



*A review of*  
**Magical Folk:  
British and Irish  
Fairies, 500 A.D.  
to the Present**

Katherine Langrish

*'[I]f you run a fine comb through even the most urbanised of the modern English counties, fairies will come tumbling out.'* (8)

**M**agical Folk feels like a joyful, modern take on Thomas Keightley's *Fairy Mythology*.<sup>1</sup> In these sixteen essays by prominent folklorists and historians, editors Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook have put together a compendium of fairy sightings and fairylore from across Britain, Ireland and perhaps most interestingly from parts of North America. A welcome and unusual element is the attention paid by many contributors to modern fairylore and apparitions, whether 'believed, half-believed or enjoyed' (13). Here is an account of trows spotted on Tor Ness in World War II (125), a 2006 sighting in a Worcestershire pub garden of a grotesque little naked man climbing over a fence (41), and an appraisal of the recent fairy 'tradition' of coin trees (112). Just as fascinating is the annual re-enactment by Cub-scouts and Brownies of a pixy abduction in Devon (44), a 'village' of garden gnomes placed by divers at the bottom of Wastwater (79), and the Irish Fairy Door Company, which 'produces diminutive doors that can be stuck on to trees' (107). Whimsical, commercially-driven, tourist-oriented, or simply unexplained, such accounts testify to the continuous re-invention, vitality and relevance of fairy lore.

Less successful in my view is the editors' attempt to differentiate between 'Fairy Tribes' of different regions (14-17). In the preface they contrast the mischievous, playful pixies and piskies of Devon and Cornwall with the more dangerous fairies of the north of England, Scotland and Ireland (13). Brushes with Cornish fairies, they suggest, result mainly in a human's discomfiture, while a similar encounter in Scotland may end in death. Yet darker strains exist in south-west English fairy lore: as Ronald M. James points out in his essay 'Piskies and Knockers', citing the Cornish tale 'The Fairy Dwelling on Selena Moor', Cornish fairies could be 'terrifying and dangerous' (190).

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Instead, and unsurprisingly, the regional tales and beliefs offered here exhibit many similarities. Stories from Worcestershire and Cumbria repeat the well-known motif of 'the broken peel' (38/39; 87). Ceri Houlbrook's Scottish account of a 'little fellow' who buys a horse from a mortal and immediately rides it into the earth (114) is mirrored in Stephen Miller's essay on fairy lore from the Isle of Man (172). In the same essay Miller provides an eyewitness account of a stunted Manx 'changeling' child, unable to walk or stand (168), while Ronald M. James remarks that 'most Cornish references to changelings seem to describe actual infants who failed to thrive' (190). It is a shame that the lack of an index makes it difficult to keep track of such correspondences.

The essays are divided into three sections: English Fairies, Celtic and Norse Fairies, and Travelling Fairies. Jacqueline Simpson collects some of the 'scanty, scattered' fairy lore of Sussex. From Yorkshire, Richard Sugg provides an eye-widening account of the ongoing repercussions of the Cottingley hoax. Investigating Dorset fairylore, Jeremy Harte concludes no 'unified portrait' is possible, as associations and meanings change through time. In Cumbria, Simon Young tells how the broken clay pipes of the 17th century are attributed to the fairies. Lara Coulson provides haunting tales of Orkney trows, and in his essay on Welsh fairylore, Richard Suggett offers an intriguing explanation of the fairy dislike of iron.

In the final section, three essays trace the remains of tales and beliefs brought to North America by English, Scottish and Irish emigrants. In 'Banshees and Changelings' Chris Woodyard looks at transplanted Irish fairylore, with specific reference to a remarkable account of a fairy abduction in Dubuque, Iowa, 1876, which was reported (with considerable scepticism) in the local papers. In a splendid piece of analysis-cum-detective work, Woodyard shows that the disappearing Kitty Crow did actually exist and wonders if her family used the fairies as a euphemistic excuse to conceal pregnancy or some other 'disgrace'?

In 'Fairy Bread and Fairy Squalls', Simon Young discusses the surviving European fairylore of Atlantic Canada, acknowledging the 19th-century view of the Canadian woods as 'virgin land' empty of fancy, devoid of spirits, fays and fairies (211). Nevertheless in the Maritime Provinces, settled largely by Scots and Irish, he has uncovered a variety of fairy thefts and kidnappings, and one lovely tale in which a man emigrates to escape his fairy lover (she follows him!) (213). Young also traces a number of 'fairy' place names, including a cave called the 'Fairy Hole', or 'Gluskap's Wigwam', on Kelly's Mountain, Nova Scotia. Young seems unaware of the importance of this site. Gluskap, or Klu'skap, is a hugely important culture hero to the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick who thirty years ago successfully fought off an attempt to open a superquarry on the mountain.<sup>2</sup> Here is a missed opportunity to reflect, however briefly, on cultural appropriation and the substitution of European for indigenous place-names and lore.<sup>3</sup>

