

Fairies in the Sky: Devising a creative response to archive material

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Fairies, gnomes and nature spirits in general I now accept holus bolus as to their existence.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, June 23rd 1944

In 2018 I was asked to get involved with The Modern Fairies project through Sheffield University as a musician alongside a range of artists from different creative disciplines: musicians, writers, poets, visual artists and filmmakers. The idea was for those involved to collaborate across different art forms and produce new material inspired by the theme of fairies.

There was no set output for this, no album, book, public performance or exhibition and so it was left to those involved to chart their own path as to what work they were inspired to produce. For those working professionally in the arts, this is a very unusual situation in which to find oneself, normally there is always some underlying commercial goal to which you are working and generally keep your eye upon throughout the creative process, even if you fool yourself that you are not.

Before we met up we were given notes to read through, prepared by Carolyne Larrington, Professor of Medieval European Literature at St. John's College Oxford and then had a series of presentations and discussions on the subject of fairies. Not all of the artists involved had a particular background in fairy lore and so this acted as a primer and refresher to launch us on a springboard to finding directions of interest.

As a musician who has mainly worked with traditional music, I have obviously encountered many songs that have something of the fantastical in their lyrics, but never focused on fairies specifically. Carolyne's brilliant notes and talks about fairies had definitely opened my eyes to many new aspects of this subject, but I was struggling to find what my way into this might be as a creative artist looking to produce new work.

As is often the way in this day and age, I decided to do an internet search and see what might come to light. Using the keywords “fairy” and “music”, I began a search engine trawl through the results; strange fantasy new-age music, traditional songs of fairy kings, TV commercials, even some prog-rock.... I kept scrolling down.

A link to a video jumped out, a cartoon of a small half-human creature wearing a Russian looking hat, jumping across the wing of an aircraft, it had the look of those old, hand drawn cartoons from the years before computer animation was even a dream.

This was a WW2 American propaganda video (youtube.com, *Russian Rhapsody*, Looney Tunes, 1944). Small creatures, mostly looking like stylized Germans or Russians were leaping around an aircraft mid-flight, trying to pull it to pieces from within and sabotage its ability to fly, a Disney type song sound tracking as they went with the words “we’re gremlins from the Kremlin”. So these were gremlins? I knew gremlins from the Joe Dante movie of that name from the 80s, but they weren’t anything like this. Dante’s gremlins were small creatures of Asian origin, which seemed to have a two-stage life cycle, transforming from the perfect pets into beings wreaking havoc upon society, with no mention of their links to aviation.

My search turned from fairies in general to the tighter realm of gremlins. The RAF and US Air Force in particular had a long history with these small magical creatures dating back to the period after WW1 and then blossoming throughout WW2. They were often considered to have sympathy for the enemy, but the Luftwaffe too would sometimes face similar puzzling mechanical problems through interventions of small folk. These were apparently beings acting mischievously in their own interests, quite in keeping with what might commonly be considered fairies.

The gremlins frequently caused malfunctions in aircraft by sabotaging the mechanical and electrical systems and so became feared by airmen. Roald Dahl who himself was a pilot in WW2 and so would have been familiar with the creatures from the RAF wrote his first children’s novel *The Gremlins* in 1943 (Dahl 1943). This found its way into the hands of Walt Disney who started to develop a feature film based upon the story. This never came to anything, but spread the knowledge of gremlins, at least amongst the film industry and Joe Dante.

Some of the first mentions of fairies in aeroplanes were in the 1920s among the British pilots stationed in Malta , the Middle East, and India, with one of the earliest recorded printed references being in a poem published in the journal *Aeroplane* in Malta on 10 April 1929 (etymonline.com 2020). There seems to be no certainty over the origins of the word gremlin although folklorist John Hazen noted ‘the gremlin has been looked on as new phenomenon, a product of the machine age- the age of air’ (Hazen 1972 465).

During WW2 the reports increased. The fact that this poem appeared in the RAF Journal shows that gremlins were something discussed by aircrew in WW2 and seemed to have established behaviours. A poem from the *RAF Journal* April 1942 (Griffith 1942).

