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**Sprites, Spiritualists and Sleuths: the Intersecting Ownership of Transcendent Proofs in the Cottingley Fairy Fraud.**

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**Abstract**

‘Fairies Photographed: An Epoch Making Event’, headlined the 1920 Christmas Strand Magazine. Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of famous sleuth Sherlock Holmes, revealed the infamous Cottingley fairy photographs to the world. This paper explores the backdrop of intersecting meanings overlaid upon this case. After WW1 many sought solace in Spiritualist and Theosophical movements following the death of soldiers. Doyle also championed this cause, his eminence supporting many mediums, spiritual photographers and the congruent Cottingley affair, as proof of otherworldly occurrences. This paper examines the polarisation between the rational sleuth Holmes and Doyle’s incredulous beliefs which were played out in the popular press. An investigative mode dominates Cottingley literature, setting up further polarisation and conflict. In addition, competing meanings attributed to the images, from the girls’ play fantasy to supporting evidence for adults’ Theosophical and Spiritual faith are examined. These created tension and conflict at the boundaries of public discussion in turn affecting the public reception of the infamous photographs.

**Introduction**

This paper compliments a chapter in my thesis exploring the silence the Folklore Society held on the Cottingley Fairies. President of the FLS Stewart Sanderson in 1973 noted ‘Yet 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. What, one wonders, were they thinking about?’[[1]](#footnote-1) Why was such a widely publicised event ignored and how does this represent the FLS’ treatment of fairies in the aftermath of World War One? From these questions a secondary line of interest emerged concerning the overlapping press perception of Cottingley and Arthur Conan Doyle’s belief in spiritualism.

‘It’s a fairy story with big, strong wings that can fly people’s imaginations to gorgeous and fairyland places’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Elsie Hill, the artist behind the famous Cottingley fairy photographs, wrote a play about a crowd trying to force open a giant oyster shell to discover the secret within.[[3]](#footnote-3) This was an allegory for the secret of Cottingley case, where many people desired to find the truth. Hill follows the common fairy-story motif of the desire to know the contents of a forbidden object. For example, in Andrew Lang’s adaptation of *Graciosa and Percinet* for the *Red Fairy Book.* Graciosa’s desire to know the secret of a box she had been bade not to open caused hordes of dancing elves to spill over the countryside.[[4]](#footnote-4) This motif allegorises attempts to possess unknown truths. As such, this paper discusses various parties’ attempts to claim the truth behind the secrets of the Cottingley fairies. Like the fairy story motif, we explore the ideas of elves spilling over printed pages once Arthur Conan Doyle opened the case.

The case begins during the First World War when two Yorkshire cousins, Elsie and Frances, played a practical joke on their family by photographing images of fairies, using cardboard cut-outs copied from a story book. In 1920 at a Bradford Theosophical Society meeting on nature spirits, Elsie’s mother, seeing a connection, related the tale of the photographs. Soon E.L. Gardner, head of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, used the photographs as lantern slides to accompany his theosophical lectures. Doyle, after being commissioned to write an article on fairies for the *Strand Magazine*, fortuitously discovered this case. On Doyle’s behalf, Gardner visited Cottingley to investigate the claims and capture further fairy images. Doyle’s article, headlining the 1920 Christmas *Strand,* faced vigorous media debate. It was followed by his 1922 book *The Coming of the Fairies.* Through these Doyle exposed his spiritual beliefs to the world. The aesthetics of these fairy creatures came under intense scrutiny. Subsequently, the tale of the Cottingley fairies frequently featured in the press and still attracts lively debate today.

