

Late-Victorian Folklore: Constructing the Science of Fairies

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Introduction

In Andrew Lang's and May Kendall's satire *That Very Mab* (1885) the fairy Queen is captured by a scientist, treated like a butterfly and categorised. When his son starts worshipping the fairy, the scientist proclaims to have discovered the origin of religion. 'It is worshipping butterflies, with a service of fetich stones. The boy has returned to it by an act of unconscious inherited memory, derived from Palaeolithic Man' (40). This 'amusing moment of self-satire' (Silver 1999: 202), parodies anthropologists searching for the origins of ancient beliefs, especially in fairies. The origin of fairy belief was also one of the first questions addressed by Thomas Keightley in *The Fairy Mythology* (1828: 3-8). This question of origins also became centrally important to the late Victorian fairy science of the Folklore Society (FLS). Driven by a cultural Darwinian obsession with origins and spurred on by new anthropological theories, folklorists attempted to use cultural survivals to fill the vastly expanded boundaries of human time. Gillian Bennett notes, alongside the field of geology, Darwinism 'opened up a vast chasm of uncharted ages which, like a vacuum, demanded to be filled with-something' (1994: 27), therefore anthropologists employed evolutionary theories to provide new explanations. She explains that cultural evolution enabled the 'fragmentary and diverse materials of anthropology' to be systemised, promising a 'scientific basis' upon which to establish 'the construction of a prehistory of mankind' (27). The scientific methodologies of anthropology, to which most FLS members were committed adherents, could now explain the popular Victorian theme of fairies as survivals of ancient religions, primitive animistic beliefs, or half memories of ancient peoples distorted through time. British occultist Lewis Spence labelled the quest to find fairy origins as the 'philosopher's stone of traditional science' (1946: vi). Yet this enactment of scientific explanation, with its historicised model of fairy-lore, came into conflict with contemporary psychical beliefs in fairies held by Theosophists, Spiritualists and other Occultists.

The late-Victorian fairy science, as led by the FLS, emerged from collectors of popular antiquities and Tylorian anthropological theory. In 1846 Ambrose Merton, a pseudonym for

antiquarian William Thoms, wrote into *The Athenæum* suggesting a new term for popular antiquities, 'Folk-Lore' meaning '*the Lore of the People*' (862). It marked a break from antiquarian approaches by forging a distinct scientific field, a rational way of understanding and exploring curious and sometimes supernatural aspects of folk-culture, such as fairies. Thoms proposed collecting and analysing scraps of folklore, the dying vestiges of ancient culture. He hoped that 'a roundel and a fairy song' might be 'rescued from destruction' (Merton 1846: 886-7). In the 1870s Tylorian theory further crystallised folklore as a science. Edward Tylor, the first Reader in Anthropology at Oxford, in his prominent work *Primitive Culture* (1871) proposed 'a unilinear evolutionary model of culture', which transitioned progressively through hierarchical cultural stages from 'savagery', to 'barbarism', and then finally to 'civilisation' (Reid 2006: 109). For Tylor the 'educated world' in Europe and America could 'simply' place itself at 'one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other' (1871: 23). Tylor argued that, like children, primitive man's 'first explanation of all events will be the human explanation', where inanimate objects have the 'same sort of personal will' as humans and animals (1871: 258). Through these primitive philosophies, Tylor proposed myths and superstitions about supernatural beings formed. These earlier elements of culture remained as decayed cultural survivals, or folklore, in contemporary culture. Bennett notes, just as fossils could be embedded in the landscape, so 'cultural fossils' could be found in the 'cultural landscape' and could theoretically be compared to help 'reconstruct' human history (1991: 34). Fairies were vestiges of historic primitive culture, still lingering in the beliefs of culturally remote rural folk in Europe. Two 'powerful' chapters on survivals in *Primitive Culture* inspired folklorists to hunt out the 'irrational beliefs and practices of the European peasantry' (Dorson 1968: 193; Tylor 1871: 63-144). From this theoretical context the FLS finally formed in 1878 (Dorson 1968: 202). Folklore was seen as a sub-discipline of anthropology 'dealing with the psychological phenomena of uncivilised man', with FLS members keen to promote the 'science of folklore' (Hartland 1885: 116). This refrain was often repeated in the FLS journal. Alfred Haddon, in his introduction to *The Study of Man* (1898: xix), presents folklore as a marginal aspect of anthropology dealing with 'psychical survivals' of the past within more advanced civilised societies; a discipline which attracted some 'derision'. Out of all the anthropological sciences folklore edged closely to the supposedly spurious supernatural. Nevertheless, folklorists focussed on their scientific methodologies, forging rational theories to explain away the fairies' fantastical and elusive nature.