When you're seven miles up in the heavens,
(That's a hell of a lonely spot)
And it's fifty degrees below zero
Which isn't exactly hot.
When you're frozen blue like your Spitfire
And you're scared a Mosquito pink,
When you're thousands of miles from nowhere
And there's nothing below but the drink
It's then you will see the Gremlins,
Green and gamboge and gold,
Male and female and neuter
Gremlins both young and old.
It's no good trying to dodge them,
The lessons you learned on the Link
Won't help you evade a Gremlin,
Though you boost and you dive and you fink.
White ones will wiggle your wingtips,
Male ones will muddle your maps,
Green ones will guzzle your Glycol,
Females will flutter your flaps.
Pink ones will perch on your perspex,
And dance pirouettes on your prop;
There's a spherical, middle-aged Gremlin
who'll spin on your stick like a top.
They'll freeze up your camera shutters,
They'll bite through your aileron wires,
They'll bend and they'll break and they'll batter,
They'll insert toasting forks in your tyres.
That is the tale of the Gremlins,
Told by the P.R.U.,
(P)retty (R)uddy (U)nlikely to many
But fact, none the less, to the few."

(The P.R.U. Is the RAF's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit)

Attributed to Hubert Griffith, this is obviously a slightly tongue in cheek take on the gremlin phenomenon, but as in all times of war and stress it's a very human reaction to conjure up a mythical creature on which to pass some of the blame for devastating events, in a similar way to the superstitions of sailors of old with Krakens, Sirens etc.

The RAF's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit were flying incredibly long and high altitude missions is thought to have something to do with their regular sightings of gremlins, lower oxygen, the cold and tiredness were probably contributors to the cause of their hallucinations.

The fact that pretty much all of gremlin history is still just within living memory and is at least certainly well documented and preserved is of particular interest as many of the more traditional fairy's origins seem to have been lost with time. Here it is easy to trace the truths and untruths as the stories about them spread with the huge aviation records existing from WW1 onwards. It seems to come to the point however where the facts don't matter as it's about mans relationship with his fellow man and himself.

I became intrigued with the unlikely combination of the military and fantastical and when looking through the history of Gremlins in the RAF, the name of Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding kept cropping up, he was in charge of the tactics of RAF Fighter Command during the summer of 1940 as the Battle of Britain was raging in the skies of Southern England with the Luftwaffe trying to gain air superiority.

Dowding was a complicated man, nicknamed 'Stuffy' by his men for his lack of humour. He'd served with the Royal Air Force during WW1 and then worked his way up the military during the inter-war years. He married his first wife in 1918 and had one son, Derek, who went on to become a pilot in WW2. His first wife died when Derek was 2 years old and Dowding brought him up on his own, later remarrying in 1951. He was often considered too defensive in his tactics and protective of his pilots, but this is understandable as his son was flying in the war effort.

He was a man with long held suspicions about spiritualism and the influence of fairies on the human world and was a member of the Fairy Investigation Society. This was an organisation set up in the 1927 to collect information and evidence about the existence of fairies and a condition of membership was the genuine belief in their existence. The Society had some famous members throughout the different phases of its existence, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Walt Disney. During its peak in the 1920s and 30s it organized lectures, meetings and discussions about the collection of fairy evidence through anecdotes, letters and accounts of sightings even if these had originated via some form of clairvoyant activity.

Dowding also wrote several spiritualist books, starting with *Many Mansions* in 1943 (Dowding 1943). It's quite possible that this interest was brought about by the early death of his first wife, leaving him with a two year-old child, but he was clearly dedicated to his spiritualist studies and belief.

In his books he discusses his views on the existence of fairies, nature spirits, the reality of reincarnation and in *Lychgate* 1945 (Dowding, 1945) even encounters with deceased pilots, describing them as 'spirits who flew fighters from mountain-top runways made of light.' It's not hard to see how these views might not have gone down well with his RAF employers. He was quickly removed from front line duty after the end of the Battle of Britain and retired in 1942.

I wondered about the compatibility of the military position Dowding held and his Fairy Investigation Society membership and how these sat together in his mind. It's probably hard to know exactly, but this felt like fertile ground to explore with a creative piece.