This paper demonstrates how debates over the fairy pictures fall in-between the boundaries of post-First World War Spiritualism, Theosophy, childhood play and supposedly rationalist explanations. It also furthers current discussions by examining how the Cottingley debate became polarised into broad concepts of scientific versus supernatural in the public arena. Firstly, this paper demonstrates how Doyle presented the case in a detective mode. He ostensibly leaves the reader as judge, but really guides them to the conclusion that the fairies were real. Secondly, we will discuss how Doyle’s critics constructed their arguments for the fraudulent nature of spiritualism, with which the fairies became connected. They made broad appeals to logical investigation and scientific evidence. Doyle’s beliefs were polarised against this as fantastical and irrational. The press particularly use this as a device to create a clear-cut debate for public entertainment. In particular the examples of Joseph Jastrow, Joseph McCabe and Harry Houdini are examined. In this connection, we discuss how the vehement press attacks launched at Cottingley became attached to Spiritualism, resulting in Doyle seeking to separate the two. Thirdly, the paper will consider how the press and critics employed Sherlock Holmes, who to them personified the logical sleuth, to criticise and juxtapose Doyle’s belief in both sprites and Spiritualism. Finally, the true meaning of the paper pixies as part of the girls’ games is examined. We will discuss how this innocent image was reframed and given meaning through the world of adult occultism and subsequent press criticism.

**Presenting the Case**

First, defining the concepts this paper explores is necessary. Notionally the fairies were presented as nature spirits, within the Theosophical hierarchy of beings. Started by Helena Blavatsky, Theosophy ‘is an esoteric philosophy, one, that is, which has at its heart a mystery; hence it may be described as an occult faith.’[[5]](#footnote-5) This belief system grew vastly in popularity in Edwardian England. In this ‘The lowest order, the nature spirits, identify with the classic elements; Salamanders are the spirits of Fire; Undines or Nereids are the spirits of Water; Gnomes and Elves are the spirits of Earth; and Fairies the spirits of Air.’[[6]](#footnote-6) For Gardner the fairies could be fitted into evolution and were part of nature.

Divergently, Spiritualism for our purposes refers to Doyle’s belief in the ‘a Gothic religion that, with its mediumship, automatic spirit writing, and “spirit” photography where alleged manifestations of the dead appeared in photographs blurred the boundaries between life and death.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Much of the press, as will be discussed, defined spiritualism and nature spirits within a broader supernatural world, which they often present as irrational. Irrationality, for the critics of Doyle, related to beliefs which they considered unprovable, spurious and fictitious. His press critics presented rationality as a consensus reality where phenomena had been subjected to logical testing for empirical evidence.

Doyle considered science, mainly psychical research methods based on empirical observations of supernatural phenomena, could be used to explore spiritualist realms.[[8]](#footnote-8) Saler comments: ‘But Holmes's science of observation was not the same as positivistic science. It re-enchanted the world by imbuing everything with hidden import. Holmes demonstrated that profane reality could be no less mysterious or alluring than the supernatural realm; the material world was laden with occult significance, which could be revealed to those with an observant eye and logical outlook.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Similarly, Doyle also believed it was possible to observe the fairy phenomena ‘scientifically’ through non-conventional means of empirical perception, such as clairvoyance. This is why Doyle employed Hodson, who is discussed below, to verify the Cottingley phenomena. It is important to highlight that both parties, for and against the fairies’ existence, considered that they were adhering to logical principles of investigation in their opinions.

Arthur Conan Doyle, medical doctor and creator of sleuth detective Sherlock Holmes, first unveiled the photographs in 1920. There was immediate conflicting tension over their truthfulness and bemusement over Doyle’s involvement. Overlapping stake holders also sought different meaning in the photographs. Wood describes Cottingley as ‘a richly textured event that polarises belief and scepticism, and involves an intuitive understanding of legend formation and the social nuances of early twentieth-century English Society.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Likewise, eminent photographer Crawley notes: ‘It is a tale of genuine persons of integrity across a wide band of the social structure of sixty and more years ago, who, by reason of their human strengths, frailties and genuinely held beliefs were inevitably drawn into a sequence of events whose chain reaction, once set in motion, could not be reversed.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