As the great Victorian fairy fascination and the interests of the FLS overlap so strongly, members' writings present us with a corpus of work that sits at the very centre of the Victorian fairy science. This paper aims to specifically discuss the FLS's response to fairies, exemplifying how Victorian scientific folklorists cast a glance over fairyland, determined to explain it away, rationalise the fantastic, and perform an analysis. It also discusses how contemporary supernatural events and beliefs challenged the predominantly rationalising epistemology of British folkloristics. We consider the work of David MacRitchie and George Laurence Gomme, the key proponents of the theory that fairies originated from a primitive pre-historic race. Edwin Sidney Hartland, John Rhys and Alfred Nutt viewed fairy-lore as at least partially originating from varying strands of ancient polytheistic and animistic beliefs. We also consider the challenges these rationalising theories faced when confronting psychical studies, as promoted by prominent FLS member Andrew Lang. Finally, in the 1920s the Cottingley fairy photographs emerged in this fragile discursive space, exposing the conflict between spiritual beliefs and scientific theories regarding fairies; a space where silence was often the most comfortable reaction for academic folklorists.

1. Fairies as a Historical Survival

In Grant Allen's chilling winter ghost-story 'Pallinghurst Barrow' (1892) journalist Rudolph Reeve visits a country house, encountering the terrifying, primordial, subterranean hill-folk that live in the nearby barrow. In this fireside reading for a winter evening, the popular anthropological theory that fairies were remnants of an ancient conquered, aboriginal race, lingering in remote and liminal places is twisted into an eerie Gothic tale. In the tale Allen makes direct reference to MacRitchie's theory that fairies represent a memory of a real historical race (1892: 15). Reeve also reads the tale 'Childe Rowland' from Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* (1890: 117-124), in which the maiden Burd Ellen is rescued from elves in a barrow. Allen's subterranean hill-folk, uncomfortably stereotyped as an aboriginal tribe, are 'spirits, yet savages', 'grinning and hateful barbarian shadows', with 'hair falling unkempt in matted locks' (17). As suggested by Jason Harris 'the tension between folk metaphysical and rationalism produces the literary fantastic' and that folkloric conceptions played a central role in literary fiction (2008: viii). Indeed, Allen was also a folklore theorist who argued that the majority of fairy-lore dated from the 'early days of the Celtic or Teutonic struggles with the small dark race which preceded them' (1881: 348). For Allen the fairies represented 'the last traditional memories of an historical race' (1881: 348). In this theory the fairies' physical

presence seemed to be embedded in the landscape, with tumuli and other ancient sites interpreted as their hollow-hill homes. The memory of these historic groups survived in fantastically exaggerated forms as fairies. Diane Purkiss calls this theory ‘a gorgeous idea’, which ‘gives fairies breath and life, rescues them from story, turns them into people and our favourite kind of people too - oppressed, indigenous people’ (2001: 5). It was rational theory which appealed widely to FLS members, a contribution to the anthropological study of man.

MacRitchie was the first FLS member to forge historical race theory into an extensive mono-causal thesis. His two main works on the topic, *Testimony of Tradition* (1890) and *Fians, Fairies, and Picts* (1893), were supported by dozens of articles all espousing the same theory. MacRitchie felt that by applying euhemerist techniques to fantastical folklore, it was possible to find ‘a reasonable and plausible explanation [...] reducing apparent nonsense to actual sense’ (1892: 108). Stretching beyond the boundaries of folklore, his work also employs an unusual blend of ethnology, etymology, and history. MacRitchie used an ‘etymological sleight of hand’, bowdlerising ethnology, and passing similarities to conflate various mythical, legendary, and historical groups together as part of his supposed historical fairy race (Grydehøj 2013: 109). Grydehøj points out that by drawing parallels between hairiness, dwarfism, and strength, MacRitchie equated numerous groups, including Lapps, Finns, merfolk, witches, Druids, and even Santa Claus, with each other (2009: 88). MacRitchie skirts over underlying differences to connect various groups together. For instance, he argues that ‘*pecht* (or *pech*), *trow*, and *fairy* are all synonyms for “dwarf”’, based on evidence that they were all mound-dwellers (1890: 79). Grydehøj argues that MacRitchie’s work vastly re-evaluates European and Asian history and traces ‘the circumpolar history of his hairy, diminutive originators of fairy belief all the way to Japan’ (2013: 109). MacRitchie aimed to cut through fantastical fairy-lore by performing unwavering rationalist readings, no matter how implausible. In particular, the tangible archaeological remnants of barrows and tumuli seemed to provide concrete evidence for fairy houses. Indeed, *Fians, Fairies and Picts*, was considered unsuitable for publication in the FLS Journal, most probably due to the strong archaeological focus (1893: xvii). The book is elaborately illustrated with archaeological diagrams of these supposed fairy dwellings, such as Maeshowe in Orkney. MacRitchie stressed that these mounds contained ‘articles of domestic and personal use’, ‘bones of birds and animals’, proving that they were inhabited (1900: 128). Silver notes archaeology gave ‘MacRitchie’s new euhemerism a force beyond the theoretical’ (1999: 48). Despite dubious evidence, MacRitchie’s theory shifted an intangible topic onto a tangible and empirical level.

