

CHUGG'S CHARMS: AUTHENTICITY, TYPICALITY, AND SOURCES

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Abstract: This contribution describes the collection and contents of a set of charms from early twentieth century Devon, and takes that as a stepping stone toward questions about the reliability of the orally-collected data many charms scholars rely on.

Keywords: Devon, England, Henry Williamson, source criticism, verbal charms

In this brief piece, I wish to describe a set of charms collected in early twentieth century England from one 'Jimmie Chugg', and then make some remarks about the nature of our data as charms scholars. But there is first a variety of things that need explaining. The first of these is the identity of the man who saw these charm texts into print, Henry Williamson (1895–1977). Williamson was a Londoner, who moved, following his traumatic experiences as a soldier in the First World War, to the country. To be precise, he ended up in the village of Georgeham in Devon in the south-west of the country. During his time there, he wrote the classic work, *Tarka the Otter* (1927), as well as various other works of fiction. Shortly after he left the village to try farming in the east of England, he wrote two books which describe life in Georgeham and some of the local personalities, *The Village Book* (1930) and *The Labouring Life* (1932). He subsequently rewrote and rearranged these books, and republished them in 1945 as *Life in a Devon Village* and *Tales from a Devon Village*.

There is much more that could be said about Williamson (his fascist period, his return to Devon, his novel sequence *The Chronicles of Ancient Sunlight*) and details might be sought after in various memoirs,

studies and biographies, such as Lamplugh (1991), Sewell (1980), and Williamson (1995), and the publications of the Henry Williamson Society. But his relevance for *Incantatio* is as a recorder of charm texts and a describer of a charmer. Given Williamson was a novelist, can we trust his description of charms and charming in Georgeham? To answer this question, we need to look at the relevant chapters in the two books, namely ‘Scriddicks’ in *The Village Book* and ‘On Scandal, Gossip, Hypocrisy or Self-Deception, Roguery, and Senescence’ in *Life in a Devon Village*. In both of these chapters, he mentions ‘Jimmy Chugg’, “a harmless old fellow who lived alone in his cottage” (1930: 259). He found out about this man from the local doctor, who having failed to cure a local woman’s warts, had sent his patient to him, who succeeded in curing them (in the latter account, the woman is described as the daughter of “General Dashed” (1945: 106)). But no ‘Jimmy Chugg’ seems to exist in the relevant census data. In his country writings, Williamson typically gave local people (relatively transparent) pseudonyms, so the local pub landlord Charlie Ovey became ‘Charlie Taylor’, Billy Geen became ‘Billy Goldsworth’, Revvy Gammon became ‘Revvy Carter’; and the village of Georgeham itself became ‘Ham’ (for more on this practice, see Stokes 1985 and Lewis 1995). Working on this basis, we might deduce that perhaps the charmer’s real first name, Jimmy, was used, while his surname (which was indeed a local surname) was changed, in which case the charmer may have been Jimmy Gammon, the father of Revvy Gammon. But Williamson on occasion used less transparent pseudonyms, such as ‘Mr. Furze’ for Jacob Thorne or ‘Colonel Ponde’ for Admiral Biggs, so this hypothesis is far from being the only possibility.

In any event, Williamson provides us with a few details about the charmer. He describes him as having “a serene and quiet temperament” (1930: 263) and Jimmy’s belief that he could not take money in exchange for his charming, but that he might receive payment in kind “if you really want it” (263). Writing in 1930, Williamson remarks that he would now have no opportunity to see him what he and the doctor had been invited to witness, Chugg staunching blood at a pig-killing “without going near the animal” (263), as Chugg was now dead. (In a way, staunching blood at a pig-killing would be an odd thing to do, unless it was pure showmanship, as it would negatively affect the quality of the meat.) Throughout his description, Williamson does not use the word ‘charmer’, instead referring to him as a ‘white witch’, possibly in order to contrast him with a witch in a nearby village also mentioned in these chapters, whom he terms a ‘black witch’ (264).

