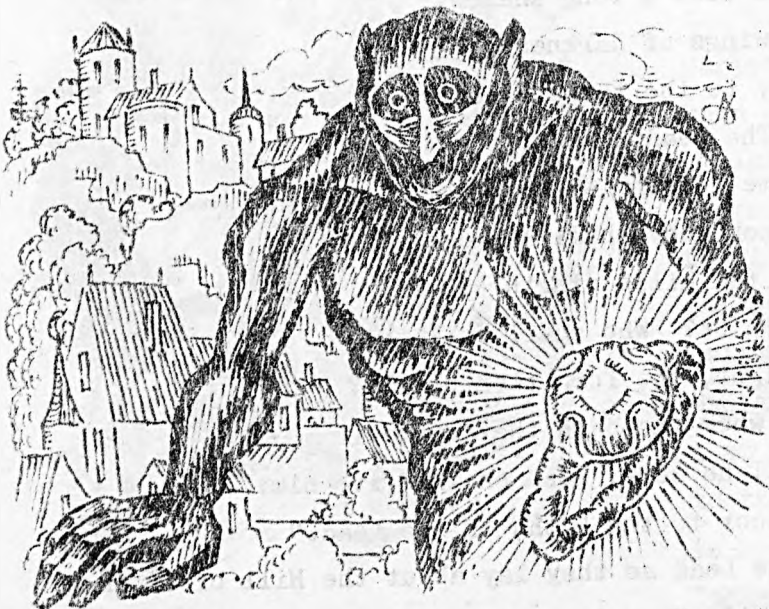
And so Aragorn awakens the Sleepless Dead as they lay about the Hill of Erech. This again is a strong form of the Wild Hunt intermixing the march of the dead

with those doomed never to rest, as in the case of King Valdemar. In fact, the legend of the Men of the Mountain is very much like that of Earl FitzGerald who is supposed to ride around the Rath of Curragh until the silver shoes of his horse are worn as thin as a cat's ear, with which his spell will be broken by a horn sounded by a miller's son with six fingers on each hand.

Thirdly, there is Gollum who is, in fact, in the form of a death portent. Physically, he is very similar to two portents in the lore of the Wild Hunt who supposedly stalk the Midlands and Northern England - the Padfoot and the Skirker - as well as the Gwyllgi, or Dog of Darkness of Welsh lore. The similarity does not end there, when one thinks upon Gollum's actions in "LotR"; throughout the travels of the Fellowship Gollum is like a familiar, closely dogging the heels of Frodo, who possesses the Ring, in much the same way as does Hillyer's familiar in Machen's "Green Round".

Finally, could any conclusion be drawn from the fact that Boromir's horn was once the possession of Vorondil the Hunter who hunted the wild kine of Araw, a name that could have its derivation from Arawn, Lord of Annwn?

Aspects of the Wild Hunt go on still further. In Carl Jacobi's story, "The Coach on the Ring" the Hunt takes on the form of a spectral coach which is a death portent. Spectral coaches and headless horsemen, although not obviously, are part of the Wild Hunt/Furious Host. It is as the driver of a spectral coach that Sir Francis Drake enters the lore of the Hunt. In a more modern form, the Hunt also appears in Joseph Payne Brennan's story, "The Hunt" and in Saki's story, "The Hounds of Fate", the Hunt in the latter story becoming merely a metaphor for the fact that your fate will hunt you down no matter what you do or where you go.



As can be seen from the few examples given herein, the Wild Hunt is greatly represented in fantastic literature and it only remains for it to be asked, how much does fantastic literature rely on folk-lore and legend?