Other FLS members supported elements of MacRitchie's theory as a key factor in the origins of fairy-lore. On the point of mound-houses, Jacobs endorsed MacRitchie's theory in scholarly notes appended to 'Childe Rowland' in *English Fairy Tales* (1890: 238-245). Jacobs argues that descriptions of the Dark Tower, in which the King of Elfland captures Burd Ellen, correlates with Maeshowe in Orkney and re-prints MacRitchie's illustration of the passage grave (1890: 242). This further highlights the complex interplay between scientific folklore theory and literature. Rhys also gave MacRitchie some theoretical backing in his presidential speech to the Anthropological Section of the British Association (1900: 503). For Rhys an element of fairy-lore originated from 'a short, stumpy, swarthy race, which made its habitations underground or otherwise cunningly concealed' (1900: 504). Powerful invaders feared these groups as magicians with the power to cause disease and foretell the future (1900: 504). It was the Celts' 'incapacity to comprehend the weird and uncanny population' that meant they bequeathed 'to the great literatures of Western Europe a motley train of dwarfs and little people, a whole world of wizardry, and a vast wealth of utopianism' (1900: 507). In his 1901 *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx*, Rhys also proposed fairies were partially originated from 'a real race on which have been lavishly superinduced various impossible attributes' (xi). This theory was so appealing to folklorists as it provided an easily understandable explanation for fairies, cutting through all the supernatural elements, making them the centre of a historicised debate. These fairies could be analysed and understood through anthropological methodologies, they were not elusive and frolicsome.

Gomme, the chief advocate of scientific methodology in the FLS, presented his ethnological version of historical race theory in *Ethnology in Folklore* (1892). For Gomme, the folklore of fairies and witches was a distorted remnant of a period of ethnological conflict between a primitive tribe and a supposedly superior conqueror. Gomme hypothesised that fairycraft was 'the survival of beliefs about the aborigines' formed by invading Aryan tribes, whilst witchcraft was the direct 'survival of aboriginal beliefs from aboriginal sources' (1892: 63). Gomme explains that the conquered peoples' influence did not simply end, but that their religious rituals were still observed by the new regime (1892: 41). The initial conquerors' perceptions developed over time, becoming 'stereotyped into certain well-defined lines of fairy lore' (1892: 63). Silver suggests, for Gomme, like many other euhemerists, the 'racial composition of the fairies, their inferior or superior status, and their place in British history became major issues' (1999: 46). Gomme was determined to adopt the right methodology, so that fairycraft and witchcraft, and indeed all folkloric elements, could be accurately delineated between different

historical and ethnological groups. Nonetheless, Weeks notes that folklorists' practice of grouping cultures in 'judgmental terms' at the bottom of a cultural evolutionary ladder had 'very little to do with "objective science"' and 'everything to do with colonial culture validating itself' (2011: 324-5). Euhemerist methodologies appealed to FLS members, providing a performance of post-enlightenment scientific rigour that aimed to explain away, rationalise, and historicise supernatural fairy beliefs. Their projected vision of fairies sat firmly in the past, a cultural echo of the ancient primitive world, far away from their own perception of elite educated Victorian London.

