The Cottingley Photographs: Fairies at the Bottom of the Garden

‘There are fairies at the bottom of our garden!

It's not so very, very far away;

You pass the gardener's shed and you just keep straight ahead --

I do so hope they've really come to stay.

There's a little wood, with moss in it and beetles,

And a little stream that quietly runs through;

You wouldn't think they'd dare to come merrymaking there—

Well, they do.’

(Rose Fyleman, ‘There are Fairies at the Bottom of Our Garden’, (1917).

On a summer’s afternoon in 1917 at the bottom of a Yorkshire Garden, two young girls, Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright, were about to capture some of the most famous photographs of the 20th century. These images, claiming to have captured real fairies, were spread around the globe when Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes novels and practising spiritualist, published them in the 1920 Christmas edition of *Strand* magazine. The photographs became part of a century long furore, with claim and counter claim over the veracity of the images. Much ink has been spilled over this controversy, which has not diminished with time.

However, the Cottingley images fit very easily into the cultural motif of children playing at the bottom of the garden, or just beyond the hedge boundary, with fairies. It is a regular theme in children’s books of the era. In Rudyard Kiplings’s *Puck of Pooks Hill* (1906)and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910)*,* Una and Dan play with Puck, the last fairy in England, who lives in an ancient barrow at the bottom of their garden. There is also E. S. Nesbit’s *Five Children and It* (1902)*,* where a sand fairy grants the five siblings wishes and they have many magical adventures. Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911)*,* where orphan Mary Lennox opens up a forbidden garden in her uncle’s isolated mansion, is abound with references to magic and sprites. Even Cottingley’s own Elsie and Frances took their cardboard cut-out fairies from a poem, illustrated by Alfred Noyes, in the *Princess Mary Gift Book* (1914)*.* In this poem, “A Spell for a Fairy”, the themes of children, fairies, nature and gardens become intrinsically intermixed. The space at the bottom of the garden becomes a motif for wild, escapist fantasy. It is a landscape where children can run wild, just outside the dominion of their parents’ authority. It is a liminal space where children can play tricks on adults and encounter beings which invert the rules of normal time and space.

Prior to the Cottingley photographs fairies had also been a fascination for Victorian adults and a topic of serious academic pursuit. Folklorist Edwin Sidney Hartland’s *The Science of Fairy Tales* (1891) explores fairy mythology, claiming it had deep significance for understanding the cultural evolution of mankind. Similarly, Oxford Professor John Rhys wrote the two volume *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* (1901), exploring fairy-lore. For this he travelled around the Welsh countryside asking peasants if they believed in the fay folk. Civil servant and folklorist George Laurence Gomme in *Ethnology of Folklore* (1892) had even suggested that fairy-lore was the memory of Britain’s ancient aboriginal races clashing with invaders. For him fairy-lore could open-up understanding into unrecorded ancient history. Some Victorians took their fairies extremely seriously!

However, after WW1 we see a cultural shift in the position of the fairy, with the children’s miniature flower fairy taking over as the dominant cultural concept of the fairy figure. Fairies moved away from the dark folkloric creatures and became small butterfly winged creatures adorning domesticated garden flowers. Indeed, the Cottingley photographs, by tapping into such strong cultural themes, helped to shift the image of the fairy away from folklore. The Folk-Lore Society in London put up a notable wall of silence on the Cottingley photographs. Furthermore, the images looked so palpably fake they became objects of derision and due to the scale of the controversy fairies became less attractive to serious academics. Nevertheless, the transformation of miniature flower fairy became complete with the illustrations of Cicely Mary Barker and her *Flower Fairies of the Spring* (1923).

A moment at the bottom of a Yorkshire garden marks a watershed in the history of the fairy. For the Victorians, fairies represented a morbid fascination; they spoke of ancient beliefs, escape from encroaching scientific doubt, of industrialisation and fears of lost spirituality. As the horror of WW1 dawned and the sheer human carnage made man appear as a beast, so our ‘others’, the fairies seemed whimsical or sadly nostalgic in the face of such troubles. In this process fairies were forgotten, literally; sent out to play in the garden with the children.