After the initial press reports, the Cottingley affair periodically enjoyed media and academic coverage. This primarily debated the existence of fairies and whether the images were forged or genuine. Bown notes that most Cottingley literature ‘has assumed a detective mode.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Similarly, Owen notes ‘concern with authenticity has remained at the core of much of the Cottingley debate’.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, a marked change occurred after 1983 when the girls confessed that the fairies were paper cut outs.[[14]](#footnote-14) More recent investigations focus upon literary, personal and emotional perspectives. In Purkiss’ *Troublesome Things* and *Fairies and Fairy Stories* sections on the Cottingley Fairies analyse the girls’ world of play and contextualise Cottingley within the fairies of popular children’s culture. Purkiss sees Cottingley as ‘the last great blow against the fairy’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Correspondingly, Owen’s article ‘Borderland Forms Arthur Conan Doyle Albion’s Daughters and the Politics of the Cottingley Fairies’ explores ‘the social and cultural implications of the Cottingley episode itself’, particularly how it fits into the spiritualist discourse.[[16]](#footnote-16) Owen also explores ‘competing representations of reality inherent in the drama, and the contest over meanings that lie at the heart of this fairy story.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Divergently, Wynne discusses the Cottingley fairies against the backdrop of Doyle’s work with spirit photographs. She draws parallels with his belief in spirit photography which had been unveiled as fraudulent by the Society for Psychical Research.[[18]](#footnote-18) This paper is situated within the more recent explanatory tradition. It moves it beyond current debates by expanding discussions of how the press polarised the Cottingley affair.

Doyle in his 1922 book *The Coming of the Fairies* employs a detective mode. He draws together ample source material acting as an investigator and superficially frames the reader as jury. Doyle states, ‘This narrative is not a special plea for that authenticity, but is simply a collection of facts the inferences from which may be accepted or rejected as the reader may think fit.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Impartiality is fostered by reproducing raw evidence and minimising his opinion. For example, Doyle reprints press articles in the chapter ‘Reception of the First Photographs’.[[20]](#footnote-20) His *Strand* articles are also reprinted as case evidence in a stylised detective manner. Introducing this layout he states: ‘I gave particulars of a number of cases where such creatures were said to have been seen, and showed how very strong were the reasons for supposing that some such forms of life exist. I now reproduce this article, and I add to it another chapter containing fresh evidence’.[[21]](#footnote-21) The words ‘particulars’ and ‘fresh evidence’ invoke an appearance of a detective style investigation. Doyle knows readers associate him with Holmes and harnesses this effect to portray himself as the sleuth in the Cottingley case.

However, in a twist from traditional detective mode motifs Doyle reflects the final decision back onto the reader. ‘I have given the reader the opportunity of judging the evidence for a considerable number of alleged cases, collected before and after the Cottingley incident. Finally, I have placed before him the general theory of the place in creation of such creatures, as defined by the only system of thought which has room for them.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Doyle seemingly acts as merely the bringer of evidence; the audience is responsible for the judgement. The audience is also complimented by being given ownership of the final judgement. This in turn reflects responsibility for judgement upon the audience. Crawley from *The* *British Journal of Photography* notes ‘nowhere does he fully lend the weight of his own authority to the genuineness of the photographs.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

However, at a deeper level readers are lead towards belief in the pictures. For example, a well know clairvoyant, Hodson’s observations present theosophical nature spirit beliefs as naturalistic biological descriptions which appear factual, especially when presented as field notes.[[24]](#footnote-24) Headings such as ‘Gnomes and Fairies’ and ‘Water Fairy (August 14, 1921)’ are employed to heavily guide the reader towards the reality of the fairies.[[25]](#footnote-25) This presentation of supposedly factual evidence also allowed Doyle to avoid staking his personal authority to verify the images. Owen similarly argues Doyle ‘appears to offer an impartial account of the Cottingley affair whilst actually presenting a carefully constructed case.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Indeed, Wynne argues that by the second edition of *The Coming of the Fairies* ‘Doyle was increasingly confident in his beliefs’ as he presented more tenuous images of fairies and lent more weight to the existence of the Cottingley fairies.[[27]](#footnote-27) Although, on the surface his impartiality is asserted, Doyle’s presentation implicitly advocates the genuineness of the photographs. This coupled with his spiritualist connections made critics automatically assume his advocacy of the fairies’ existence. Whilst presenting a ruse, Doyle harnesses the language of sleuths to lead readers to the conclusion he increasingly believed, that the fairies were real.