Fairy-lore was also interpreted as a faded legacy of ancient primitive belief systems, worshipping animistic spirits of place or diminished pagan fertility deities. Hartland in *Science of Fairy-Tales* (1891) hoped to expose facets of archaic thought, beliefs, and practices encapsulated within folk tales about fairies by comparing them and tracing similar motifs. The volume mainly abridges fairy tales with similar themes, such as supernatural time-lapse in fairyland. However, in the final section Hartland tries to outline the core beliefs underlying these similarities. Hartland explains that the same 'backbone' runs through his tales and they 'are all built on the same general plan' (1891: 345). He outlines three doctrines of primitive thought from which fairies, and all supernatural beings, once arose (1891: 337). The 'doctrine of Spirits' represents the belief that spirits quit the body and roam in different shapes, eventually returning to the body (334). The 'doctrine of Transformation' represents the belief in beings' ability to change form while maintaining the same identity. Thirdly, Hartland suggests the underlying belief in witchcraft's ability to cause transformations (334-5). For Hartland all fairy tales had the same primitive psychology as their origin. As civilisation progressed Hartland proposed that these beliefs became more fragmentary and 'the attributes of these various orders of supernatural beings begin to be differentiated' (348). Fairies were an offshoot of broader ancient beliefs, gradually disconnected as these belief systems lost their original meaning. Eventually surviving facets of ancient belief became encapsulated as remnants found in folk-tale, re-enacted by their cast of fairy characters.

Rhÿs in *Celtic Folklore* (1901) also proposed an ancient belief system lay behind his particularly Welsh presentation of fairy-lore. For Rhÿs, fairy origins were of a heterogeneous nature; 'drawn partly from history and fact, and partly from the world of imagination and myth' (1901: xi). The mythological element was deeply tied to the Welsh landscape and national

character. Myths were ‘inseparably connected with certain ancient beliefs in divinities and demons associated, for instance, with lakes, rivers, and floods’ (1901: xi). Rhÿs highlights the ‘manifold proof’ of fairies’ ‘close connexion with the waterworld’, an element that he perhaps overstressed (1901: 449). Rhÿs argues that one strand of fairy-lore included demons that ‘the weird fancy of our remote forefathers peopled lakes and streams, bays and creeks and estuaries’ (1901: 445). For instance, the Lady of [Ll]ynny Fan Fach’s father is considered to anthropomorphically represent the lake monster the *afanc* (1901: 440). Rhÿs even suggested a ‘priesthood in connexion with wells in Wales’ (1901: 389). When discussing the Glasfryn Lake he observes that a cover and walls kept the spring from overflowing, perhaps acting as a border to prevent the lake fairies from emerging (1901: 389). He suggests the maiden in charge of the well was possibly a priestess. Furthermore, stretching the discipline of folklore into linguistics, the Welsh language itself is a dominant feature in *Celtic Folklore*, with sources often provided in both Welsh and English. This provided a visual way of displaying linguistic and, by implication, cultural differences from England. Rhÿs was one of the few folklorists to consider what language the fairies themselves reportedly spoke. He proposed ‘a more ancient language of the country’, such as Goidelic, or perhaps even a pre-Celtic ‘earlier idiom’ (1901: 279). This feeds into Rhÿs’ assertion that fairy-lore, in part, stood as evidence of a historical race. Rhÿs’ fairies represented an ancient racial group in Wales, with their own myths, beliefs, and language. Juliette Wood notes that, whilst many of Rhÿs’ informants did not believe in fairies, there appears to be ‘a system of beliefs about fairies’, giving ‘substance and cohesion to tales about them’ (2005: 334). For Rhÿs, the Welsh landscape was a stage-setting for the ancient population and their animistic beliefs ossified in myths and legends.

Another Celtic folklorist, Nutt in *The Voyage of Bran* (1895/1897) ultimately sought to trace fairy origins back to agricultural belief systems, as uniquely preserved in Irish mythology. For Nutt, the Tuatha De Danann developed from primitive agricultural spirits, who provided fertility and were connected to festivals and ceremonies of agriculture. Ecstatic sacrificial fertility rites were performed to ‘strengthen the life of the vegetation upon which that of man depends, by infusing into it the vital energy of a specially selected victim’ (1897: 144). This religion, Nutt asserted, hailed from a pre-historic stage of culture, during the era of migrations of his proposed Aryan-speaking populations (1897: 277). The myths of the Tuatha De Danann emerged from ‘chants’ forming part of the agricultural rites and eventually developed as *dramatis personae* of complex myths (1897: 195). Nutt discusses the themes of the ‘Happy Otherworld’ and ‘Doctrine of re-birth’ found in Irish mythological literature. Nutt employed a

literary methodology, tracing these themes back into the earliest manuscripts, in attempt to reconstruct his ancient agricultural religion. From this he paints a picture of:

beings pre-eminent in art magic, capable of assuming all shapes at will, lords of a land of ideal plenty' through whom 'the perpetual flow and transformation of the animating essence (which in this world can only be maintained by bloody sacrifice and inevitable death) is so ordered. (1897: 194)

Like other FLS members, Nutt's vision of an agricultural fertility cult presents a historicised version of fairy-lore, irrelevant to the modern world.

