



A. Forestier's illustration for 'Pallinghurst Barrow' by Grant Allen,
The Illustrated London News, Christmas 1892.

The origin of the sprites: The Folklore Society's late-Victorian fairy science

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When the London Folklore Society (FLS) was founded in 1878, Victorian culture was flourishing with a fairy fascination, seeing swarms of sprites bounding through artwork, children's picture books and literature.¹ Against the backdrop of this elven enchantment, early FLS members forged the new science of folklore, mixing antiquarian enthusiasm with anthropology as inspired by Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871). This cultural archaeology, drawing upon collected folklore and printed folktales, attempted to reconstruct the origin of the fairies as primitive ancient beliefs or folk memories of ancient populations driven to the margins by civilising forces. Folklore, like the fairies themselves, lingered in culturally marginal rural areas and temporally ancient eras. These works evoked Gothic fears of ancient and primitive beliefs returning in contemporary Britain. Despite folklorists' attempts to rationalise the fay folk, they continually haunted the margins of this embryonic discipline, challenging materialist theoretical narratives. Academic folklorists repeatedly struggled to reconcile their historicised model of fairy-lore with contemporary fairy beliefs held by some occultists.

Alfred Nutt's *The Voyage of Bran* (1895-7) represented Irish fairy belief as a dark sacrificial fertility cult, still lingering as fragmentary folklore among the Gaelic population. David MacRitchie's *Testimony of Tradition* (1890) portrayed fairies as a global, yet ancient, mound-dwelling population who were diminutive and hirsute. Edwin Sidney Hartland's *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891), an analysis of folktales about fairies, proposed that primitive supernatural beliefs lay behind the origins of such stories. Despite attempts to rationalise these otherworldly beings, contemporary fairy beliefs and sightings continually resurfaced. Writers of the Celtic Dawn, such as William Butler Yeats in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) and Walter Evans-Wentz in *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911), claimed the fairies as a potent occult force in contemporary Celtic culture. Literature such as Grant Allen's ghost story 'Pallinghurst Barrow' gave voice to ancient terrors resurfacing in educated, middle-class Victorian Britain. Andrew Lang, the folklorist and psychical researcher, fiercely debated with the staunchly rationalist Edward Clodd over 'psycho-folklore', a disciplinary strand which aimed to conjoin folklore with psychical research. The fairies' occult nature continually encroached upon attempts to rationalise them. They manifested in abundance in dainty

colourful picture-book illustrations and even supernatural photography, creating an uncanny cyclical reoccurrence. Resurfacing upon the same controversial theoretical ground as folklore's late-Victorian fairy science, the Cottingley Fairies photographs challenged the boundary between materialism, Spiritualism and childhood imaginary play.

Fairies stalked the Victorian era, reoccurring in abundance and excess. As Tom Hillard, drawing on the work of Fred Botting, points out, 'the Gothic is at heart a literature of fear, of excess'.² The corpus of scholarship formed by the late-Victorian FLS is overrun and teeming with fairies. The anthropological theory of survivalism, which underpinned many attempts to historicise fairy-lore, can be viewed as a deeply uncanny theory of ancient beliefs resurfacing. The prevailing theory of knowledge that dominated FLS members' writings focussed on 'a science devoted to reconstructing the world view of prehistoric savages from the contemporary lore of peasants'.³ Tylor's work *Primitive Culture* proposed an evolutionary cultural model moving along a 'measured line', where humankind goes through developmental stages from 'savagery' to 'barbarism' to 'civilisation'.⁴ Lang described folklore in terms of cultural archaeology: '[t]he Science of Folklore, if we may call it a science, finds everywhere, close to the surface of civilised life, the remains of ideas as old as the stone elf-shots, older than the celt of bronze'.⁵ 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 the history of mankind'.⁶ The folkloric theme that fairies were continually in 'the process of vanishing', as Jason Josephson-Storm shows, complemented the theory of survivalism and also 'provided an embryonic version of the myth of disenchantment'.⁷ However, despite being framed as ancient, fossilised beliefs facing extinction, fairies persistently resurfaced in the academic spaces that were attempting to disenchant them. Fairies became 'That which Returns', which Julian Wolfreys discusses in relation to Victorian hauntings as 'manifestation or persistence of the past in the present, though never as a presence as such'.⁸ Folklorists tried to map out their historicised vision for fairy origins, yet contemporary fairies continued to manifest between the gaps in their folkloric scientific rationalism.