So much for the charmer, what about his charms? The title of the chapter in his 1930 account is 'Scriddicks'. The *Devonshire Dialect Dictionary* (Dearson 2023) defines the word in the singular, *s.v.* 'scriddick', as "a tiny morsel; ... a shred", and sure enough the chapter does have a bitty character. It is only a few pages in length, and mostly consists of the texts of the charms. In the 1930 account, it is not clear where Williamson discovered the texts, although there is the suggestive remark that he is giving them with "the authentic spelling" (260). In the latter account, he expands this: "I got a copy of the white witch's incantations, with the authentic spelling", showing he had a written source for all of them, except one. The exception is a wart charm, which he learnt orally from the village doctor (i.e. Jimmy Chugg > General Dashel's daughter > the village doctor > Henry Williamson): "Figseye! Figseye!! Figseye!!!", which the doctor can only hypothesize may be "a corruption of *pig's eye*" (1945: 106).

While the description of the charmer varies somewhat between the two accounts, the words of the charm-texts found in both *The Village Book* (259–263) and *Life in a Devon Village* (206–208) are the same, although some of the charms in the first book are not found in the second book, namely, a text for ringworm, a charm (actually two charms that he prints as one) for an eye condition, and a charm for a wound made by thorns, and, finally, three words used to cure warts. Why Williamson chose to leave these texts out of his later book is not clear, but we can speculate: the second thorn charm may have been dropped because he already has one thorn-charm in the material; the two eye charms are confusing when printed as a single text, as he does, so better to drop them altogether; the words for warts may not have been included because in this arrangement of the materials they have already been given (from the mouth of the doctor), and also we might speculate they were not found in the written source Williamson drew on.

If we take the earlier, fuller record as our basis, we can see that all of Chugg's charms are healing charms. They treat flesh wounds from thorns (2 examples), sprains (2 examples), eye problems (3 examples), ringworm, bleeding, snakebite, and a cow's udders. How typical is such a repertoire? The presence of the final veterinary text is unusual, and having three charms for eye ailments, but no charms for toothache or burns is also unusual at this time and place. Nevertheless, Chugg's repertoire is, on the whole, typical of English charmers in recent centuries. This is our first warrant for the authenticity of the texts Williamson gives us. We can, for example, compare his repertoire from early twen-

tieth-century south-western England with that of the celebrated Clun charmer in late nineteenth-century central-western England, which was also collected in written form (“a small manuscript book”, Morgan 1895: 202–4), rather than orally. The ailments the latter charmed were sprains, wounds, blood flow, toothache, burns, and ague, and he also knew a love divination charm. In his known repertoire of eight charms, there are representatives of the following charm-types: **Bone to bone**, **Neque doluit neque tumuit**, **Flum Jordan**, **Super Petram**, **Out Fire in Frost**, and **Crux Christi**.

If we look at the charm-types in Chugg’s material, we find two examples of **Bone to bone** (one for a person, one for a horse), two of **Neque doluit neque tumuit**, and one of **Flum Jordan**, so approximately half of the Georgeham charmer’s texts are identifiable as representatives of charm-types as against three-quarters of the Clun charmer’s. I list Chugg’s charms in the appendix to this piece.

AUTHENTICITY

In the dedication of the work Williamson says his book is fiction. It is:

an imaginative work which should not be read as the history of any particular village, and certainly not of any man or woman. Even the ‘I’ and the ‘zur’ and the ‘Mr. Williamson’ of certain pages, such as those describing the quarrel between the fictitious Zeale brothers, are but devices of storytelling (1930: 9).

Such a claim is worth notice, as other country writers often made the opposite claim: that what they wrote was true. For example, W.D. Parish wrote “I have also endeavoured to illustrate the use of the words by specimens of conversation, most of which are taken from the life verbatim” (1874: 9). However, Parish’s illustrative quotations, where every dialect word begins unfailingly with the same letter, cannot possibly be verbatim – under the guise of fidelity he is producing little fictions. Williamson’s claim may also not be what it seems. The ‘Zeale Brothers’ may be fictitious, in the sense that the individuals referred to were not brothers nor surnamed ‘Zeale’, but a fight does seem to have taken between two friends which this incident is based on, and the people involved bore the same first names as the people in the book (see again the articles by Stokes and by Lewis). There were no doubt reasons of tact for not giving everyone’s true name in print, especially when you

have chapters headed 'On Scandal, Gossip, Hypocrisy or Self-Deception, Roguery, and Senescence'. But Williamson may protest too much, like Parish but in the opposite direction – he is presenting truth under the guise of fiction.