Nutt presents contemporary Irish fairy-lore as the fragmented remnants of his ancient pagan fertility faith, which had been side-lined and moralised by Christianity. Nutt argued that the Powers of Increase, 'change as they might', 'retained to the last the marks of their origin' (1897: 244). The 'older powers' the Irish rural folk cherished were not the poetical creatures of mythology, but the 'ruder prototypes to whom all along his [the peasants'] worship had been paid' (1897: 204). Whilst the tales and mythologies of the agricultural gods had survived in literature, the practice of their cult survived in fairy-lore; they represented two strands from the same source. In the Irish peasants' homes the ancient rites, changed but a little, lived on beside newer Christian practices (1897: 204). Nutt asserted that Christianity had curbed the most 'intense and awful rites' with 'bloody sacrifice', including the 'frenzied and orgiastic spring and harvest festival' (1897: 207). However, milder aspects of this agricultural religion were kept alive in folk practice and sat beside celebrations of saints' festivals. For Nutt, the dark pagan past still lingered in the background of Irish folklore. For many FLS members you just needed to scratch the surface of myths and legends to find ancient philosophies. They forged a historicised model for fairy-lore, one which did not have an active role in their image of scientific Victorian Britain.

2. The Challenge of the Contemporary Supernatural

Contemporary supernatural beliefs in fairies, especially elite expressions by spiritualists, were problematic for FLS members' historicised theories. Often they struggled to reconcile their historical model of fairy-lore with contemporary fairy beliefs and manifestations. In particular Lang's discussions challenged the boundaries between survivals, contemporary supernatural phenomena, folklore, and psychical research. Lang highlighted how, despite the obvious connections, psychical researchers and folklorists often ignored each the others' work. He noted that so long as belief 'rests only on tradition it interests the folklorist', but as 'soon as

contemporary evidence of honourable men avers that the belief reposes on a fact, Folklore drops the subject' and psychical research takes it up (1895: 247). Lang had a longstanding interest in psychical phenomena and increasingly promoted his vision for psycho-folklore during the 1890s. During this period Lang published an edition of seventeenth-century Scottish minister Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* (1893) and also *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (1894). His psycho-folklore methodology compared contemporary and historical manifestations, to provide 'a long-range view on ghostlore and appreciate its timeless rather than temporal features' (Dorson 1968: 212). Through this methodology, Dorson notes that Lang hoped to "scientifically" ... distinguish the folklore tale from the factual phenomenon, the magician's tricks from the real event' (1968: 213). While Lang championed the comparative anthropological folklore model, he also felt the need to address the fantastical fairy encounters that continued into the Victorian age.

Lang's introduction to Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* exemplifies the methodology of Psycho-Folklore, pressing 'home his desire for a scientific approach to the supernatural' (Dorson 1968: 214). In an era when Spiritualism was growing in strength, Marina Warner argues that Lang 'compares the seers of the fairies with telepathic mediums of the Victorian era' (2007: xxxii). Lang focusses on house haunting pixies and Brownies, which he felt originated in ghostly activity and poltergeist experiences (1893: xxxix). He analyses 'less easily explicable tales', such as the 'moving of objects without visible contact', comparing modern examples recorded by Society for Psychical Research (SPR) with historical cases (1893: xxxviii). Lang discusses Mr H's 'epileptic' behaviour during a séance, from the *Proceedings of the SPR* (1893: xl-xlii). Lang then cites a comparative example from New England in 1679, similarly accompanied by an epileptic patient, where a supposed demon threw around furniture in the house of William Morse (1893: xlii). Lang also discusses the Epworth rectory, haunted by a ghost called Old Jeffrey in 1716-1717 (1893: xlvi). Lang suggests that these suspected poltergeist instances kept belief in Brownies alive (1893: l). Lang felt that all supposedly supernatural phenomena, whether ancient or modern, deserved to be scientifically analysed for possible explanations. He proposed that a comparative methodology bridging folklore and psychical research could help achieve this.