**Spiritualists**

The losses of the First World War overshadow the Cottingley affair, helping to explain how it intersects spiritualist beliefs. Doyle suffered the loss of many family members. ‘My son was badly wounded on the Somme and died afterwards of pneumonia. My wife’s brother, a doctor died at Mons, my sister’s husband, my wife’s nephew, my sister’s son, all dead’.[[28]](#footnote-28) He, like many others, sought solace through an increasing belief in Spiritualism. The war thus uprooted the status quo. Marrett in his 1918 Folklore Society address stated: ‘Are we not conscious, before all else, of a wholesale shifting of values - an utter derangement of the hierarchy of established interests and activities constituting that “old order” which we were brought up to accept?’[[29]](#footnote-29) At this frontier, blown open by the scars of the First World War, the Cottingley debate flourishes but also sits uncomfortably upon transcending boundaries between the old Edwardian world and the new post war mind-set.

On 25th October 1917 Doyle publically declared his beliefs at the London Spiritualist Alliance.[[30]](#footnote-30) He had joined the Psychical Research Society in 1893 and was keen to assert to one audience ‘My interest in the subject is one of some standing’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Despite this Stashower argues ‘his public declaration had come quite abruptly.’[[32]](#footnote-32) This revelation coincided with the height of war loss and the Cottingley case was unveiled just a few short years after. Henceforth, from the public perspective, Doyle threw himself into the declaration of Spiritualist beliefs with utmost fervour. Demonstrating the lasting image of Doyle the spiritualist, his *Manchester Guardian* obituary noted: ‘he embraced the creed of spiritualism, and its defence, conducted as whole heartedly and disinterestedly as all other defences he conducted, occupied his later years.’[[33]](#footnote-33) *The New York Tribune* also notes ‘He believes intensely himself - believes like a crusader who must pass along his message.’[[34]](#footnote-34) Occurring during this time frame, the press unsurprisingly harnessed the fairy pictures to Doyle’s new spiritualist crusade. The critical arguments launched at Cottingley became conjointly levelled at spiritualism.

Adding to this effect, Doyle viewed the photographs with spiritualist eyes, adopting them as evidence to open up discussion of psychic beliefs. He hoped photographic proof may open up materialistic minds to consider wider ideas beyond consensus reality. He wrote to Gardner: ‘When our fairies are admitted other psychic phenomena will find a more ready acceptance.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Additionally, he wrote in his book: ‘The 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’.[[36]](#footnote-36) The ‘ruts in the mud’ evokes the reality of war; the mystic world is depicted as a palliative for this. Most importantly the images provided evidence of the psychic. However, as Purkiss defines ‘the supernaturalists’, ‘fail to find a way to yoke fairies to modernity by the simple expedient of making them representable within it.’[[37]](#footnote-37) Consequently, as the aesthetic of the paper fairies looked dubious and rather two dimensional they were open to criticism. Attacks upon their appearance became conjoined with direct attacks on Doyle’s spiritualist beliefs, particularly spirit manifestations.

