**Late-Victorian Folklore Studies and Fairy-Lore**

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In the 16th and 17th centuries fairies were seen as potentially demonic entities, appearing in multiple witchcraft trials, not the small butterfly-like creatures encountered by children today. In folkloric accounts studied by the Folk-lore Society, the threat fairies pose is still very palpable with stories of them stealing children, making cattle sick and terrifying late-night travellers. In 1895 Bridget Cleary, of Clonmel in Ireland, was murdered by her husband, accused of being a fairy changeling. However, during the late-nineteenth century the fairy was becoming increasingly infantilised and divorced from adult concerns, especially with the rising popularity of coloured picture books. In 1870 Richard Doyle’s *In Fairyland* (1870)was “a masterpiece of Victorian book production” with its “innovative colour printing process”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Christopher Wood highlights that *In Fairyland* was a turning point of the late Victorian tendency to reduce fairyland to “something delightful and harmless, and suitable for children.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Members of the Folklore Society also produced fairy tale collections for children, including Andrew Lang’s *Coloured Fairy Book Series* and Joseph Jacobs’. (With sample illustrations dotted around this presentation). By the 1920s when Cicely Mary Barker published her famous *Flower Fairies Series* dominant public image of the small blossom being was firmly established. The public perception of fairies during this era became increasingly complicated.

Due to the massive influence fairies had on Victorian Society, it is unsurprising that the Folklore Society, with its interest in customs and superstitions, devoted a substantial amount of attention to fairy scholarship. The FLS formed in 1878 from the rising periodical press aiming to make antiquarian studies into a serious science. The early Society had a healthy list of elite educated members, including respected writers, scholars and professionals, who were chiefly based around the London metropolis.[[3]](#footnote-3) In his 1893 presidential address George Laurence Gomme noted folklorists were “no longer considered to be harmless lunatics prettily chatting to each other about fairies, Mother Hubbard, and Little Riding Hood”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Fairies, although supernatural and thought of as imaginary, were to be scientifically studied and rationalised.

The FLS predominantly focussed on “a science devoted to reconstructing the world view of prehistoric savages from the contemporary lore of peasants.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor’s work *Primitive Culture* (1871) acted to crystallise cultural evolution into a disciplinary model for anthropological folklore, proposing “a unilinear evolutionary model of culture” where humankind goes through developmental stages from “savagery”, “barbarism” to “civilisation”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet each culture held fragmentary evidence or survivals of the prior stage in culture, through which it had passed. Lang defined: “The 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”.[[7]](#footnote-7) Just as fossils could be embedded in the soil, so “cultural fossils” could be found in the “cultural landscape” and could theoretically be compared to help “reconstruct the history of mankind.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Survivals of these ancient beliefs and culture endured in small, isolated, rural populations unspoiled by industrialisation. They were also represented in supposedly primitive native cultures. Tylorian survivalism complimented imperialist expansion as well as an antiquarian fascination for the countryside. Gillian Bennett argues that it is “perhaps an exaggeration to say that cultural evolution was the rural myth made into a theory of culture- but it is not much of an exaggeration.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Cultural evolution “justified and to some extent institutionalised” the sentimental image of rural Merrie England.[[10]](#footnote-10) This potent mix forged the late-Victorian fairy science, where fairy-lore was understood as decayed cultural memories of primitive beliefs or memories of forgotten primitive peoples.

Edwin Sidney Hartland helped to establish and model a methodology for this comparative science of fairy-lore. Born in 1848, Hartland was a solicitor by profession, and therefore an evening scholar.[[11]](#footnote-11) His *Science of Fairy Tales* (1891) compared various folk-tales tracing themes such as fairies’ human midwives, changelings, supernatural time-lapse in fairyland and swan-maidens. Hartland’s methodology involved taking a tale type and comparing it with other narratives displaying similar motifs. He provides little commentary letting the abbreviated tales placed one after another build the argument via exemplification. For instance in the theme of the fairy human midwife tale, in which a magic ointment is used to reveal the glamour of fairy-land, Hartland traces the theme of seeing what one ought not. His text eventually takes a large diversion to discuss Peeping Tom looking at the naked Lady Godiva in Coventry. The book’s premise was that the ‘fairy world is a survival of savage imagination, and the science of fairy tales consists in tracing these survivals.’[[12]](#footnote-12) The ‘survivals’ of fairy-tales which were ‘unintelligible if regarded singly’ could be better understood ‘only by comparison with other survivals’.[[13]](#footnote-13) By comparing fairy-tales and tracing and common themes Hartland hoped to expose facets of archaic thought, beliefs and practices encapsulated within the tales.

