

Folk tales and others

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by
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How many young Jamaicans are still told Anancy stories? Are these dying out? And how many Jamaicans of any age know the folk tales of the first inhabitants of this area, tales which were told long before Anancy crossed the sea from Africa?

If they don't know these it will not be the fault of Philip Sherlock who is well known as a populariser of Anancy stories, both spoken and written. His "West Indian Folk-Tales" has just been published by Oxford University Press and includes twenty-one stories, six of them being stories of the Caribs. The book joins a distinguished company of fables, legends and folk-tales put out under the O.U.P. imprint, this newest book being the fourteenth in the series. This collection is excellently illustrated by Joan Kiddell-Monroe and should be a delight to young and old alike.

In a short introduction the author gives the background of the area and shows how, with the disappearances of the Arawaks and the Caribs, almost entirely, from the West Indies, the folk tales of this area telling of the coming of man to the earth, as believed by the Caribs, have disappeared and been replaced by those telling of a 'little bald-headed man with a falsetto voice . . . getting the better of Dog and Cat and most of the other animals by his cunning — in fact, Anancy the spider who sometimes takes human shape.

The Carib stories begin with the coming of the Caribs from the Moon to the earth and the provision by their deity, Kabo Tano, of the Coomacka Tree which gave food to man, of how the plain-looking powis bird became the beautifully crested curassow, of how men and animals ceased to understand each other, of why the dog's nose is cold, etc. Although the forest where these tales take place is strange to Jamaicans these are genuine tales of the mainland.

The Anancy stories begin with the story of why they are called Anancy stories and not Tiger stories and then follow on with thirteen others in which Anancy usually scores, but is sometimes bested even by Tiger who had once been treated by Anansi as a riding-horse, and by Monkey.

The tales are simply and yet vividly told and should impress, as well as fascinate children. The parents will probably insist on reading the book first.