Lang's attempts to incorporate psychical research into the FLS's scholarly remit were increasingly unpopular (Luckhurst 2004: 207). Edward Clodd attacked psychical phenomena and the SPR in his 1895 FLS presidential address, stating that they were an 'order of superstitions, towards which, lacking the justification of the older, and having no quality of

nobility about them, the attitude of the folklorist is, so it seems to me, wholly different' (1895: 78-9). Clodd further explains that '[a]nalyse under the dry light of anthropology, its psychism is seen to be only the "other self" of barbaric spiritual philosophy "writ large"' (1895: 79). For Clodd psychical phenomena and Spiritualism represented a modern-day eruption of beliefs from a lower stage of culture. Clodd saw it as threat to modern society, which 'narcotize the reason and judgment' spreading 'epidemic delusions' (1895: 80). Bennett notes that Clodd, 'secure within the dominant tradition of disbelief', doesn't explain the grounds for his condemnation or enter 'serious discussion' about ghost 'twaddle' (1987: 97). Even in 1987, Bennett argued no one touched 'disreputable' supernatural folklore (13). Lang was publicly berated for his ideas. Psychical material claimed to have contemporary significance to tangential reality and encroached upon the rationalistic mind-set of post-enlightenment science. The folklorists were determined to stress their scientific credentials, forging a strong scholarly reputation for themselves. Members were aware that studying contemporary fairies would not help the FLS's reputation as a serious scholarly body.

Lang, in a 'Protest' to Clodd's speech, isolates himself as the only member of the psych-folklorist, 'sect' (1895: 236). He portrays Clodd's opinion as one of distaste regarding the belief of '*community of the living and the so-called dead*', rather than a validated academic criticism (1895: 242). Lang uses the opportunity to emphasise the common ground between psychical research and folklore (1895: 243). But likewise, Lang recognised that 'folk-lore and fairies' found no home in the SPR (1894: 89). Lang was trying to forge a connection between the two societies, and disciplines, which he saw had mutual interests, but were divided. Clodd replied to Lang arguing that the SPR's methods were 'pseudo-scientific' (1895: 248). Clodd recognised that many phenomena fell 'within the province' of both Societies, but argued there 'cannot be two varying canons of investigation' (1895: 257-8). For Clodd psychical research was 'a state of feeling', yet folklore was 'an order of thought' (1895: 258). Roger Luckhurst notes that Clodd's attack might have been prompted because 'Lang's popularisation of anthropology risked over-identification with other marginal knowledges' (2004: 211). Clodd was wary that any connection with the SPR, psychical researchers, and their spurious supernatural phenomena, might damage the FLS's burgeoning academic reputation. While the FLS was keen to promote themselves as a serious scholarly body, folklore always sat on a difficult boundary between science and the supernatural. Bennett notes the arena of Clodd and Lang's debate, the 'illicit "delving" into the unknown', engaged the 'greatest taboo, and the greatest silence' (1987: 104). Likewise, Sugg notes 'fairy encounters wriggle in this unsettling

way across the borders of folklore and reality' (2018: 84). Lang was a solitary voice with little obvious support. A chasm lay between ossified folkloric survivalist theories and psychical researchers investigating the reality of fairies.

3. The Cottingley Photographs and the Silencing of the Fairies

In a Society where hostility to contemporary psychical research was openly expressed, it is unsurprising that the famous Cottingley photographs were not even considered worthy of criticism, despite their international profile. On a summer's afternoon in 1917, armed with an aptly named box brownie camera, hat pins, and delicate tracings of fairy pictures from Alfred Noyes's poem 'A Spell for a Fairy', Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths were about to change the fairies' cultural fate (Gettings 1978: 72). These photographs of garden fairies caused disruption in the elite adult world of writers, folklorists, and theosophists. There were questions around their veracity, and by implication the very existence of fairies. Wood notes the case 'is a richly textured event that polarises belief and scepticism, and involves an intuitive understanding of legend formation and the social nuances of early twentieth-century English Society' (2006: 288). They represented the complicated clash between the metropolitan literary world, the media, adults, children, nature, technology, Spiritualism, and the occult. Nicola Bown notes, 'the photographs killed off interest in fairies as an adult preoccupation and consigned them to the world of childhood' (2001: 196). The images highlight a cultural shift in the perception of the fairy, which was becoming increasingly benign and child-like.