Though Native American folklore<sup>4</sup> is beyond the scope of this book, it is neither possible nor desirable to ignore it when it becomes imported into Anglo-American tradition. Finding scant evidence for British fairylore in New England, possibly because of the paucity of fairy beliefs among the East Anglian Puritans who settled there, Peter Muise introduces the naked Pukwudgie,<sup>5</sup> 'two feet high with pale grey skin', with hairy arms, green eyes and long nose, spotted most recently in Massachusetts in the 1990s by a woman walking her dog. Going on to discuss other fascinating creatures of indigenous folklore such as the Passamaquoddy mekumwasuk, he concludes that 'the American Indians of northern New England have a rich tradition of stories about fairies,' adding 'it seems almost certain the fairies existed in Indian lore long before the first Europeans arrived in New England' (201). Muise is right to insist on the richness and age of Wabanaki folklore. However, it is problematic to refer to creatures such as the Pukwudgie as *fairies*, a word which comes with a great deal of European baggage. To stick European labels on Native American folklore is to invite misinterpretation.

In the Mi'kmaq world-view, 'Power is the essence which underlies the perceived universe,' energises and transforms it. Their very language 'catalogue[s] elements of the created world in two ways: as animate or inanimate. *Persons* are those manifestations which are animate, and they include humans, animals, trees ... The Thunders are Powers of the natural world and *Persons*... [who] live both in human form and bird shape.'<sup>6</sup> Even boulders, lakes and mountains may be *Persons*. In a cosmology so different from ours, 'fairies' just doesn't cut it, and Muise's earlier and more cautious description of 'non-human entities' is to be preferred (199).<sup>7</sup> Creatures of Power such as the mekumwasuk (mi'kmwes'uk) are not supernatural – a concept foreign to the Mi'kmaq – but entirely natural, and need to be understood within their own context. Muise points out that 'American Indian lore' has had an influence on modern New England fairy lore '*whether or not it is authentic*' (my italics) and this is undoubtedly true, but we should take care not to perpetuate the use of an inauthentic terminology which tends to homogenise a distinctive, unfamiliar culture into something Europeans find comfortable.

Authors: Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook.  
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## Notes

1. Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (1828).
2. Anne Christian Hornburg, *Mi'kmaq Landscapes: From Animism to Sacred Ecology* (Routledge, 2008), 147.
3. As of last year the site is under new threat: CBC report: 'Protest Planned as Cape Breton mountain becomes focus of mining group', [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/kelly-s-mountain-sean-kirby-protest-mining-mi-kmaq-1.4418614](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/kelly-s-mountain-sean-kirby-protest-mining-mi-kmaq-1.4418614) accessed 25 November 2017.
4. It is best to be precise: in New England and the Maritime Provinces of Atlantic Canada, the folklore in question would be primarily that of the Wabanaki, 'People of the First Light', who comprise the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Abenaki nations.
5. 'The Puck Wudj Ininee' or 'little wild man of the mountains' was an Ojibwa tale introduced to European readers by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft in *The Myth of Hiawatha and other Oral Legends, Mythologic and Allegoric, of the North American Indians*, 1856. Schoolcraft's wife was half Ojibwa.
6. Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Stories from the Six Worlds* (Nimbus Publishing, 1988), 4-5.
7. Finding accurate ways to talk in English about Native American entities is by no means easy (but we should make the effort): 'The Mi'kmwes'uk were traditionally human beings who had been changed by power.' Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Tracking Doctor Lonecloud* (Goose Lane Editions and Nova Scotia Museum, 2002), 172.



## A review of **Folk**

Victoria Leslie

One of the first characters mentioned in Zoe Gilbert's collection of interrelated short stories, *Folk*, is Verlyn Webbe, a boy born with a wing for an arm who struggles to come to terms with his difference. With a nod to the classic fairy tale 'The Six Swans', it is clear straight away that Gilbert's stories are heavily influenced by folklore and fairy tales and equally preoccupied with the role of outsiders and their quest to fit in. Verlyn's story, like many of the others in this collection, span a generation, giving the lives of the small island community of Neverness a sense of perpetuity; where customs and traditions are upheld, and superstitions and storytelling are sustained as tonics to cope with the hardships and hostilities of island life.

The collection begins with 'Prick Song' (appearing in this issue), a story about an annual custom attached to the slash-and-burn farming of the gorse headland. With everyone in the community assembled, the young women of Neverness fire arrows decorated with their

names into the gorse thicket to be retrieved by potential suitors who can claim a kiss for their efforts. Some of the girls weight their arrows, so they will go further, for they all desire 'their kiss to be the reddest: a kiss from a boy who has dived so deep for her arrow that his lips have been pricked to a bloody pincushion'. The sexual overtones of this rite of passage are made clear, not only from the title, but by the fact many of the girls sew red dots on their ribbons to indicate that the boy who finds their arrow can claim much more than just a kiss. Similarly, the boys psych themselves up before running headlong into the gorse with lewd chants about the Gorse Mother, the mythologised woman of the gorse who comes for those who go deepest into the thicket. With her mouth compared to 'a bowl of mulberries' and entreaties from the youths for her to 'drink [them] up', the imagery of consuming and being consumed is muddled, with the boys eager to play both dominant and submissive roles in their first venture into adulthood.