The pervading fairies represented a lack of control over nature, the primitive and savage, a resurgence of everything that Victorian imperial so-called civilisation tried to control. Simon Estok argues that '[u]npredictable and uncontrolled nonhuman agency is troubling. The ecophobic loathes the unpredictable. Ecophobia emanates from anxieties about control', especially the reclamation of civilisation by nature.⁹ Many educated folklorists feared the loss of carefully ordered civilisation to uncivilised and animistic fairy beliefs still ossified in folk practice. The landscape was haunted by the horror and fear of the unpredictable ancient fairy, which became conflated with nature itself. Emily and Percival Arland Ussher's 'Waterford Folk-Tales' describes a barren, rural landscape of 'purple desolation', 'consumption', 'empty stomachs' and 'insanity', where livelihoods are eked out of the ground.¹⁰ From their 'starved life of struggle with the stubborn soil', the population took 'refuge in imaginings of unseen

and supernatural beings.¹¹ Locals would attempt to relieve their sufferings by stealing from the small *Clutharacán* who carried a purse called a '*sparán na scillinge*'.¹² Estok explains how the 'sheer unpredictability' of the natural environment 'threatens to entrench', resulting in 'madness'. Nonetheless, industrialisation also appeared to be destroying the natural world.¹³ Fairies concurrently represented the idealised lost natural landscape. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas explains that fairies conjured up a 'nostalgia' as 'extinct creatures'; they were 'the victims of massive industrialism'.¹⁴ Fairies, as representatives of nature, sit at the cusp of tensions over controlling the natural environment in late 19th-century modernity. Folklorists' writings on fairies, and their interactions with supernatural fairy manifestations, reveal the fairy as an uncanny spectre, stalking the boundary between reality and the supernatural, the natural world and human-controlled industrial development.

Fairies at the Celtic Dawn

The publisher Alfred Nutt's fairy scholarship sits on the periphery of Irish cultural nationalist revivals, negotiated from his position at the centre of London's literary elite. *The Voyage of Bran* (1895-7) was a two-volume exploratory essay on the Celtic 'Happy Otherworld', the 'Doctrine of Re-birth' and contemporary Gaelic fairy-lore, accompanying Kuno Meyer's translation of the old Irish saga. In *Bran*, Nutt traces the origin of peasants' oral fairy-lore far back into history through medieval fairy romance into a proposed pre-Christian migratory religion. For Nutt, Ireland exemplified a unique case study, containing both 'ancient record' and 'modern folklore'.¹⁵ *Bran* employs a fashionable fertility cult theory, as also hypothesised most famously in James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890). Nutt proposed that the mythological *Tuatha De Danann* were developed from primitive vegetation spirits who provided fertility and were connected to agricultural festivals. Ecstatic sacrificial fertility rites were performed to 'strengthen the life of the vegetation' by 'infusing into it the vital energy of a specially selected victim'.¹⁶ In the final chapter of *Bran*, Nutt explores contemporary 'peasant lore' as the fragmented remnants of his ancient agricultural belief system.¹⁷ Peasants are presented as 'credulous and sceptical' and 'tenacious of old custom'.¹⁸ Nutt argued that the mythological characters, fairy spirits, smaller gods, and deities, the sources of fertility which he termed the Powers of Increase, 'change as they might', 'retained to the last the marks of their origin'.¹⁹ The 'older powers' the peasants cherished were the 'ruder prototypes' of their poetical mythological counterparts.²⁰ Among the Irish rural population, ancient rites, changed but a little, lived on beside newer Christian practices. Josephson-Storm, on Frazer's work, claims that while elite magic could be tolerated, among the masses magic could evoke Gothic terror, the 'slumbering kernel of savagery' and 'occult murders'.²¹ This fear also lies at the heart of Nutt's fairy thesis.

Nutt presented the ancient pagan festivals as deeply horrific, modified over time and made milder by Christianity. However, the peasant was continually at risk of regressing to these potent yet bloody rituals:

Much, on the other hand, in the older faith was in itself fierce, monstrous, obscene, though in using these words we must recollect that they convey to us a sense of reprobation which was totally lacking at the time. The bloody sacrifice, the frenzied and orgiastic spring and harvest festival, were expressions of religious fervour as were, to cite similar instances, the sacrifice to Moloch and the midnight worship of Dionysus. It is these intense and awful rites that are really potent, it is to them, when the milder agencies of Church or fairy prove of no avail, that the peasant has recourse.²²

Despite Christianity's censorship of the 'fierce and horrible' elements of these festivities, for Nutt the 'dominant conceptions' continued 'substantially unaltered'.²³ Nutt takes as an example the tradition of Áiné's hill near Loch Gur in Munster, where men would gather on St John's Night for a torchlit procession.²⁴ After this they ran through the cultivated fields and cattle to bring luck for the following year. Nutt asserted that only in 'Gaeldom' could such a close connection between fairies and the fertility deities be found and performed for 'countless ages'.²⁵ Likewise, tales of night-time fairy revels, where mortals were swept up into joyous dancing, were a legacy of the frenzied agricultural rites where participants passed into a 'wonder-land of ecstatic joy where time and space were not'.²⁶ For Nutt the dark pagan past still lingered in the background of late 19th-century Irish folk beliefs, continually at risk of recurrence.

