Custom Made

*Rough Music: Folk Customs, Trangressions & Alternative Britain*, Liz Williams (Reaktion)

The current surge of interest in paganism, mythology, standing stones and archaeology (I blame *Detectorists* and the likes of Alice Roberts and Bettany Hughes), not to mention psychogeography and popular history, along with the UK's penchant for nostalgia and an imaginary past where everything was hunky dory, has also led to new considerations of folk customs, magazines such as *Weird Walk* and *Undefined Boundary* (both excellent) and loose-knit groups and event organisers such as The Stone Club.

Although research has shown that many events and rituals once considered ancient were invented or resurrected in the 20th Century, the general public have not only continued to ignore the evidence but also flock to spectacles such as burning barrels being carried through village streets, or 'obby 'oss dances, parades and songs, not to mention festivals and fairs, along with fireworks and bonfire events.

Liz Williams has chosen to write about these through the lens of 'transgression' and 'alternative Britain', both open-ended and nigh-on-impossible-to-define terms, not least because – as the book makes clear – customs and events change and develop, are reimagined or reinvented as time goes by. Sometimes this is due to bad behaviour or violence, at other times it is simply in response to health and safety concerns or under duress from church, council or landowners.

Williams does her best to navigate the history or histories of the green man, mystery plays, morris and molly dancing, wassailing, mummering, trick or treating, fairs and carnivals and street football, although she often seems unable to do much more than offer alternative theories and versions of how or why these started. It's understandable within county- and country-wide variations, self-mythologising, old wives' tales and deliberate misdirection, not to mention previous misreadings by groups of pagans, witches or folklorists keen to deliberately establish and justify traditions, more often as a result of intuitive and erroneous jumps between source materials around the world.

Although this book tries to carefully unravel some of this, whilst still reporting local variations, feuds and fictional histories, at times Williams seems at a loss to understand why things happen. The 'alternative' tag means she can include the Notting Hill Carnival, Glastonbury Festival and the Battle of the Beanfield and make political comment, but it feels a little bit forced to be honest, however much I agree with her analysis of police violence, commercialisation, class divide and racism.

She is better when writing about more documented material, such as Mystery Plays and Cheese Rolling, or when considering 'skimitty riding' and other acts of public humiliation, rather than the current incarnations of processions and events such as Somerset carnival parades or the more recently created Penzance Montol Festival for Winter Solstice.

Although this is an enjoyable and informative read, it feels like there are several books here condensed into one, some of which have already been written. (See, for instance, Sarah Clegg's *The Dead of Winter*, which was published in late 2024.) So having read *Rough Music* I wanted to understand more about *why* communities come together and the human need for celebration and ritual; more about storytelling and narrative; more about localization; and more about why contemporary culture continues to make assumptions about the provenance of folk customs.

Williams starts to deal with some of these issues and often refers to Ronald Hutton's superb book *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, which I recommend, but it does feel like a start more than anything else. She is prone to tacking on rather vague interviews to her own writing, and although I like the idea of giving voice to those involved firsthand in the events and activities described, they interview material is not made much use of nor are the ideas presented interrogated and questioned. More in-depth research rather than the wide-ranging padding in the shallows on offer would have made this a much better book than it already is.

Rupert Loydell

(660 words)