I thought it might be interesting to see what happens in the stories of fairies in war. Do fairies wage war? I wasn't able to unearth many references of fairies involved in warfare, their general demeanour always seems to be more about leading people astray and untold mischief, but I found a reference in Anna Eliza Bray's 1854 book, *A Peep at the Pixies, or Legends of The West*, to a great battle between the Pixies and Fairies of Devon.

Indeed, it is matter of tradition, that the Fairies wished very much to establish themselves in Devonshire, but the Pixies would not hear of it; and a terrible war ensued. Oberon was, with his host, defeated; and his majesty received a wound in the leg which proved incurable; none of the herbs in his dominions

have hitherto had the least beneficial effects, though his principal secretary and attendant, Puck, has been in search of one of a healing nature ever since. (Bray, 1854)

There doesn't seem to be much more information about this battle available but it left me with some key elements to take away for a creative piece: fairies will get involved in territorial warfare and the devastating effect of the battle on Oberon, the Fairy King.

What parallels could be drawn between a Fairy King and Dowding; what happens to military leaders after the wars have finished? It certainly felt like Dowding was rejected in some way after his victory in the Battle of Britain and we have Oberon, defeated and wounded, never to fully recover. Of course I would need some creative vehicle by which to bring these two characters together, the larger than life Fairy King loosely based upon Oberon and the reserved Hugh 'Stuffey' Dowding.

One of the common motifs that crops up in fairy stories is their connection to nature and the fact that they like to live where there is little chance of being disturbed by human activity. With the onset of WW2 there was rapid growth in the number of airfields being developed by the RAF spreading right across Britain. Some of these were built on sacred sites, such as RAF Charmy Down in Somerset, where they flattened Bronze Age long barrows to make way for runways. (somerset.gov.uk 2020)

This encroachment on the fairy places by the spreading of military building work into the wild was a way to bring these two characters into the same orbit, the escalation of WW2 clashing directly with the fairy realm. Airfields by their very nature tend to be built away from other buildings and urban areas and even more so during times of war when they're certainly military targets, meaning the likelihood of this crossing into and interfering with fairy places would be high. It seems clear that this would never be tolerated or left unanswered by any local fairy population.

At this point I had the key ingredients to start putting together a creative piece on a fairy theme: a territorial war-mongering fairy king, a human military leader with beliefs in the fairy realm, sightings of gremlins in military aircraft, destruction of fairy places by the wartime building works.

As a musician it felt like something that would have to be more expansive than a single song, but at the same time the usual constraints of budget and time would limit the scale

of what could be produced. I decided on the format of having two actors on stage with music underscoring the emotional narrative of the speech.

It was clear that the actors should be playing the parts of Dowding and the Fairy King, set up to explore a scenario where they don't actually speak to each other directly, but they have a conversation about their interlocking stories through a series of 'out loud' thoughts almost like personal journal entries. The contrast of their personalities would work well, the riled up Fairy King against the reserved Dowding.

I pictured the opening scene involving two actors standing at lecterns on either side of the stage, one side Dowding, the other The Fairy King. At this point Dowding is preparing for the start of the Battle of Britain- calm and engrossed in planning for the pending combat, the Fairy King is nearing defeat by the Devon Pixies- in the full rant of a military leader rallying his fairy army.

I decided that I wasn't looking to produce a historically accurate piece, either through the details of Dowding participation in WW2 or by sticking to folkloric portrayals of the Fairy King. Instead I would borrow elements from both of their stories. My research into the tales of fairy wars and gremlins in aircraft had already led me to think that an element of fantastical thinking and the Chinese whisper effect are essential in dealing with fairy related material on a creative level.

There needed to be some kind of narrative to the piece, where would these characters go? Each of them would have realisations, the Fairy King seeing the new power of human flight and aircraft production techniques, a mechanised power that could destroy the environment and Dowding with an increasing awareness of the of the fairy realm's influence on the war and his own life.

Around this time, I was in touch with Tim Dalling, a musician with a great deal of experience in putting together theatrical pieces for performance. We had an on-going brainstorming session to develop and twist together the stories of the characters.