The sacrificial agricultural rites described by Nutt appeared to readers as omnipresent in modern Irish farming communities, lying under the surface threatening to re-emerge. Nutt even suggested that the death of Bridget Cleary in 1895, who was murdered by her family as a fairy changeling, was a remnant of human sacrifice to these fertility deities.²⁷ When Bridget went missing, rumours circulated of her abduction by the fairies living in nearby Kylegranagh Hill.²⁸ Nutt emphasised how this 'potent' belief was connected to the 'antique conception of life and sacrifice', causing her cousins 'to slowly roast' her to death.²⁹ Furthermore, both Lang and Clodd wrote to *The Times*, making a paternalist case to mitigate Michael Cleary's guilt, owing to his genuine superstitious beliefs.³⁰ Lang argued that the crime was the result of 'invincible ignorance', and that 'pity' might be exercised to one 'already punished' by the discovery of 'his own horrible and all but incredible error'.³¹ It appeared to Nutt, and other folklorists, as if disturbing atavistic beliefs were waiting to well up, thus playing into English imperial sensibilities that the Irish, like other colonial subjects, were incapable of self-rule. Josephson-Storm notes that fairy belief was a 'lightning-rod issue' for Home Rule debates: 'Did the Irish really believe in fairies and magic? If so, did this disqualify them from self-governance?'³² Just beneath the cultural surface fairy-lore sat as a disturbing fragmentary legacy of paganism, waiting to resurface and overwhelm. Nutt's theoretical

conceptions pre-empt familiar features in folk horror plots as defined by Adam Scovell. Scovell asserts that 'Folk Horror treats the past as a paranoid, skewed trauma; a trauma reflecting on the everyday' and the 'recognisability of darker ages that are beginning to reoccur'.³³ He focuses on the concepts of landscape isolation and '[t]he halting of social progress', resulting in 'skewed belief systems and morality'.³⁴ Nutt's Irish fairy-lore sits on the Celtic fringe, in isolated rural settlements, lurking under a veneer of civilisation. His folkloristic notions of survivalism open up the possibility of 'That which Returns'.³⁵

William Butler Yeats's poem 'The Host of the Air', about a bride stolen by the fairies, mirrors beliefs surrounding the sad murder of Bridget Cleary.³⁶ For the writers of the Celtic Dawn, fairies became powerfully linked to concepts of Irish cultural nationalism. Carole Silver argues that, for Irish-Celtic revivalists such as Yeats, 'belief in fairies was a political and cultural necessity'.³⁷ This nationalist dialogue, at an extreme, could descend into a debate over who had the finest and most authentic fairies, the English or the Irish.³⁸ Fairy-lore, embraced by Irish nationalist folklorists such as Yeats as an emblem of the Celtic Dawn, might be perceived as a resistance to imperialist agendas or conversely, for some imperialist folklorists in London, a worrying resurgence of an uncivilised past. Whilst Yeats became connected to London folklore circles, his only contribution to *Folklore* was some 'memoranda' regarding the fairies in the region, added to the folklore collected by Bryan J. Jones in County Louth, which Clodd had passed onto him for comment.³⁹ Yeats replied confirming that he had also encountered similar folklore. In response to a tale where a man was taken 'with the gentry' at night to the Hill of Faughart, Yeats reports that he too was carried 'four miles in County Sligo'.⁴⁰ Yeats himself, the educated writer, had personally experienced being away with the fairies and thus confirmed the reality of folk belief. This is strengthened by a report of his Sligo relation, who had a black lamb placed into their flock as a warning by the fairies after a sacred bush was cut.⁴¹ Edward Hirsch argues that by narrating personal experiences from his own supernatural beliefs, Yeats 'takes responsibility for their truthfulness', exposing himself as a collector turned informer; a native performer.⁴² Fairy belief, as portrayed by Yeats, is not ossified fragmentary folklore, but a threatening and active occult force in Irish society.

For Yeats, the rural Irish countryside, with its belief in fairies, became a tonic to the modern industrialised, namely British, steam-powered world. In *Irish Fairy Tales*, Yeats emphasises that fairy belief is active amongst the Irish rural population, despite 'great engines and spinning-jinnies'.⁴³ He asks, 'Do you think the Irish peasant would be so full of poetry if he had not his fairies?'⁴⁴ Edward Said argues that Yeats was able to harness 'Ireland's backwardness as the source of its radically disturbing, destructive return to spiritual ideals that had been lost to an overdeveloped modern Europe'.⁴⁵ Yeats's pivotal work *Celtic Twilight* (1893) combined Irish folklore with his own personal visionary experiences.⁴⁶ In *Celtic Twilight*, Yeats stresses that he was 'at no pains to separate my own beliefs from those of the peasantry, but have rather let my men and women, dhoul and faeries, go their way unoffended or defended by any argument of mine'.⁴⁷ Yeats relates personal mystical

