



A review of
**Fearsome Fairies:
Haunting
Tales of the Fae**

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Do you believe in fairies? Certainly, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle famously did so, publishing an article in *The Strand Magazine* (December 1920) that recounted his discovery of photographs taken by two young girls in Yorkshire, who claimed they had taken pictures of fairies by Cottingley Beck during the summer of 1917. This was followed by a book, *The Coming of the Fairies* (September 1922), where Conan Doyle endorsed the authenticity of the photographs.

Nowadays, the Cottingley Fairies are remembered as one of the most famous hoaxes in photographic history. In later life the two girls admitted the fairies had been staged with paper cut-outs and hatpins, yet until she died one of the girls, Frances Griffiths, maintained that the fifth and final image they had taken was genuine.

While Conan Doyle's reputation suffered because of his involvement, the intensity of public debate following his publication of the photos – particularly in a world reeling from the mass deaths and horror of World War I – says a great deal about a collective desire to believe in the supernatural as well as tapping into an older uneasiness as to what fairies might actually be. Were they flimsy butterfly-winged creatures fluttering within the pages of children's books or something altogether more ambiguous, hovering in the shadows?

Today many popular images of fairies fall into the first category and our perceptions of fairies have been shaped by developments in children's books and the entertainment industry; think Tinkerbell! However, historically fairies have always been unpredictable and formidable figures, and associations between fairies and the dead go back a long way. In many folklore traditions, fairies are described as coming from the 'otherworld', which is often also an underworld. Other stories explicitly link fairies to the souls of the departed, and the fairies' acquisition of insect wings in the 18th century further associates them with dead souls, who are linked with butterflies or moths in numerous cultures.

As folklore developed as a discipline during the 19th century, Victorian Britain developed an enormous fascination with fairies, using the otherness of the little folk

to deal with contemporary issues surrounding empire, race, gender class and national identity (10). Some theorists used the emerging social sciences of anthropology and archaeology to suggest pseudo-scientific explanations for belief in fairies and cultural evolution. Meanwhile the development of magical-seeming technologies such as X-rays, photography and moving pictures led to fresh questions about what might exist beyond human perception. Seen within this wider context, it is easier to see how Conan Doyle's conviction that fairies might be invisibly all around us captured the public imagination. It is out of this swirl of ideas about fairies, the occult, death, the otherworld and otherness that this collection of 12 stories, edited by Elizabeth Dearnley, was written between 1867-2014. Together these stories chart one-and-a-half centuries of unsettling encounters between the familiar human world and the unpredictable, potentially dangerous yet tempting fairy realm.

Other than Frances Hodgson Burnett's 'In the Closed Room', which takes place in a humid New York summer, all these stories are set in the British Isles, frequently exploring resurfacings of fairy figures from British and Irish folklore, many of which draw directly on much older folktales. The opening story, Charlotte Riddell's 'The Banshee Warning', for example, brings the death-heralding banshee of Ireland to the real-world locations of Soho and Guy's Hospital in London.

Fairies are by no means always female. Examples of sexually magnetic male fairies can be found in Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Laura Silver Bell', where the orphan Laura becomes captivated by a mysterious lord, while Angela Carter's 'Erl-King', a mesmeric, green-eyed forest-dweller, promises 'red berries, ripe and delicious,' to anyone he entices into his lair. Likewise, the young girl at the centre of 'The White People' describes walking through a suggestively sensuous green valley, full of bubbling streams with ripples that kiss her like nymphs; in fairyland even the landscape can seduce.

Another type of fairy found in this collection, often linked with children, is the changeling; a belief that fairies might steal a human child and leave a doppelgänger in its place. Frances Hodgson Burnett's previously mentioned haunting account of the delicate-featured Judith echoes changeling tales, while Randolph Stow's 'Concerning a boy and a girl emerging from the earth' recounts the consternation within the Suffolk village of Woolpit when two green-skinned children appeared at the edge of a harvest field. Similarly, in Margery Lawrence's 'The Case of the Leannabh Sidhe', an occult detective is called to investigate a young boy exhibiting disturbing behaviour, and J.M. Barrie's 'Lock-out Time' introduces the character of Peter Pan, the once mortal boy who decides on his own accord to live with the fairies. His indecision about whether to return to his mother and the eventual consequence of his leaving is emotionally resonant of other changeling tales.

The Celtic Revival of the 19th and early 20th centuries revitalised interest in the fairy lore of Ireland and Scotland. Fiona Macleod's 'By the Yellow Moonrock' takes the

reader to the Scottish moorlands, where a young piper becomes captivated by a vampiric '*Bhean-Nimhir*' (serpent woman) he meets on St Bride's Night. This tale is part of a long tradition of seductively threatening female fairies. Jane Alexander's '*In Yon Green Hill to Dwell*' revisits the border ballad of '*Tam Lin*' to explore what happens after the mortal Janet saves her lover, Tam, from the fairy queen.

In 19th-century England, a nostalgia for the fairies of Shakespeare or Chaucer was coupled with a sense that there was no place for them in a rapidly industrialising society. The clash between urban modernity and the remnants of older, darker forces buried in the landscape is ably demonstrated in M.R. James' '*After Dark in the Playing Fields*' and Algernon Blackwood's '*The Trod*'.

This is a superb collection that uses supernatural occurrences as a magic mirror in which to reflect real-world fears, desires and anxieties. Each story is preceded by a short biography of the authors and some of the stories have a relevant introductory quote which provides contextualisation. While Elizabeth Dearnley provides detailed references in her Introduction and suggested further reading, a glossary of some of the more unusual terms in the stories may have been helpful in addition to the explanatory footnotes provided in some of the stories.

Elizabeth Dearnley's great-grandparents lived in Fairy Dell, Cottingley, and this connection provides the framework of this collection, which has developed alongside a wider project on the Cottingley fairies. The Cottingley Fairy photographs have been reproduced in the appendix of this collection, including the final 'fairy bower' image that Frances Griffiths always claimed was real; readers of this book can judge the veracity for themselves. This book will appeal to fairy story enthusiasts and readers interested in the folk and fairy lore of the British Isles and Ireland, as well as students of history, children's literature and cultural studies.

Editor: Elizabeth Dearnley.

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