

Elaine interviewing local writer and historian Wendy Mewes about Little People with story telling by Pierre

Elaine: Most Celtic countries seem to have Little People, such as Leprechauns in Ireland, but Brittany seems to have an abundance. Why is that Wendy?

Wendy: Well it's true of course Elaine that Little People is a very big subject in Brittany. I think perhaps you could look back to Celtic culture, Celtic religion and animism, where they believe that all the nature, spirits, trees, rocks, rivers, were alive and had a certain life and identity. And I think it's quite a small step to the personification of spirits so that Little People in the country, because they are mainly in a rural context in Brittany so I think there's a connection there between the Celtic view of animism and Little People in Brittany. And in Brittany there are many, many, many types of Little People. It makes Lord of the Rings look rather limited. Literally hundreds of different types, which have different names in different parts of Brittany. So you might have Nozigans or Poulpiquets or Folliquets. All different names depending on what part of Brittany they come from. And completely different appearances. They might, well, they're little of course, but they might have ordinary clothes, they might be dressed in cabbage leaves. Some of the female Little People wear little purple bonnets. Sometimes they are said to have luminous red eyes and to be really terrifying. And sometimes they wear big hats that cover their faces. There's an enormous variety. And they also have very different characters. Sometimes the Little People in Breton tradition are kind, helpful to humans, prepared to grant wishes to humans, and sometimes they're not. And they're malicious, and they don't like humans interfering in their in their lives. Um, and they can also be humorous and mischievous, and have fun with humans. So there's an enormous variety. As regards what we call them, the most commonly used word is Lutin. Um this is er really a generic word referring to all kinds of Little People. And it's not a Breton thing. It's used all over France for Little People. In the Breton context, Lutins are often shown in the household or on the farm as helpers. They do the washing up late at night, or they sweep the floor, or they groom the animals. And the humans often leave out little bits of food for them or little presents. Er, so you have a relationship of mutual respect and then all goes well. It's when you don't have that relationship of mutual respect that things can go wrong. But in Brittany perhaps the most famous of the Little People are the Korrigans of Western Brittany associated particularly with the Mont D'Arrée with the wild moorland where they dance in the round at night, but also with stone. They have a great affinity with stone. They're often said to live in the dolmans, but also to live underground. They have a reputation as miners and as storing their treasure underground. And Pierre has a very good story for us about a Korrigan:

Pierre: Of course, I do have a story about Alain and the great standing stone. Because in the centre of Brittany there's a village with a beautiful forest around called Huelgoat and in this village lived a long time ago a little boy called Alain. And not far from there in

Berrien there was a great standing stone. It was about 20ft high. Shaded by an oak tree. Alain liked to sit there and read.

One day he saw a Korrigan coming towards him. With two spades the little creature proposed, "Hello dear friend, would you like to become rich?" Suspicious, Alain replied, "This is certainly a joke. I am not interested." But the Korrigan insisted. "This is not a joke. There's a treasure buried under the standing stone. Help me dig it up. And let's share it." But Alain got angry. "Are you mad? Do not dig at the foot of standing stones. Respect them. Go away before I hit you with your spades." The next day, Alain arrived a little earlier on the moor. Disaster. He caught the Korrigan digging at the foot of the standing stone. "Stop it right now!" But the Korrigan didn't listen to him. He continued throwing earth everywhere. Alain ran towards him. They both fell to the ground and rolled around and suddenly the earth started to shake and they stopped their fight. "Oh gosh. It's the standing stone. It's leaning. It's going to fall", said Alain. The boy grabbed a spade, he starts to fill in the hole asking the Korrigan, "Help me. Help me now." But the little being escaped and went away in the forest. The standing stone moved, tilted and then slowly rose again by magic. Alain pat the earth, exhausted. He collapsed at the foot of his cherished standing stone but to his great surprise a soft voice rose, "Thank you my friend for helping me. You have been respectful, honest and brave. In order to reward you I will offer you a part of my treasure." Suddenly, thousands of gold coins busted out of the ground. Alain couldn't believe his eyes. The little boy never told anyone his secret, he lived happily and continued to come every day to read a story at the foot of his beloved standing stone.

Elaine: Lovely story. Thank you very much Pierre. And so Wendy, how do we know all this about these Little People?