experiences, such as longing for a 'message' from beings 'who inhabit the world of spirits', eventually seeing two weasel-like dogs, one black and one white, 'two faery dogs', representing good and evil.⁴⁸ Yeats's fairies are powerful occult beings, an active part of Celtic culture, diametrically opposed to the benign domesticated English flower fairy. Indeed, in 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', the Irish fairy-folk are presented as fearsome, wild and natural. Amidst the 'rushing band' with 'Caolte tossing his burning hair', their 'breasts are heaving', 'arms are waving', 'eyes are a-gleam' and 'lips are apart'.⁴⁹ The *Sidhe* ride over the landscape unbounded, representing a loss of control. Castle argues that in Yeats the 'other-worldly is simultaneously *this-worldly*; and magic, far from being an eccentricity of the Celtic imagination, lay at the heart of Yeats's Revivalist project'.⁵⁰ Even the title *Celtic Twilight* underpins Yeats's vision. Twilight sits in a liminal space between light and dark. Like the fairies, it can express the peripheral nature of the Celtic, sitting under the gloom of an English oppression, waiting to emerge as the day breaks. For Yeats, fairies are not an object of decayed Irish culture, as studied by British anthropologists, but an active presence embedded in the Irish landscape. Yeats inverts fears regarding the Celtic supernatural held in volumes such as Nutt's *Bran* and employs them as a potent source of cultural revival.

Walter Evans-Wentz, who studied at Oxford under John Rhys and Andrew Lang, also considered fairies as an active supernatural component in contemporary Celtic culture.⁵¹ *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* was strongly influenced by, and dedicated to, Yeats, who brought Evans-Wentz the 'first message from fairyland'.⁵² Evans-Wentz travelled round Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany, Cornwall and the Isle of Man collecting fairy-lore. While employing established folkloric methodologies, Evans-Wentz concluded that the 'ordinary non-Celtic mind must readjust itself to a new set of phenomena' and stop treating fairies as 'fanciful', 'non-real' and 'absurd'.⁵³ He asserted that 'Fairyland exists' as a 'super-normal state of consciousness' and 'fairies exist' as intelligent forces recognised by psychical research.⁵⁴ Evans-Wentz strongly engaged with folkloric fairy scholarship. His chapter 'The Celtic Doctrine of Re-Birth and Otherworld Scientifically Examined' references Nutt's *Bran*.⁵⁵ He also analysed Lang's psychical research relating to fairies and the theory that fairies were an historical race.⁵⁶ *Fairy Faith* is a work of scholarship with an esoteric conclusion, challenging the often materialist conclusions of anthropological folklorists. This unsurprisingly attracted scholarly criticism. Hartland felt that Evans-Wentz's argument was only supported by the 'weak, hesitating, and tentative conclusions' of scientific men, who 'indulged' in psychical research.⁵⁷ Eleanor Hull felt another conclusion might have been more 'convincing'.⁵⁸ Her review quotes Douglas Hyde's contradictory introduction in *Fairy Faith*, noting that if the 'real objective existence' of the 'banshee' were admitted, then 'where are we to stop? for any number of beings, more or less well authenticated, come crowding on her heels'.⁵⁹ Evans-Wentz opened up the possibility of innumerable supernatural beings resurging through Celtic culture in crowding abundance. Evans-Wentz's *Fairy Faith* shifted the debate from a consideration of fairy origins into a scientific discussion of their objective reality.

Contemporary fairies continued to re-haunt folklore studies, an alternative voice countering theoretical attempts to situate fairies in an archaic past. Fairies of the Celtic Dawn created a sense of horror as they challenged from the margins, conjuring up an alternative voice beyond the supposedly ordered Victorian industrialised world.

Fairies as an ancient population

Grant Allen's chilling tale 'Pallinghurst Barrow' appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in 1892. Rudolph Reeve, a journalist, visits a country house and encounters terrifying, primordial, subterranean hill folk in the nearby barrow. The popular anthropological euhemerist theory that fairies were the remnants of an ancient race lingering in remote and liminal places is twisted into an eerie Gothic tale. Mixing scholarly theory with horror, Allen makes direct reference to David MacRitchie, who advocated that fairies originated as an ancient historic race.⁶⁰ Reeve also reads 'Childe Rowland' from Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales* (1890), a tale which Jacobs used to support MacRitchie's thesis.⁶¹ In 'Pallinghurst Barrow', similarly to more recent works of folk horror, 'era and temporality are linked by esoteric, inexplicable events; things that unnerve through a sheer recognisability of darker ages that are beginning to reoccur'.⁶² The fairy-like child Joyce recounts some gypsy-lore about Pallinghurst Barrow lighting up on St Michael's night to the room full of educated rationalist adults, including her disapproving mother.⁶³ Reeve, in a 'strange semi-mesmeric state', goes to the barrow and re-enacts the method of opening the hill from 'Childe Rowland', walking round the hill three times widdershins and declaring 'Open door!'⁶⁴ When Reeve enters the barrow, he is imminently 'aware that the age had gone back upon its steps ten thousand years'; he stood facing 'a remote antiquity'.⁶⁵ Gothic qualities of excess, exaggeration and wildness are conjoined to MacRitchie's rationalist theory of fairy origin.⁶⁶ Inside the barrow Reeve encounters 'a ghostly throng of naked and hideous savages'.⁶⁷ These beings are a 'unreal throng of angry and disappointed creatures', 'unearthly foes' with 'unknown tongue'.⁶⁸ The illustrations accompanying the story show Reeve in a smart evening suit being clawed at by the hoard of naked cave-dwellers, dragging him into the 'grim black hole'.⁶⁹ Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils also draw attention to the sense of claustrophobia and entrapment, as in a labyrinth, that the Gothic genre often employs.⁷⁰ The intensity of this tale is palpable, with the ancient race, now remembered as fairies, coming back to stalk the modern journalist.

