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# Introduction

A HOT OCTOBER NOON; black yew shadows; strong sunlight dappling the clay banks of a stream. Shooting by, something fast, there and gone, a bright vanishing flashes from shade to shade. I pause, pass on. A squirrel? A kingfisher? Surely nothing more exotic than the latter, for I am in the local park, thronged with people, bounded by traffic on either side. Yet just for a moment the thing in the hot shade, off that deserted back path, was more than animal and less than human. For half a second it was a nymph, felt rather than thought.

The fairies had got inside my head. Perhaps they were always there, buried deep in the caves of childhood, deeper still in the childhood of our species. But I had worked hard to get them to the surface, through weeks of listening to those who once believed in them – believed unshakably, and accordingly saw, felt, heard and suspected them everywhere, every day of their lives. It is my aim, here, to get you to see the world as they saw it. An aim, if we are to be fussily literal, which is of course impossible: it would involve amnesia, require robbing you of the ability to read and write, oblige me to take away your car keys and dissolve the solid streets around you into fairy hills and glades. Let us try, all the same. This is my dark and impious dream: to get fairies into your head, and to get you into the heads, behind the eyes, of people to whom fairies were terror and wonder, danger and glamour, and yet – unlike the angels and demons of educated Christianity – right *there*: romping and singing, fiddling and feasting in the turf which your nailed boots crushed day by day, on the glowing hearth where they warmed themselves as you slept.

## *Fairies*

Once, people really believed in fairies. By the close of Chapter Three you should be able to see why; and you should (I must warn you) then find that fairies never look the same to you again. But I take no offence if, at this point, you are unconvinced. Few beings of the supernatural world have suffered greater indignities than the fairy. Vampires and witches have been the victims of much distortion, and even ghosts rather belittled by their role in the jokey films of recent years. But fairies? Imagine that one day you are torn from the earth, scrubbed clean, hideously perfumed, shrunk down from four foot of sturdy muscle into a diaphanous five inches, showered in glitter and rainbow hues, and forced to wave a flimsy wand at small girls for the rest of your immortal life. Once, the fear of you moved people to murder, and scared some to death. Your pedigree stretched back to the edge of Time itself, and your powers ranged from the tiniest accidents of field and kitchen to the potential destruction of the world. Once, fairies were woven through the tree roots, bobbing on the tides and, on some enchanted island off the coast, living a life as intricate and complex as that of any human society. Let us meet them now, in two remarkable encounters.

‘It was in the year 1757, in a summer’s day, about noon, I, with three others, one of which was a sister of mine, and the other two were sisters.’ Thus wrote the Reverend Edward Williams, in a letter dated 24 March 1772. Aged seven on that earlier summer day, he was playing with the girls in a field called Kae-kaled in Bodvry parish, Denbighshire, Wales, ‘near the stile which is next Lanelwyd house’, when suddenly

we perceived a company of dancers, in the middle of the field, about seventy yards from us. We could not tell their numbers, because of the swiftness of their motions, which seemed to be after the manner of Morris-dancers (something uncommonly wild in their motions) but after looking some time we came to guess that their number might be about fifteen or sixteen. They were clothed in red like soldiers, with red handkerchiefs spotted with

yellow about their heads. They seemed to be a little bigger than we, but of a dwarfish appearance.

. . . Presently we saw one of them coming away from the company in a running pace; upon seeing this we began to be afraid and ran to the stile. Barbara Jones went over the stile first, next her sister, next to that my sister, and last of all myself: while I was creeping up the stile, my sister staying to help me, I looked back and saw him just by me; upon which I cried out, my sister also cried out, and took hold of me under her arm to draw me over; and when my feet had just come over, I still crying and looking back, we saw him reaching after me, leaning on the stile; but did not come over. Away we ran towards the house, called the people out, and went trembling towards the place; which might be about one hundred and fifty yards from the house: but though we came so soon to see, yet we could see nothing of them. He who came near us had a grim countenance, a wild and somewhat fierce look. He came towards us in a slow running pace, but with long steps for a little one. His complexion was copper-coloured, which might be significative of his disposition and condition; for they were not good, but therefore bad Spirits . . . and he looked rather old than young.