One review complained that ‘the greater part of the book is taken up with the tales themselves’, and was ‘disappointed’ by the limited explanations.[[14]](#footnote-14) The conclusions of Hartland’s comparative method were ‘restrained’ and generalised.[[15]](#footnote-15) Hartland also acknowledged that the science was new and that conclusions ‘can at present be stated only tentatively and with caution’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Nevertheless, Hartland asserts that despite very different geographical locations that upon ‘close examination’ many tale features were ‘absolutely identical’.[[17]](#footnote-17)He outlined three doctrines of the savage thought from which fairies, and all supernatural beings, shared a legacy.[[18]](#footnote-18) The ‘doctrine of Spirits’, the belief the spirits quit the body and roam in different shapes eventually returning to the body.[[19]](#footnote-19) The ‘doctrine of Transformation’ expresses belief in the ability to change form while maintaining the same identity. Thirdly, the belief in witchcraft’s ability to cause transformations.[[20]](#footnote-20) The strange features in folk-tales were merely remnants of savage thought, and by comparing them, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, their original meaning could be reconstructed. Rationalist Edward Clodd in *Tom Tit Tot* (1898) also used this comparative methodology to seek the ‘savage philosophy’ lying behind the Rumpelstiltskin tale type.

David MacRitchie was the FLS’ chief champion of historical race theory proposing that an actual primitive race, of short and hairy people who dwelt in mounds, lay behind fairy-lore. Euhemerist or Historical race theories claimed to demystify fantastical accounts of fairy-lore by providing a seemingly rational and scientific explanation. MacRitchie argued that whilst one cannot accept all folklore statements ‘literally’ they concealed a ‘germ of truth’.[[21]](#footnote-21) He felt that by applying euhemerist techniques to apparently incredible elements, it was possible to find ‘a reasonable and plausible explanation’, ‘reducing apparent nonsense to actual sense.’[[22]](#footnote-22) His two main works on the topic are *Testimony of Tradition* (1890) and *Fairies, Fian’s and Picts* (1893), supported by dozens of periodical articles all espousing the same theory.[[23]](#footnote-23)

MacRitchie’s work employs an unusual blend of ethnology, etymology, archaeology, history and folklore to construct his theory. He used these various methods to create a historical sleight of hand, reading multiple, mythical, legendary, historical and racial groups all as part of his global vision for the one fairy race. One reviewer for *Science* criticised MacRitchie’s connections exclaiming that Eskimos, Lapps and Finns being part of the same race was ‘a surprising piece of information, which can scarcely also be ‘assumed.’’[[24]](#footnote-24) MacRitchie proposed his fairy race over time became increasingly marginalised or integrated with other populations. He argued that the ‘present British people show traces of such a line of ancestry’.[[25]](#footnote-25) He also finds evidence of the fairy race all around the globe describing the Ainos of Japan as perhaps even the ‘purest living descendants of this once-mighty array of tribes.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Adam Grydehøj argues that MacRitichie’s work ‘becomes a vast re-evaluation of European and Asian history’, which traces ‘the circumpolar history of his hairy, diminutive originators of fairy belief all the way to Japan’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This provided fairies with a physicality which undercut all the supernatural attributes.

In *Science* Hartland attacked the central core of MacRitchie’s theory noting that it was ‘founded on too narrow an induction.’[[28]](#footnote-28) He argued that no theory could find the origin of fairy belief without also explaining the origin of other supernatural creatures also.[[29]](#footnote-29)Grydehøj argues Hartland’s opposition ‘is so damning because it shows the shallowness of MacRitchie’s universalism’.[[30]](#footnote-30) MacRitchie stated much opposition was due to his critics’ fundamental belief that fairies ‘were purely imaginary’, it was ‘scarcely contemplated’ that they were essentially true.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Archaeological remains provided MacRitchie with physical evidence of his fairy race, most concretely in the form of earth houses, such as the chambered Maeshowe in Orkney. MacRitchie explained that ‘the descendants of those who had seen its inmate or inmates, knew, in spite of the lapse of a thousand years, that this was no ordinary grassy mound’, but a habitation.[[32]](#footnote-32) *Testimony* also contained sectional view diagrams of Maeshowe.[[33]](#footnote-33) *Fians, Fairies and Picts* had a stronger archaeological focus on the dwarf race as ‘alleged builders and occupiers of those very archaic and peculiar structures’[[34]](#footnote-34) with many site diagrams. This was perhaps an attempt to base his theory in more concrete evidence after criticism of his ethnological and etymological arguments. Carole Silver notes the remains gave ‘MacRitchie’s new euhemerism a force beyond the theoretical’. [[35]](#footnote-35) Nevertheless, as archaeological methods progressed MacRitchie’s theory about underground houses became increasingly untenable.