David MacRitchie forged an all-encompassing thesis of fairy origins, claiming fairies were an ancient primitive population. His two main works on the topic, *Testimony of Tradition* (1890) and *Fians, Fairies, and Picts* (1893) are supported by dozens of periodical articles espousing the same theory. His work employs a blend of ethnology, etymology, history and folklore to construct his theory of an international ancient fairy race driven into liminal regions. MacRitchie's articles repeat his thesis in sheer abundance; each new pre-historic burial mound or barrow gives testimony to his theory. These archaeological remains

provided MacRitchie's theory with physical evidence for supposed earth houses, pinning fairy-lore to monuments in the landscape. This provided a tangible materiality to ancient fairy peoples. *Testimony of Tradition* contained sectional view diagrams of the chambered Maeshowe in Orkney.⁷¹ MacRitchie explained that, despite a thousand-year lapse, residents knew that Maeshowe 'was no ordinary grassy mound', but a habitation.⁷² *Fians, Fairies and Picts* is also replete with archaeological diagrams of these so-called mound dwellings. Furthermore, by tracing reports of various groups, such as Picts, Trows, and Feens, MacRitchie hoped to garner evidence of his wide-spread ancient fairy-race. Adam Grydehøj notes that MacRitchie used an 'etymological sleight of hand' and passing similarities, such as being hirsute, to conflate various legendary and historical groups together as part his fairy race.⁷³ Despite their precarious connections, at first glance MacRitchie's theories scientifically explained the supernatural, manifesting fairies as historical cavemen.

MacRitchie's theory of an historical race driven into marginal landscapes parallels the core motif of the fairies' flit, mentioned in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*.⁷⁴ Such fairies as last of their kind frequently emerged in children's literature. In Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, Puck explains '[u]nluckily the Hills are empty now, and all the People of the Hills are gone. I'm the only one left.'⁷⁵ Puck is unhappy about being confused with the 'paint-winged, wand-waving, sugar-and-shake-your-head set of imposters' from children's picture books.⁷⁶ Puck explains how the Old Things became diminutive: firstly they were gods, then they were People of the Hills, before finally leaving England.⁷⁷ Kipling's Puck, as a character, is deeply historically aware of English fairy-lore motifs and the declining fate of his kind, which at the turn of the 20th century was mainly consigned to the nursery. Likewise, the Psammead in E. Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (1905) is also the last of his race, recalling that 'as soon as a sand-fairy got wet it caught cold, and generally died. And so there got to be fewer and fewer.'⁷⁸ He relates a time when children ate pterodactyls.⁷⁹ Talairach-Vielmas argues that Nesbit provided 'an ecological discourse on extinction.'⁸⁰ The Psammead evokes 'mankind's ancestry', like MacRitchie's cave-dwelling fairies, edging into extinction.⁸¹ The Psammead's eyes were on long horns like a snail's eyes' and his 'tubby body was shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur' with 'hands and feet like a monkey's.'⁸² Like the humanoid creatures haunting Pallinghurst Barrow, the Psammead conjured notions of the evolutionary past of primitive mankind, which became supernaturalised.⁸³

Ironically, the theory that fairies represented an ancient population was carried into 20th-century Paganism and witchcraft via the controversial Egyptologist turned witchcraft historian, Margaret Murray. In *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), Murray argued that early modern European witchcraft trials represented the legacy of a Palaeolithic fertility cult, which was persecuted by Christianity. Fairies fit into Murray's witch-cult thesis as an aboriginal population, who were driven into marginal areas by invaders, but kept enough contact with the outside world to transmit their religion. Murray proposed that the cult survived for several centuries under a veneer of Christianity, and then later as folk festivals. Her ideas reflect

concepts of ancient fertility cults as advocated in Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890) and also Nutt's *Bran* (1895-7). Jacqueline Simpson recognised that Murray, like MacRitchie, glided through the supernatural evidence of witchcraft, devising 'a natural explanation, however implausible'.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Ronald Hutton shows how her thesis appealed to 'emotional impulses of the age', which considered the 'English countryside as a timeless place full of ancient secrets', with Christianity as a 'vener' covering the 'persistence of paganism'.⁸⁵ Murray's witch-cult appeared to be the manifestation of folkloric survivalist theory; beliefs and rituals from her putative ancient pagan fairy race had continued tenaciously into the modern era.