Arthur Conan Doyle promoted the fairy pictures as tiny miracles at the bottom of the garden, proof of a wider spiritual realm. The Cottingley case was emblazoned across the front cover of the 1920 Christmas *Strand* and the authenticity of the photographs were open to full public scrutiny (Doyle [1922] 1997: 21-32). Doyle later published *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922) as a compendium of evidence, including the *Strand* articles, case notes and numerous newspaper excerpts, portrayed as an investigation. Coverage of the Cottingley case predominantly 'assumed a detective mode' (Bown 1996: 57); whether these fairies, and by extrapolation all fairies, were real. Purkiss notes that this made the fairies 'as vulnerable to the paparazzi, as any other superstar' (2001: 284). The press response, as Paul Smith notes, was 'one of embarrassment and puzzlement' (1997: 391). Many newspaper headlines mocked the case and stirred up polarised media debate. They generally adopted a negative, disbelieving, and somewhat sarcastic stance, circulating round the themes of juvenile pranks and Doyle's gullibility. One *Illustrated London News* headline read 'Hoax or Revelation: Photograph of

Fairies' (1922: 444). Maurice Hewlett, writing in *John O'London* and requoted by Doyle, noted 'knowing children, and knowing that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has legs, I decide that the Miss Carpenters [a pseudonym used for the girls] have pulled one of them' (Doyle [1922] 1997: 50). The Cottingley images were at the centre of a press storm debating the actual existence of fairies, as characters familiar from Edwardian children's picture books.

The FLS all but ignored the Cottingley photographs, despite their public profile and obvious interest in the subject matter. Stewart Sanderson, in his 1973 FLS presidential speech, highlighted this curious silence (1973: 89). Rather than being a silence of benign disinterest, it represents the confused and contradictory space the Cottingley images represented within the public domain during the 1920s and the FLS's response to this. It also represents the increased silencing of the fairy itself, from a figure of folkloric interest, into a childish nursery puppet. A tale negotiated around themes of forgery, Spiritualism, Doyle being fooled, and childhood play emerged as the public narrative for the Cottingley images. This is also the impression to which the FLS, as collectors of press cuttings and general readers, were exposed. Sanderson also vocalised the fear that folklore, especially due to its 'magical and supernatural aspects', could attract 'the lunatic fringe' who often had an 'emotional response' to 'intellectual analysis' (1973: 90). The issues over contemporary supernaturalism that Lang and Clodd had debated a generation earlier still presented theoretical problems for wary FLS members. Even the SPR and the *British Journal of Photography* 'maintained a stony silence' on the Cottingley images (Owen 1994: 80). Geoffrey Crawley argues that for these Societies to discuss the images would 'imply that there is something there which is worth their attention', which might 'raise doubts as their own soundness of judgement' (1982: 1380). This was further amplified as the Cottingley photographs sat on the juncture of old and tense debates within the FLS.

The photographs, which FLS members most probably saw in the *Strand*, attracted a strong aesthetic resistance. One headline ran 'Doyle Fairies Toyshop Flappers, Critic Insists' (1922: 1). In 1923, eminent psychologist Joseph Jastrow stated that the pictures were so 'palpably fraudulent' that even children 'would hardly be convinced' (1923: 28). Even without being photographic experts, the FLS members would have detected the posed portrait quality to the images. In 'Frances and the Fairies' she looks directly at the camera, posing with the fairies (Crawley 1983: 67). Even though their poses are suggestive of dancing, Maurice Hewlett argued that '*the figures are not moving*' (Doyle [1922] 1997: 50). Bown sees the fairies as 'decorative props' in 'portraits of girls-who-see-fairies' (2001: 194). The images also evoke the theme of children playing with fairies in gardens. *Finding a Fairy* (1917) by Will and

Carine Cadby was liberally illustrated with photographs of a girl posing with an ornately dressed doll, representing a fairy. The Cottingley fairy figures themselves can easily be linked with the aesthetics from children's picture books. Purkiss highlights their 'lissom Edwardian bodies, the careful Edwardian hairstyles, the little wreaths of flowers' redolent of children's book illustrations (2001: 292). Alex Owen notes the Cottingley images were 'replete with diminutive pert features and gossamer wings' and 'bear little relation' to northern and Celtic folkloric fairies (1994: 56). The photos are clearly derived from a world of childhood play; they simply do not resemble the historical races or ancient gods which FLS members associated with fairy folklore.