However, the active component in fairy-lore, such as contemporary sightings, represented a challenge for folklorists who preferred to examine historical material or accounts categorised as peasant superstition. Andrew Lang’s discussions challenged the boundary between survivals and contemporary supernatural phenomena, folklore and psychical research. The frequency of psychical phenomena ‘in all known conditions of culture’ and ‘through all history’, led Lang to propose that it deserved folkloric investigation.[[36]](#footnote-36) His methodology of Psycho-Folklore was modelled in the scholarly introduction to Kirk’s *Secret* *Commonwealth* (1893).[[37]](#footnote-37) He compared folklore and psychical phenomena to shine a light upon household fairies and poltergeists. Likewise, the central theme of *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (1894) is that ‘Common-Sense’ cannot adequately account for phenomena’ such as the ghostly occurrences at Cock Lane in the mid-1700s.[[38]](#footnote-38) Lang again proposed ‘expanding the field of folklore’ to include contemporary supernatural phenomena.[[39]](#footnote-39) He regretted the distain with which FLS members held psychical research. However, Edward Clodd in his 1895 FLS presidential address attacked the Society for Psychical Research, of whom Lang was a member, noting that ‘[a]nalysed under the dry light of anthropology, its psychism is seen to be only the ‘other self’ of barbaric spiritual philosophy ‘writ large.’’[[40]](#footnote-40) He stated that psychical phenomena represented an ‘order of superstitions, towards which, lacking the justification of the older, and having no quality of nobility about them, the attitude of the folklorist is, so it seems to me, wholly different’.[[41]](#footnote-41) For Clodd psychical phenomena represented a modern day eruption of the ‘savage’ practices and beliefs from a lower stage of culture.

Lang replied in ‘Protest’ to Clodd’s speech portraying Clodd's opinion as one of distaste regarding the belief of ‘*community of the living and the so-called dead',* rather than a valid academic criticism.[[42]](#footnote-42) Lang used the opportunity to re-iterate that ‘folklore and psychical research have much common ground’.[[43]](#footnote-43) He highlights that so long as beliefs ‘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.[[44]](#footnote-44) Lang thinks that folklore as a discipline was poorer for not using psychical materials.[[45]](#footnote-45) Miss X (Ada Goodrich Freer)[[46]](#footnote-46) a member of both the FLS and SPR, writing in *Borderland* found it a ‘matter of regret’ that Clodd had ‘inaugurated his presidency’ by attacking the SPR.[[47]](#footnote-47) Gillian Bennett notes the arena of Clodd and Lang’s debate, the ‘illicit ‘delving’ into the unknown’, engaged the ‘greatest taboo, and the greatest silence’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Likewise, Richard Sugg notes ‘fairy encounters wriggle in this unsettling way across the borders of folklore and reality.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Survivalist methodologies did not have a suitable way to justify contemporary phenomena, except to ignore them as delusions or hoaxes. They also threatened to damage the academic reputation of the FLS.

The famous Cottingley photographs sat upon this juncture of tense debates. On a summer’s afternoon in 1917 armed with a box brownie camera, hat pins and delicate tracings of fairy pictures from Alfred Noyes’ poem ‘A spell for a Fairy’, Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright were about to change the cultural fate of fairies.[[50]](#footnote-50) When Elsie’s mother attended a Theosophical Society lecture on nature spirits in Bradford the photographs caught the attention of E.L. Gardner.[[51]](#footnote-51) Coincidentally, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was writing an article on fairies for the 1920 Christmas *Strand Magazine* and featured the images.[[52]](#footnote-52) During the summer of 1920 the girls were encouraged to provide further pictures and Gardner was sent to Cottingley to investigate.[[53]](#footnote-53) Doyle published all of his findings, presented as an investigation, in *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). These photographs presented children’s picture book fairies, as real benign nature spirits. They certainly did not resemble more folkloric model of fairies.