It was 'Murray's ironic fate', as Grydehøj notes, that her ideas were eventually incorporated into Gerald Gardner's Wiccan movement and disseminated to future generations of neo-pagans.⁸⁶ In 1954, with *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner outlined the supposed origins and practices of his ancient witch religion. Acting as the 'godmother of Wicca', Murray wrote an introduction for the volume, her expert status attaching credibility to the book.⁸⁷ Gardner's religion appeared to be a re-invocation of those ancient beliefs and practices, survivals that had been hiding for so long. Mirroring Murray, *Witchcraft Today* also included a chapter on the 'Little People' as a wider background, promoting the theory of fairies as an ancient race.⁸⁸ For Gardner this ancient race was human, but their witchcraft religion was a real supernatural force surviving into modernity. A materialist idea is completely subverted. Gardner in the 20th century was still practising the religion of the Little People, Britain's ancient fairy population. This Victorian theoretical idea has a long haunting echo. Gardner's work resummoned the theoretical past, confronting the disciplinary boundaries of folklore with the contemporary supernatural.

Science and the supernatural

Folklorists viewed fairy and folktales as stories originating in mankind's primitive past and examined them for evidence of ancient belief systems. These tales sat in a theoretical space straddling childhood entertainment and anthropological evidence. Edwin Sidney Hartland's volume *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891) modelled the new anthropological-comparativist approach to folktale, attempting to reconstruct ancient philosophy and find the origins of fairies. He compared various tales, tracing themes such as fairies' human midwives, changelings, the supernatural time-lapse in fairyland, and swan-maidens. By comparing fairy tales in this way, Hartland traced general traits and common themes of fairy-lore, hoping to expose facets of archaic thought, beliefs and practices encapsulated within the tales – a fairy mythology. The 'survivals' of fairy-tales which were 'unintelligible if regarded singly' could be better understood 'only by comparison with other survivals'.⁸⁹ Hartland argued that fairies have the same origin as ghosts and witches, all deriving from the same core of ancient beliefs, which over time became 'fragmentary' and 'differentiated'.⁹⁰ The volume reads as a series of abstracts in which similar narratives and motifs are connected together to forge a network of interconnected motifs. These stories are cyclical, as if one were reading

a similar narrative repeatedly, with slightly different contexts and minorly altered plots. *The Science of Fairy-Tales* notably resembles the methods and style employed by fellow folktale scholars, such as Edward Clodd in his *Tom Tit Tot* (1898) and John Rhys in *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* (1901). An eerie sense of déjà vu is produced whilst reading these repetitive comparative folktale texts, a sense of excess and abundance of tale. Wolfreys, discussing the tropes of haunting in Victorian literature, points to 'the configuration of universal recurrence, the sense that events leave their imprint on time only to recur' as a 'different manifestation'.⁹¹ Like literary ghosts, Hartland's stories, remnants of ancient beliefs, re-occur again and again throughout history, spanning wide geographical regions and in different configurations. Each story represents a spectre of ancient beliefs that continually haunts in new ways.

The folktale scholar Andrew Lang's *Coloured Fairy Books* (1889-1910), like Hartland's work, appeared to demonstrate 'the sameness of the stories everywhere', caused by 'the uniformity of human fancy in early societies'.⁹² Lang recognised the propensity of individuals in Victorian Britain to continue holding similar supernatural beliefs and experiences. As Josephson-Storm, who challenges the 'myth of disenchantment', points out, 'over the course of "modernity," many people continued to believe in the reality of spirits, moral forces, and demons'.⁹³ Lang, creating a vision for psycho-folklore, felt that the study of contemporary psychical occurrences would make a useful addition to the field of folklore. Psychical research attempted to render the supernatural verifiable within modernity by using scholarly methods, thus stretching the limits of scientific knowledge. Lang noted that so long as a 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.⁹⁴ Lang's method of psycho-folklore compared contemporary and historical manifestations of ghosts to provide 'a long-range view on ghost-lore, and appreciate its universal rather than temporal features'.⁹⁵ Through this method, Richard Dorson notes, Lang hoped to 'scientifically' 'distinguish the folklore tale from the factual phenomenon, the magician's tricks from the real event'.⁹⁶ Lang felt that the comparative methods, as used by Hartland, could be extended to consider contemporary supernatural accounts, the supernatural emerging repetitively in similar guises throughout different eras.