Wendy: Well the richness of the oral tradition in Brittany is of course very well known, which means in effect that stories passed down through families, or over generations and generations and centuries by bards who made a living going round telling stories and preserving the traditions of the antics of the Little People. And often this was based on people's personal experience. They claimed to have had connection with one or another sort of Little People. They passed on the details and they were transferred into stories. But in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century particularly, people started to want to record these stories, to write them down, to preserve them. And also because most of them were in Breton, in the West of Brittany, were in Breton, to transcribe them into French to give them a wider audience. And to secure a future for the stories. Um, a famous name, a folklorist who collected hundreds and hundreds of stories about Little People - ah François-Marie Luzel, and it was he who wrote down, having been told it, the famous story about the Korrigans and two hunchbacks where the Korrigans feel that one of the hunchbacks is respectful and helpful and they remove the hump from his back for him, but the second one is not at all respectful, he's presumptuous and rude and they add a hump to his own hump. So he's punished severely for his behaviour. And he also tells a story about the Lutins on the Isle de



Bréhat which he was told by a postman from Paimpol, um that a family had Lutins who helped them in the house, but they didn't appreciate them and they started resenting the Lutins having scraps of food and one day the man heated up the stone that the Lutin usually sat on so when he sat down he had a terrible shock and the Lutins ran away from the home, but those people were cursed ever after. And very bad things happened to them. And another name for stories from Haut-Bretagne, from the East of Brittany, is Paul Sébillot, who collected many stories and wrote them down and he tells us about a naughty Lutin called Nicol who used to harass the sailors around St Malo and St Brieuc and untie the mooring ropes of their boats, cut holes in their nets, as a well I think Nicol thought it was a joke, but I'm not sure the sailors um saw it quite like that. So there are collections of stories written down which are still available now, but I think Pierre is going to give us an idea about Lutins.

Pierre: Yes, let's talk about the Lutin in the attic because once upon a time in the Mont D'Arrée there was a pretty house surrounded by flowers. In this house lived two sisters. One was born on a winter's evening and was called Shower, the other, who was born on a Summer's Day, was called Poppy. Shower was always in a bad mood. Poppy on the other hand was kind and helpful. Every evening after the meal Shower and Poppy had to clear the table and wash the dishes. But, just after desert Shower disappeared. However, Poppy um she didn't get angry. She filled a small saucer and put it in the fireplace and went to bed. At the same time, in the attic, strange noises could be heard. Um, a mouse perhaps? Not at all. It was Adrian the Lutin. Adrian with his cap and pointed ears was a nice Lutin who was happy to help his friends just like his friend Poppy and hup, Adrian left the attic and went to the kitchen. There he found the basin, a rag, some soap and off he went to wash the dishes. When the day was about to dawn Adrian would get close to the fireplace and sit down on a round pebble. There he could find the saucer that Poppy had put down for him. Mmmm the golden pancake, the red cherry and a pumpkin juice. Yummy. Adrian gobbled up the feast and went back up to his attic with a full belly. One night a strange thing happened. A shadow slid silently down the chimney – aah – it was Shower, with a spade she placed Adrian's pebble in the embers of the fire. She turned it over and over, put it back in its place. And disappeared into the darkness. A short time later Adrian could be heard whistling. Oh, he had worked hard. He had done well. And when he sat down on the pebble he jumped out of the fireplace and ran away screaming. "Ohhh". Poor Adrian, who heard Shower giggling in the distance. Hm Hum. That night, with no hesitation he would play a trick on her in his own way. The following morning Shower woke up and when she looked at herself in the mirror "oh my God!" Her hair was blue, cut short, and someone had drawn a red moustache under her nose with a permanent marker. Ho ho ho. Oh well, you know, the memory of this story is that Lutins are very nice, they will help you around the house, but do not make fun of them or they will play some very nasty tricks on you.

Elaine: Dear Pierre, that's a delightful story. And when you finally... how can people find out more about these extraordinary Little People who live amongst us?



Wendy: Well there are fairly recent books, um *Vie et Moeus des Lutins Bretons*, um that is now in a new edition, and Coop Breizh have a fairly recent *Répertoire des Lutins de Bretagne*, which is well worth a look. And er um, I hesitate to recommend my own book, but my *Legends of Brittany* has a chapter about Little People in it.

Elaine: Thank you very much Wendy. Thank you and thank you Pierre. It's been absolutely delightful hearing these stories and er I'm sure that our listeners will appreciate it too. Thank you.