Clodd, the FLS's most radical rationalist, was unsurprisingly the only FLS figure who discussed the Cottingley photographs during the 1920s. Clodd did not pass his comments to the FLS, but chose the platform of the Hibbert lectures. Clodd declared 'some of us think that "Credulity" and "Conan Doyle" are equations' (1922: 26). Clodd asserted the 2D 'fairies have been copied from some illustrated book, cleverly cut out of thin cardboard' (1922: 27). Clodd's attention to detail demonstrates that he, and most likely other FLS members, closely followed the Cottingley case. Clodd also notes that *The Daily News* on 28th April 1921 published a 'faked' fairy photograph by Miss E. R. North, in which fairy figures were cut out and 'arranged in groups amidst moorland scenery' (1922: 28). Clodd also quotes a newspaper article where Edward Gardner, who first discovered the images, discusses the ability of clairvoyant people to materialise fairies onto photographic plates. Clodd notes the 'average person will find it difficult to extract any sane meaning from this balderdash composite of wind and fog' (1922: 28). He does not enter a serious discussion or analysis about the images, for he felt they simply did not warrant it. He merely shuts the photographs down as a hoax.

Briggs also discussed the Cottingley case in an appendix to *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (1967). Her comments are suggestive of the opinions that the previous generation of FLS members held, and the reasons they ignored the photos. She notes 'any folklorist' would hold 'a very strong aesthetic resistance' to these 'butterfly-winged, gauze-clad fairies of the children's magazine illustrations' ([1967] 2002: 300). To earlier generations the Cottingley figures would have also epitomised the Edwardian picture book fairies. These were not recognisable as folkloric fairies. She argues 'every feeling revolts against believing them to be genuine' (300). Here Briggs vocalises many people's initial reaction, simply a 'feeling' of disbelief triggered by the images' aesthetic. Briggs also noted that the people promoting the case were 'cranks' and into Theosophy (300). Briggs understood that the opportunity for

dialogue or analysis was greatly troubled by personal belief structures surrounding the case. She acknowledged that by immediately dismissing ‘any believer in certain tenets as a crank it is difficult to know how he can prove his case’ (300). Folklorists were compelled, unlike the sensationalist press, to respond academically. Yet as Cooper notes, Briggs ‘felt that any practical fieldwork would invite ridicule or criticism’ (1990: 80). Briggs’s discussions on the Cottingley photographs demonstrate how problematic the case might be for the FLS. It overstretched the boundaries of folklore into controversial psychical research. Ignoring the issue was in many ways the simplest response.

Whilst Sanderson considers the FLS silence was ‘plain indifference’, there were many factors surrounding the Cottingley photographs which concerned FLS members (1973: 98). Similarly, Bennett, when researching ghosts, found informants reticent when discussing spiritualism, because it threatens the ‘world-view’ of both sceptics and believers and has the ‘strongest taboo placed upon it’ (1987: 104). Cottingley tapped into many controversial topics and created boundaries of tension. The FLS silence is pregnant with meaning. This silence also speaks loudly of the fairies’ new cultural position which belonged to a world of children’s garden play and pretty picture books, but was also associated with credulous Spiritualists, like Doyle. Fairies were increasingly serving as small amusements for the young. Melanie Keene in *Science in Wonderland* (2015) shows how fairyland and the fantastic were used to enliven scientific texts, and sprinkle a bit of fairy-dust over supposedly dry scientific ideas, especially for young readers. Furthermore, in *That Very Mab* Lang and Kendall, seemingly prophetically, framed fairies as the irrational beliefs of few children and eccentric adults who believe in ‘Faith-healing and Esoteric Buddhism [Theosophy], and Thought-reading’ (1885: 22). Their presentation of the group is one which is grandiose, in vogue, but essentially a bit frivolous. Esoteric Buddhists are mocked for practising a ‘patent religion’, where people worship ‘teacup and cigarettes, standing where they ought not’ (1885: 28-9). Purkiss argues that the Cottingley case represents the ‘apotheosis’ of the cute fairy and struck ‘the last great blow against the fairy’ (2001: 284). Far from the rational late-Victorian theories of fairy origins, Sugg highlights that by the early twentieth century fairies had become the ‘nadir of childish irrationality’ (2018: 14). In his hierarchy of the irrational, ‘fairies are the very lowest, most embarrassing level of all’ (2018: 14). To believe in fairies was worse than witches, ghosts or aliens, who have ‘a certain dark weight of supernatural gravity about them’ (2018: 14). By the early twentieth century, fairies simply became too embarrassing to be considered worthy of serious folkloric

study. *Coming of the Fairies* really hailed the departure of the folkloric fairy from the adult world.

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