Lang's introduction to the 17th-century Scottish minister Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* (1893) exemplifies his comparative psycho-folklore method, demonstrating 'his desire for a scientific approach to the supernatural'.⁹⁷ In the section 'Fairies and Psychical Research', Lang focuses on the aspect of fairy belief 'concerned with Brownies and house-haunting Pixies', which he felt originated in ghostly activity and experiences.⁹⁸ He takes modern examples recorded by psychical researchers and compares them with historical cases. Lang felt that all supposedly supernatural phenomena, whether ancient or modern, deserved to be scientifically analysed for

possible explanations. Lang's comparative psycho-folklore mirrors folkloric methodologies applied by Clodd and Hartland to folktales. For instance, Clodd's *Tom Tit Tot* (1898) extensively traced the anthropological beliefs underlying the Rumpelstiltskin tale type by comparing narratives and beliefs containing similar motifs. The name-guessing motif in 'Tom Tit Tot' is considered the 'most archaic element' of the story, containing the idea 'that to know the name is to put its owner, whether he be deity, ghost, or mortal, in the power of another, involving risk of harm or destruction to the named'.⁹⁹ In Clodd's argument, the fear of being harmed through possession of a name is extended to material items such as nails, saliva, and hair. However, whilst Lang took contemporary supernatural phenomena potentially seriously, Clodd, as the FLS's chief rationalist, assumed that such accounts merely represent primitive beliefs.

Folklorists generally considered it imprudent to investigate psychical occurrences. Katherine Briggs, discussing the Cottingley Fairies with the investigator Joe Cooper, considered it 'unwise to delve too deeply into fairy expeditions and to concentrate more upon recorded folklore'.¹⁰⁰ Gillian Bennett argues that no one would 'tackle' supernatural folklore because it was 'disreputable'.¹⁰¹ Lang's attempts to incorporate psychical research into the FLS remit were unpopular. Clodd attacked Lang in his presidential address, stating that '[a]nalyse[d] under the dry light of anthropology, its psychism is seen to be only the "other self" of barbaric spiritual philosophy "writ large"'.¹⁰² For Clodd, psychical phenomena represented a modern-day eruption of 'savage' beliefs from a lower stage of culture. Lang, in a 'Protest' against Clodd's speech, isolated himself as the only member of the psycho-folklorist 'sect'.¹⁰³ He portrayed Clodd's opinion as one of distaste regarding the belief of the 'community of the living and the so-called dead', rather than a valid academic criticism.¹⁰⁴ Lang re-iterates that 'folklore and psychical research have much common ground'.¹⁰⁵ Clodd replied to Lang's 'Protest' arguing that the Society for Psychical Research's methods were 'pseudo-scientific'.¹⁰⁶ For Clodd, psychical research was 'a state of feeling', yet folklore was 'an order of thought'.¹⁰⁷ Bennett notes that Clodd, 'secure within the dominant tradition of disbelief', did not engage in 'serious discussion' about ghost 'twaddle'.¹⁰⁸ The arena of Clodd and Lang's debate involved the 'illicit "delving" into the unknown', engaging the 'greatest taboo, and the greatest silence'.¹⁰⁹ Lang's psycho-folklore was seen as a threat, not just to folklore as a burgeoning science, but to the wider materialist anthropological cause which was trying to dispense with 'primitive' supernatural beliefs. As Richard Sugg notes, 'fairy encounters wriggle in this unsettling way across the borders of folklore and reality'.¹¹⁰ For folklorists, the contemporary supernatural spectres continually resurfaced; the ancient past returned to re-haunt the present.

The materialist Tylorian theories that sought to historicise fairies were continually challenged by the contemporary presence of the supernatural fairy in modernity, as we have explored in the works of Yeats and Evans-Wenz. However, this was most notable in the Cottingley Fairies photographs, in which the imaginative world of childhood fairy play became intermingled with adult Theosophical beliefs. On a summer's afternoon in 1917,

armed with a 'Brownie' box camera, hat pins, and delicate tracings of fairy pictures from Alfred Noyes's poem 'A Spell for a Fairy', two girls were about to bring disruption upon the adult world with figments of their imaginary play. By the Christmas of 1920, the writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, of Sherlock Holmes fame, revealed these photos to *Strand Magazine* readers. Doyle announced that the images 'represent either the most elaborate and ingenious hoax' or an 'epoch-making' event.¹¹¹ In the wake of World War I, Doyle hoped that 'recognition of their existence will jolt the material twentieth-century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud, and will make it admit that there is a glamour and mystery to life.'¹¹² He anticipated that the Cottingley photographs would extend humankind's 'mental horizon' and prove that 'matter as we have known it is not really the limit of our universe'.¹¹³ Catherine Wynne argues that, while the fairies do not relate directly to Spiritualism, Doyle hoped that the Cottingley evidence of 'lower spirit forms' would provide a small opening to 'lend credence to a belief in the higher spirit world'.¹¹⁴ Spectrality, as Wolfreys argues, 'appears in a gap between the limits of two ontological categories', which can be 'between life and death, though neither alive nor dead'.¹¹⁵ These tiny bottom-of-the-garden miracles, garnered from a children's book iconography, were employed to challenge the materialist narrative of disenchantment, rendering the fairies as benign spectres of the imagination coming to re-haunt early 20th-century Britain.