Twenty-five years later, all this was still very real to Williams: so much so that reading the encounter now is rather like being there in real time, gasping from the terror of pursuit, yet seeing in detail numbers and colours, and even the peculiarly uncanny motion of the approaching fairy man. In the earlier stages of my quest through fairyland I would have felt that Williams's account, written down by an educated author, was rather atypical. In fact, there are actually scores of similar reports from educated men and women, running on well into the present day.

A second meeting brings the witness up closer still. The mound known as the Gump, at St Just in Cornwall, was a 'reputed playground of the Small People' – here termed spriggans. Climbing up

there one night beneath a harvest moon, an old man in search of fairy treasure presently 'heard music of the most ravishing kind . . . and on more than one occasion he was compelled to dance in obedience to the timé.' Presently there was a great crash; the hill opened; myriad lights blazed. 'Out from the opening in the hill marched a host of spriggans,' followed by scores of musicians and soldiers,

each troop bearing aloft their banner . . . One thing was not at all to our friend's liking; several hundreds of the most grotesque of the spriggans placed themselves so as to enclose the spot on which he was standing. Yet, as they were none of them higher than his shoe-tic, he thought he could 'squash' them easily with his foot if they were up to any mischief.

Next, there 'came a crowd of servants bearing vessels of silver and . . . gold, goblets cut out of diamonds, rubies, and other precious stones . . . [and] laden . . . with the richest meats, pastry, preserves, and fruits.' The lights grew still more dazzling: 'out of the hill were crowding thousands upon thousands of lovely ladies and gentlemen, arrayed in the most costly attire.' The old man was nearly overpowered by the scent of flowers, and by voices 'united in one gush of song, which was clear as silver bells.' This singing was directed towards a newly approaching company: children in white, scattering flowers which blossomed where they fell; boys playing shells strung like harps, and 'line upon line of little men clothed in green and gold'. Finally, 'carried upon a platform above the heads of the men, came a young prince and princess who blazed with beauty and jewels, as if they were suns amidst a skyey host of stars . . . eventually the platform was placed upon a mound on the Gump, which was now transformed into a hillock of roses and lilies.'

With the feasting begun, the crafty old man thought he spied his chance. But, stealthily advancing on his belly, 'he never saw that thousands of spriggans had thrown little strings about him.' He was just about to clap his hat down over the royal table when his

hand was fixed powerless in the air, and everything became dark around him. Whirr! whirr! whirr! as if a flight of bees were passing him, buzzed in his ears. Every limb, from head to foot, was as if stuck full of pins and pinched with tweezers . . . he felt as if a number of insects were running over him, and by the light of the moon he saw standing on his nose one of the spriggans, who looked exceedingly like a small dragon-fly.

Stamping and jumping, the spriggan 'shouted, "Away, away, I smell the day!" . . . At length the sun arose, and then he found that he had been tied to the ground by myriads of gossamer webs, which were now covered with dew, and glistened like diamonds in the sunshine.'

Just what do we make of this? In many ways – and especially by contrast with Williams's encounter – we seem now to be deep inside the realms of folklore. We have no date or name for the old man. While we certainly have a lot of detail, much of this can be accounted for by the probability that this tale was told and retold by numerous semi-professional storytellers: people who were deliberately seeking to amaze and beguile their fireside audiences. At the same time, this is not quite a purely disconnected wonderland. Notice, for example, how the pins and needles, paralysis and speech loss look remarkably like the symptoms of a minor stroke.

What did it feel like to hear this tale, to visualize it, perhaps as a child, in Cornwall two hundred years ago? Let us assume that the listeners were ordinary country people. Most of their lives were taken up with survival. Save on the very rare occasions when they travelled to a market town or rural fair, the brightest colours and most dazzling textures they saw were those of flowers, berries, grass, wings and sky. They could not read and had no coloured pictures of any kind. But if they could believe in what we have just read, they had a kind of riches now lost to us. If glamour is relative to your own material limits and poverty, then this was high glamour indeed.