We also had some improvising sessions with the actor John Mawer, experimenting with the best way to work the dynamic between the characters. Tim Dalling was playing Dowding and John Mawer the Fairy King. This was incredibly helpful to develop the contrast of tone between the two. It was important that this left space for interplay between the roles as they would each effectively be commenting on what the other had

said previously, whilst keeping up the effect that they were unaware of each others' speech.

Gremlins would be the presence in this story that was observed from both the fairy realm and human military side so it was a case of pulling out their significance to Dowding and the Fairy King.

From the Fairy King's standpoint, he's observing the human presence destroying his kingdom and the metal flying beasts they have made to take off from their newly built airfields. He sends his spies to discover the secrets of how these aircraft are built and much to his dismay, their use of iron. Historically iron is believed to repel or harm fairies. Despite this knowledge, he sends his fairy warriors into the skies with the warplanes. Here the pilots and aircrew observe these gremlins wreaking their havoc. Of course this is certain death for the fairies with their exposure to iron.

Dowding starts the piece at the onset of the Battle of Britain, obsessing with strategy and the politics behind the war effort. Gradually he becomes more aware of the presence of gremlins in British and American aircraft through a series of real reports he is sent. We know that Dowding was already sympathetic to these views. Here, taken from an article in the *Daily Mail* about the auction of a letter he sent to Mrs Bines in 1944.

Dear Mrs Bines. Thank your for your letter of June 19th. Since I finished my book I have had a good deal of personal experience of a different kind and I agree with almost everything you say in your letter. Knowing my interest in the matter, my wife has sent me a long message about the animals which I hope to publish in my next book, Animals have their own sphere, but pets can be retained in the human sphere so long as the love-link lasts. The astral aspect of our existing ritual. Fairies, gnomes and nature spirits in general I now accept holus bolus as to their existence. As to photographs of them I maintain a healthy scepticism unless I know all about the conditions in which the photos were produced. My doubts about reincarnation have now been removed also. I hope to get another book out by the end of the year, but I never get time for it just now. Thanks you again for writing. Yours sincerely.
Dowding. (Hussain 2018)

This letter, which is reproduced in facsimile in the article, gives us insight into Dowding's mind, particularly with regards to his views on reincarnation and the existence of fairies.

We know that gremlins didn't manage to stop the creation of wartime airfields or the destruction of their fairy realms. It was a fight that the Fairy King was always going to

lose and Dowding, having been pivotal in the Battle of Britain, was to be rejected as somewhat of an outsider because of his views.

One of the early things we decided was that although Dowding and the Fairy King never speak directly with each other on stage, there should be some way that they come together directly at the end. By this point, Dowding has been pushed out of the military (it seems like he was never given that much credit for his wartime work), dejected and living out his retirement and spiritualist studies and writings- The Fairy King is a crushed character, defeated by the Pixies and failed in his attempts to stop the human destruction of his realms, now in solitary exile on Dartmoor.

We decided that Dowding, rambling on Dartmoor in his retirement, would meet the Fairy King, bitter in exile. It felt that as this stage it would be too much for Dowding to suddenly see the Fairy King, so instead he senses a otherworldly presence who he starts speaking to, he hears no answers but the Fairy King can hear him and answers him back. Dowding ponders the afterlife and reincarnation, particularly with concern for his first wife Cecile. He gets his answers from the Fairy King, but can't hear them due to their separation in different realms.

It seems that Dowding spent his life looking for answers to his own questions about the afterlife, reincarnation and their links to fantastical realms and when he finally meets someone who can give him the answers the communication can't be heard, just a presence felt and as always elusive, the question being reduced to a matter of faith.

For me, this is the essence of the fairy phenomenon, they're something that can be grasped by humans in times of stress or uncertainty to explain situations out of their control. It's easy to see how pilots in a war situation constantly under stress and in lethal scenarios every day would cling to stories of mythical creatures. Likewise Dowding, who suffered the enormous grief of losing the mother of his child, obsessed over the possibilities of reincarnation and the afterlife. These are events that have happened to people throughout the ages and are stories that apply to any era, the incarnation of the fairies might change, but we still need them. At the start of this project, I wasn't sure how to engage with the fairy world and in the end it was the human stories of fairy faith that brought them to me.

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