By announcing a new epoch, *The Coming of Fairies* (1922) sought to invert and challenge the theme of the fairies' flit, confronting folklorists with the contemporary supernatural in a materialised form. The Cottingley fairy photographs, like Evans-Wentz's work, challenged folkloric conceptions that fairies were historic survivals heading for extinction. Like a haunting, the photographs also kept returning again and again in newspapers and magazines. Wolfreys argues that 'the promise of the gothic was – and still is – a promise of a certain return, a cyclical renaissance'.¹¹⁶ Indeed, even survivalist theories left open the opportunity for revival. However, the resultant response from folklorists was primarily silence. Stewart Sanderson, in his FLS presidential speech, felt that the case should have elicited 'a lively contemporary interest'.¹¹⁷ Yet creeping between the boundaries of reality and the supernatural, the fairies presented a challenge around the 'taboo' subject of supernatural belief: the same boundary that characterised Clodd and Lang's ferocious debate. Unsurprisingly, Clodd was the only FLS figure to discuss the Cottingley photographs during the 1920s. In *Occultism in Two Lectures*, Clodd attacked Doyle, noting that 'some of us think that 'Credulity' and 'Conan Doyle' are equations'.¹¹⁸ He asserted that the two-dimensional 'fairies have been copied from some illustrated book, cleverly cut out of thin cardboard'.¹¹⁹ Regarding Theosophical explanations for the fairy photographs, he remarked that the 'average person will find it difficult to extract any sane meaning from this balderdash composite of wind and fog'.¹²⁰ Clodd merely shuts the photographs down as a hoax without engaging in any discussion. A generation later, Katherine Briggs in *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* claims that 'any folklorist' would hold 'a very strong aesthetic resistance' to

these 'butterfly-winged, gauze-clad fairies of the children's magazine illustrations'.¹²¹ Whilst Briggs noted that the 'type of people' promoting the case were 'cranks' involved with Theosophy, she acknowledged that labelling them this way made dialogue problematic.¹²² The opportunity for dialogue or analysis of the photographs was greatly troubled by personal belief structures. The fairies sit on the highly controversial theoretical juncture between psychical research and the Tylorian model of survivalist folklore.

The gauzy fairies of Victorian pictorial culture had the whole hopes of an afterlife pinned upon them by Doyle. Bown claims that the case of the Cottingley photographs 'is a terribly sad story because it bears witness to the impossibility of return, and the hopelessness of longing'.¹²³ Fairies, while still holding some of their dark cachet, were transformed by picture books and became increasingly benign by 1920. Purkiss also agrees that the Cottingley Fairies represent the 'apotheosis' of the cute fairy and struck 'the last great blow against the fairy'.¹²⁴ These gauzy beings from the world of childhood picture books could no longer easily be conflated with the dark Gothic hordes of folkloric fairies and their underworld fraternity from Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* (1893). Walter Taylor Field, in 'A Plea for the Fairies', complained that 'a fairy that can be photographed is no fairy at all', finding its place amongst other small creatures as 'essentially commonplace'.¹²⁵ Nineteenth-century folklorists had attempted to shine the torch of knowledge upon Fairyland, denuding fairies of their traditional mystery and menace. The Cottingley photographs, likewise, had attempted to materialise the fairy as a virtually powerless psychical humanoid insect. Field felt that the 'charm of a fairy is that it is not real', that it was a 'delightful, irresponsible creature of the imagination'.¹²⁶ Bemoaning the 'fact-mongers', who had 'grown too wise to appreciate the miracle of nature', he suggested a role for fairies in re-enchantment, conjuring up a sense of divinity and awe in the natural world.¹²⁷

Sabina Magliocco points out how modern Pagan concepts of the fairy owe much to the benign fays of Victorian and Edwardian children's literature.¹²⁸ For many contemporary Pagans, fairies are now benevolent nature spirits, protecting the threatened natural world. She explains how even today fairies continually re-emerge and re-haunt, offering a potential counter for the 'loss of enchantment', especially in an era of environmental crisis.¹²⁹ Magliocco emphasises the fairy's peculiar cultural position, like cats, undomesticated, 'dwelling perpetually in a liminal state at the edge of human society, interacting intimately with humans yet belonging to a seemingly separate and at times unpredictable and potentially dangerous order'.¹³⁰ Fairies, as non-human others, provide an uncanny human-like face within nature. As Sugg suggests, 'they are very like you, and yet, not *quite* like you'.¹³¹ Fairies now, just as in the 19th century, give voice to human fantasies and fears as spectres of imaginary processes, haunting the humans who conjure them.

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