And the fairies certainly had glamour. Indeed, they might be said to have patented it, if not invented it – for the word means

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magic, enchantment, a spell (and was once used verbally, in much the same way as 'enchant'). So recurrent and so potent is this darkling shimmer of fairyland, from Orkney and west to Aran, through Wales and southwest England, that at times it seems to give the fairies a status which fuses the capricious powers of Greek gods with the erotic charge of modern celebrity. They are like us, but hopelessly unlike us. They may look human, but . . .

In journeying from the fairy worlds of Homer and the fallen angels of the Old Testament we will see just how powerful this glamour was, and how much it has been reduced in the past two centuries. This journey takes us from a world in which it was dangerous not to believe in fairies, into one where it was fun, sometimes even enchanting, to *try* and believe in fairies. But there is also another way of viewing this changing arc of belief. Probably the biggest and sharpest contrast involved in our story is this: once, it was dangerous not to believe in fairies. Later, it became dangerous to believe in fairies. The first was a supernatural peril, the second a social one. In the time of Shakespeare or Milton an educated person might well believe in fairies, and had far less mockery to fear if they said so. Through the nineteenth century the fairies became more and more the stuff of fancy, whimsy and childhood. And at some point in the twentieth we entered the attitude which predominates as I write. To actually believe in fairies is now the nadir of childish irrationality – significantly more absurd than to believe in ghosts or alien abductors, and perhaps (in an unadmitted but interesting way) more ridiculous than belief in vampires or witches, these other entities having at least a certain dark weight of supernatural gravity about them.

Without much thinking about it, we take it for granted that, in a kind of hierarchy of the irrational, fairies are the very lowest, most embarrassing level of all. If atheists or agnostics might at least bother to argue with Christians or Muslims or Jews about religion, they would probably only smile condescendingly at someone trying to draw them into a debate about fairies. Religion is for grown-ups; fairies are for children. Once we start to think about it, this

hierarchy of the irrational becomes interesting in several ways. Do fairies have this lowly position because of the way they were remade into harmless, prettily feminine butterflies? Do they sit more or less outside rational debate just because all their millions of followers never had the chance to make a literate, educated case for them between the covers of books?

One Monday in 2009, the Irish story collector Eddie Lenihan was berated by a passing woman for broadcasting his beliefs about fairies, and thereby perpetuating stereotypes of the Irish as mystically backward or irrational. Lenihan's response was to gesture at the nearby cathedral and assert that everyone believed in God, although no one had ever seen him. Although Lenihan himself believes in fairies and in God (and argued to the woman that these were part of an interdependent unity), his response is intriguing if thrown into atheistical territory. Where – the atheist asks – is the empirical, physical evidence for God or Christianity? Very few people claim to see God or even Christ. But a startling number of people do claim to have seen fairies. I do not have any great hope of persuading Richard Dawkins to supplement his anti-religious activities with an impishly spirited campaign on behalf of oppressed fairy believers. But the point stands. If it is evidence you want, the fairy believers have much more than the Christians.

I quite understand if, on hearing this, you are scowling and swearing softly to yourself. It took me quite a long time to unearth some of the more arresting fairy sightings given in the following pages. And, quite frankly, I still do not know what to make of them. I will say just two more things on the subject before moving on. First: just as when I was researching vampires, discussion of fairies often prompts the plain question: are they real? Do they exist? If to some this question may seem naive, I for one find it useful and refreshing. I like real things. And I like people who are not too airily detached from the physical world to ask such questions. (The question 'are ghosts real?' is after all vastly more important than academic meanderings about the cultural meanings of ghost beliefs.) So

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I think that such people deserve at very least an engagement with this question. Are fairies real? I would agree with the scholar Simon Young that if they are, it is hard to see why they should mean such very different things, and often look so very different, to a Celtic farmer of 1850 and a vegan ecologist of 2017. These differences do indeed look like the products of cultural change, moulding and remaking something which does not actually exist. But as you will soon see for yourself, a good number of recent sightings do not match the kind of stereotypes you might expect. In a small but significant batch of reports, the observers do not believe in fairies, and do not expect or want to see them. And in these cases it is hard not to feel that they really did see something.

Let us first turn, however, to the fairies of traditional belief. Where had these beings come from? Where did they live? And just what sort of creatures – physically, temperamentally, theologically – were they?