The FLS all but ignored the Cottingley case despite its public profile and obvious interest in the subject matter. Stewart Sanderson’s 1973 FLS presidential speech asked ‘if ever there was a subject in which one might have expected two generations of folklorists to show a lively contemporary interest, this surely is it.’[[54]](#footnote-54) This unusual silence represents the conflictory space the Cottingley images represented within the public domain during the 1920s. It also represents the increased silencing of the fairy itself, from a figure of folkloric interest, into a childish nursery puppet. Any serious academic consideration of the Cottingley photographs was likely to cause embarrassment for the FLS, who were continually trying to model themselves as serious scholars despite their supernatural subject matter. The sensationalist media headlines mercilessly mocked the case. ‘Conan Doyle in Fairyland’ read *The New York Times.[[55]](#footnote-55)* *The New York Tribune* likened the fairies to ‘Toyshop Flappers’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Katherine Briggs noted a ‘very strong aesthetic resistance’ to the ‘very model of the butterfly-winged, gauze-clad fairies of the children’s magazine illustrations’.[[57]](#footnote-57) The images themselves have an unbelievable 2D quality to them. The contemporary Cottingley case did not sit comfortably within the FLS’ largely survivalist theoretical model. Their theosophical and spiritualist associations were controversial within the FLS. Edward Clodd, after briefly discussing Cottingley, referred to spiritualists as ‘cranks’.[[58]](#footnote-58) The benign child-like fairies were unrecognisable and uninteresting to FLS members.

Lewis Spence in 1946 noted fairies’ origins had “become the philosopher’s stone of traditional science.”[[59]](#footnote-59) However, this was also something, being intangible, which was nearly impossible to trace. Many threads of argument had simply run their course by the 1920s with little decisive conclusion, and failed to capture the interest they once had. The FLS was damaged by the loss of key Victorian members as they slowly got older and passed away. The tiny nursery flower fairy was firmly established by the 1920s ending the adult Victorian fairy fascination. Folkloric fairies failed to capture the interest they once had in scholarly circles. Nevertheless, during the late-nineteenth century British folklorists produced pioneering works, had energetic debates and employed highly experimental methodologies and reached debatable conclusions in attempt to explain fairy-lore scientifically. It is an eclipsed chapter of British intellectual history that deserves more attention.

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13. E. S. Hartland, *The Science of Fairy Tales: an Inquiry into Fairy Mythology* (London, 1891), p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Review: The Science of Fairy Tales by E.S. Hartland’, *Science* 17 (1891), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. L. Spence, *British Fairy Origins* (London, 1946), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hartland, *Science of Fairy Tales,* p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hartland, *Science of Fairy Tales,* p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hartland, *Science of Fairy Tales,* p. 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Hartland, *Science of Fairy Tales,* p. 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hartland, *Science of Fairy Tales,* p. 334-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. D. MacRitchie, ‘The Historical Aspect of Folk-Lore’ in A. Nutt and J. Jacobs (eds.), *International Folklore Congress 1891: Papers and Transactions* (London, 1892), p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. MacRitchie, ‘Historical Aspect of Folk-Lore’, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. D. MacRitchie, *Fians, Fairies and Picts* (London, 1893); D. MacRitchie, *The Testimony of Tradition* (London, 1890); D. MacRitchie, *The Underground Life* (Edinburgh, 1892); D. MacRitchie, ‘British Dwarfs’, *The Archaeological Review* 4 (1889), 184-207; D. MacRitchie, ‘The Finn-Men of Britain 1.’, *Archaeological Review* 4 (1889), 1-26; D. MacRitchie, ‘The Finn-Men of Britain 2.’, *Archaeological Review* 4 (1889), 107-129; D. MacRitchie, ‘Earth-Houses and their Inhabitants’, *The Archaeological Review* 4 (1890), 392-421; D. MacRitchie, ‘The Fairy Folk’, *The Academy,* 22nd Jul. 1893, 74-5; D. MacRitchie, ‘The Northern Trolls’ in H.W. Bassett, and F. Starr, (eds.) *The International Folk-Lore Congress of the World’s Columbian Exposition 1893* *Vol.1* (Chicago, 1898), pp. 42-55; D. MacRitchie, ‘Fairy Mounds’, *The Antiquary,* Mar. 1900, 70-4; D. MacRitchie, ‘Memories of the Picts’, *The Scottish Antiquary* 14 (1900), 121-39; D. MacRitchie, ‘Modern Views of the Picts’, *The Monthly Review,* Jan. 1901, 131-48; D. MacRitchie, ‘A New Solution of the Fairy Problem’, *The Celtic Review* 6 (1909), 160-76; [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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