But what is most important for charms scholars are not the incidents of village life, but the charm-texts. Williamson seems far more interested in the figure of the charmer than in the texts themselves (which he doesn't unpack or comment upon at all). Perhaps his own lack of interest in the texts, and a suspicion he may have had that his readers might feel the same way, is the reason he removes some of them from his presentation in the latter book. But a lack of interest in the texts might be a positive sign regarding their authenticity – in other words, if they had been something he was interested in, then we might have more grounds to suspect 'improvements' or sensationalization. For, while Williamson uses terms such as 'white witch' and 'incantation', which are almost certainly not locally-used terms, the charm-texts he presents do resemble charms found in the broader geographical region at and before the period they were recorded in terms of vocabulary and register, with some minor differences. For me, this mix of similarities with and differences from the existing corpus bespeaks the texts' authenticity. It is also worth noting that they also address a set of diseases typically dealt with by charms in England at this period (with the aforementioned exception of eye ailments). The charm-types are typical of the place and period. And finally, the mixture of charms and prayers reflects vernacular practice do, as does the frequent occurrence of the *In Nomine*-formula (and of *Amen*) at the end of the texts.

Thus, while there remain some unanswered questions we should still like answers to – who was the charmer? where did the charmer learn the charms and did he have more than one source? how exactly did Williamson get hold of the texts? are the originals still in his surviving papers at Exeter or Brigham Young universities? what did his "slight editing" change? – in my judgement these are highly likely to be authentic texts. Indeed, Williamson, best remembered as a writer of fiction, seems to have achieved a remarkable feat not matched by any twentieth century folklorist in England – namely, the documentation of the texts of a dozen healing charms from a single individual. But perhaps such a feat was not so remarkable after all, and could have been replicated again and again by the folklorists of that era had they been more numerous, more determined, and better connected with humble rural life.

AFTERWORD

I would now like to raise some broader questions about the nature of our data as charms scholars. This article has discussed charm-texts copied from a charmer's written notes. What Williamson did in copying them is analogous to what researchers of medieval or classical charms do – namely, to rely on manuscripts in the absence of informants. But, coming into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars have typically gained access to charm-texts by oral communication with charm-ers. Why should we trust such orally-derived texts? Especially when we consider there are many expressions in late modern Europe of the understanding that if you tell a charm to another, you lose the power to use it. Indeed, in the very same chapter, Williamson mentions a 'seventh son' who cures warts: "I asked him if he could cure warts, and he said, Yes, he could. 'Would he tell me how he did it?' He was sorry, he was not allowed to tell" (1930: 263). In other words, why should we suppose that a charmer would simply tell a researcher all his secrets and thus forgo a valuable source of power and status?

Firstly, when we have texts, how do we know that the texts are complete and correct? Might there not have been numerous cases where some lines of a charm have been *withheld*? Or where some of the words have been *changed* by the informant? By doing so, the charmer will have been able to both satisfy the fieldworker's requests and protect his own interests. Secondly, might there not have been involuntary changes made by the charmer, given that the texts are typically gathered in an 'interview'-like conversation rather than in the heat-of-the-moment observation of a *performance* of a charm? The kind of details I am thinking of here include all sorts of repetition, added or dropped words, even improvisations, and this hypothesis is applicable to medieval (and other) manuscripts too. Thirdly, we need always to consider the possibility of *clumsy fieldwork*, cases where researchers have been given but have not gotten every word. There is more clumsy fieldwork than fieldworkers admit, and this is especially likely to be the case with lay fieldworkers, e.g. people doing one-off fieldwork, a category which includes enthusiastic amateurs and also students or schoolchildren roped in to provide ethnographic data. All in all, I suggest we need to think more about the nature of our research material, its potential unreliability, more than we have done to date.

As charm scholars focused on the data we may be aware that there have been deliberate falsifications by researchers (in the manner of

Kreutwald in nineteenth century Estonia or Sakharov in nineteenth century Russia and no doubt many other cases elsewhere) and as well as cases of incompetent data collection. But I want to emphasize here that there must also be numerous cases where charmers simply choose not to give the game away entirely. During the composition of this article, I discussed such themes with my colleague, Ülo Valk, who commented that his experience of fieldwork in India held similar: his informants would never perform the *full* mantra for a researcher. When we examine our own data, we should be alive to the possibility that, when dealing material collected from a living tradition still believed in, orally-derived texts, for all their apparent attractiveness as a source, may not always make for the best record, and that we may encounter in them data that has been partially withheld or subtly altered.