'Prick Song' sets the tone of the collection, where sexual awakenings are tinged with violence and where demon lovers are not merely the stuff of make believe. Besides the Gorse Mother, a whole host of otherworldly suitors attempt to seduce and lure the young people of Neverness, often with tragic consequences. In 'The True Tale of Jack Frost', for instance, two sisters, Grey and March, find themselves under the spell of a pale man they call Jack Frost. When their mother learns that her favourite daughter, Grey, desires the man, she conspires to help her rendezvous with him by locking March in her bedroom. Grey's seduction at the hands of Jack Frost occurs on the same night that her father dies of exposure to the cold, reinforcing the axiom that there is always a price to pay when a fey unites with a mortal. The story ends with March established as a storyteller, beginning her tale of two 'bad' sisters and their even worse mother, the experience serving as a cautionary tale to others about the temptation of men and their ability to set women against one another.

The role of storytelling to protect against danger is also important in 'Water Bull Bride'. The protagonist, Plum, is sufficiently versed in folklore to recognise a water bull when he appears in human guise, though unable to resist his spell. Like Jack Frost, the water bull is thin and slender, but with 'hair as soft as waterweed' and eager for a maiden to follow him into the water. Plum's grandmother Winfrid uses all of her powers to protect her granddaughter, 'stitching blessings into her broideries' and 'plant[ing] luck into bed sheets with witching threads'. However, once touched by the water bull and eager to recapture that erotic feeling, Plum becomes the seducer of local youths until she attracts a predator far more dangerous than a water bull, revealing that it is mortal men who are the real monsters of our stories.

The presence of traditional crafts play an important part in many of the stories in this collection. As with Winfrid stitching a 'spell-soaked' net around Plum, a focus on magic garments is also important in 'Swirling Cleft', where Sil – an otherworldly stepmother – knits blankets for her stepdaughter, though she has no use for them herself. Like Gilbert's other demon lovers, Sil is also characterised by her association with the cold. While she strives to warm her stepdaughter, Sil seeks the chilled fog that rolls in off the sea, casting the window

casements wide and bathing her feet in cold water when the weather turns warm. Her acclimatisation to the mortal world is only made possible by a delicate garment, a 'shawl of cloud', harvested from the eponymous foggy outcrop at the edge of the island. With obvious allusions to selkie folktales, this garment, like that of the removed sealskin, allows Sil to stay on land. But unlike these stories, the garment is of the air, not the sea, and it can be replenished again and again by collecting more of the vaporous matter from Swirling Cleft. Furthermore, unlike her selkie counterparts, Sil chooses to stay on land to care for her stepdaughter, the call of motherhood more of an enticement than returning to her native element.

The use of garments and layers and the way they can help us acclimatise to new situations is also explored in 'Fishskin, Hareskin', which won the 2014 Costa Short Story Award. The protagonist Ervet is as much an outsider as many of the supernatural incomers in this collection, preferring the company of her tamed hares she affectionately calls 'mawkins'. But her marriage to a fisherman means she must leave them behind, for hares are a bad omen for seafarers. Suffering from postnatal depression, Ervet is unable to accept her new daughter until she sews a hare pelt around her child, surrounding her 'pink skin' with 'a new, soft-furred one.' The use of these various layers, and the magic or belief attributed to them, seem to be coping mechanisms for the characters: a means to protect or hide themselves and others from situations that are hostile or alien. In Ervet's case, the difficulty to adapt to motherhood and her rebellion against her mother-in-law – the archetypal good fishwife – speak of her reluctance to accept the role that has been assigned to her.

In fact, though Neverness is presented as a 'world far from our time and place', it is not so foreign as it first appears. Gilbert builds a varied and nuanced world, which though fantastical is nonetheless founded on a patriarchal template we can recognise as not dissimilar to our own. A place where women can be 'won' by suitors, where rape and domestic violence are the consequence for women free with their bodies or their speech, where, in the not so distant past, women who didn't conform were burnt as witches. But Gilbert also provides us with strong women who challenge the status quo; young girls refusing to be silent, exerting their influence covertly or openly in defiance, those following their dreams though their aspirations might be the prerogative of men. Gilbert's collection highlights the importance of folklore to consider and navigate societal concerns, especially in reference to our own times when we are witnessing fresh assaults on women's freedoms, prejudice against those who are different and fear of incomers. *Folk* is a timely and captivating read.

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