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APPENDIX

I reprint the charms here from Williamson (1930: 260–262), without his bracketed comments, but with my own linguistic comments and

additions in square brackets. I have further added punctuation, and also relineated the texts to show rhymes, but I have not altered the spellings or the capitalization. The titles given here are those found in Williamson (and thus perhaps those in his written source), except for the second eye treatment which is untitled and printed together as part of the first eye charm. If they reflect Chugg's own usage, then he is using a variety of traditional terms for his texts: 'charm' and 'blessing', as well as the time-honoured usage 'For ...' (something found already in the Middle English period). Neither of the two prayers contain 'For' in their titles.

Sometimes the very same word is spelt differently in different charms (compare *thin* and *thine*, or *fleash* and *flesh*, or *read* and *red*, or *perl* and *pearl*, or *preak[ing]* and *prick[ed]*, or *sincue* and *sinney*). This variable spelling may reflect Chugg's semi-literary or it may indicate that he had multiple sources for his texts, and the choice of spelling reflects those sources.

I have not commented on the poetics or semantics of the charms themselves here, but have done so in an earlier publication (Roper 2021).

FOR WHITE SWELLING [A SWELLING WITHOUT REDNESS]

As our Blessed Lord can cure all manar of des-eases, of a white ill thing, a red ill thing, a black ill thing, a rotted ill thing, an haking [*aching*] ill thing, a cold clapping [*throbbing*] ill thing, a hot preaking [*pricking*], a bizzing [*stinging?*] ill thing, a sticking ill thing, let all drop from thy face, thy head, thy fleash unto the earth in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

A CHARM FOR RINGWORMS

Pray God bless thy flesh and save bone and destroy the ringworm that are thereon. If the Lord please to remove them, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost Amen.

BLESSING FOR HURDEN HILL [UDDERS' ILLNESS]

Good Lord, keep this cow from evil, for thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory, for ever and ever, Amen.

FOR SPRAIN

Christ Himself rode over a bridge. The horse spronge [*moved suddenly*]. He onlight [*dismounted*] his joints. He wrestled His sinney [*sinew*] to sinney, vain [*vein*] to vain.

Pray God to deliver thee out of this pain.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

(The text would make more sense if the opening was understood thus:

Christ Himself rode over a bridge. The horse spronge [*moved suddenly*]. He [*Christ*] onlight [*dismounted*]. His [*the horse's*] joints He [*Christ*] wrestled[,] His sinney [*sinew*] to sinney, vain [*vein*] to vain.)

FOR PEARL [CATARACT]

The son of Arthless had a pearl upon his eye, and he prayed unto the Lord Jesus Christ that pearl might fall from his eye, so I pray it may fall from thine eye to the earth. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

[second text for eyes]

Our Lord Jesus Christ, bless the eye of Mary Ann, if it be a black kenning [*cloudy spot on the cornea*], a white kenning, a red kenning, stinging, aching, pricking, or stabbing, let it fall from thy eye, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

FOR A BLACKTHORN

Our loving Christ's blood was sprinkled among thorns. If the Lord please, the thorn may not fuster [*fester*] nor prick nor rot, but that it may be whole again.

If the Lord please. Amen.

FOR A KENNING [CLOUDY SPOT ON THE CORNEA]

If this shall be a Kenning or perl [*cataract*]. If it be white, read [*red*], or black, if the Lord be pleased to ease the pain and save the sight of A. B. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

FOR LONGCRIPPLE TING [FOR SNAKE BITE]

Our Bless Virgin Mary Sot [sat] and Soad [sewed]
her Bless[ed] babe sot [sat] and Plead [played]
their [there] Came a Ting [biting] worm [snake] out of eldern [elder] wood
He ting [bit] our Bless Saviour by the foot
his Blader Blew and never bruk [broke]
so shall A. B. Break
– A. B. – Tong Ting and Ring Ting in
In the name of the Father
Expel thy Ting [venom].

BLESSING FOR STRAIN [SPRAIN]

As Christ was riding over Crosby bridge A. B. his leg he took and blessed
it, and said these words, bones to bones and sincues [sinews] to sincues,
in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

FOR A WHITETHORN [WOUND]

As our Blessd Lord and Saviour His flesh was pricked with thorns he
did not canker nor rust no more neather [neither] shant thin[e] A. B.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

STENTEN [STAUNCHING] BLOOD

As our Bless Lord and Saviour went down into the river Jordan to be
baptised and the water was vile [wild] and hard,
our Lord Jesus was mild and good
he laid his hand and it stood so,
and so shall thy Issue of thy blood
A. B.
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

BIO

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