As evidenced from critics and press cuttings, the overriding public perception of Doyle’s approach to Cottingley is one of naïve unquestioning belief. Maurice Hewlett stated: ‘He believes the photographs to be genuine. The rest follows. But why does he believe it? Because the young ladies tell him that they are genuine. Alas!’[[38]](#footnote-38) The *Illustrated London News* sarcastically reported: ‘Sir Arthur, as might be expected, is enthusiastically on the side of the fairies’.[[39]](#footnote-39) This portrayal of his unflinching belief also remained in his public persona. His *New York Times* obituary mentioned: ‘He undoubtedly endorsed many mediums who were unquestionably fraudulent. For example, his endorsement of the fairy photographs was, from our point of view, a very foolish stand for him to take’.[[40]](#footnote-40) This example shows the press has linked Cottingley to Doyle’s spiritualism and mutually denigrated both as fraudulent. The press perception was that Doyle viewed the fairies with the same blinkered belief as he did Spiritualism.

Following the above considerations, critics of Doyle primarily argued that there was inadequate scientific evidence to support Spiritualism and Cottingley. The critics therefore set logically investigated realism up as the polar opposite of fantastical, poorly-evidenced Spiritualism. For example, eminent American psychologist, Jastrow, criticised Doyle’s lack of scientific evidence. He states Doyle’s lectures ‘offered large but not responsive audiences evidence of survival of the dead in the way of spirit photographs that was an insult to any audience beyond the moron grade’.[[41]](#footnote-41) The term ‘evidence’, places the debate into an investigative mode, it is then denigrated by employing a ‘moron grade’ viewer to believe it. Jastrow also stated ‘The case of Elsie and Frances is a minor consideration. The “case” in point is that of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, student of medicine, novelist, psychic researcher, who looked upon his contributions to the reality of the beyond as the crowning achievement of his memorable life’.[[42]](#footnote-42) The word ‘case’ also evokes an investigative mode. Jastrow works through valued judgements from good to bad, reflecting the diverse polarity of Doyle’s character. He starts with Doyle the good, scientific medical student and ends with naïve spiritualist. Furthermore, Jastrow states Doyle was ‘repeatedly and grossly deceived by the most vulgar kinds of spirit-séance that is designed to prey upon the emotions of the gullible’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Doyle’s opinion is placed in the emotional and credulous sphere. Value judgments are employed by polarising the ‘good’ scientific evidence based opinion against the ‘bad’ spiritualist naïve. Setting this wedge of distinction allows Jastrow to take ownership of the ‘truth’ that spiritualist beliefs were fraudulent. The intersecting boundaries of proofs and value judgments are negotiated to launch a fierce conjoined attack on Cottingley and Doyle’s spiritualist beliefs.

Using similar themes, Joseph McCabe, priest and lecturer, debated on Spiritualism with Doyle at London’s Queen Mary Hall on 11th March 1920.[[44]](#footnote-44) McCabe stated in the *English Review* ‘A war which removed 5 million men in adolescence or early manhood inevitably gave the opportunities and the Sludges of the world came out of their dark corners.’[[45]](#footnote-45) This particularly value laden reproach alludes to vulnerable relatives of dead First World War soldiers being preyed upon by spiritualists, testifying contact beyond the grave. This conjures an image of Victorian style mediums waiting in the wings to prey on the mourning mothers.

Making reference to Doyle’s medical career, McCabe employs rationalisation to attack physiologists who are spiritualists. ‘These men believe that certain mediums have the power of releasing a few stone from their bodies (without injury) and moulding it into limbs which can grasp’.[[46]](#footnote-46) The inconsistency between professional knowledge and belief is highlighted: ‘but how a man who knows what a hand or a face really is can entertain the idea of a medium “forming” out of spare cells of her own body in the course of a quarter or half an hour passes comprehension’.[[47]](#footnote-47) McCabe also offers a more plausible meaning of one spiritualist photograph Doyle describes: ‘Where he got either the word “ectoplasm” or this impression of the photographs I cannot imagine. What you see at first are bits of chiffon or muslin, white gloves, possibly inflated fish bladders’.[[48]](#footnote-48) The images’ meaning is moved from the fantastical to the mundane, even the ludicrous. McCabe declares Doyle’s mediumistic descriptions are ‘a finer flight of fiction than any adventure of Sherlock Holmes’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Holmes, although fictitious, is employed as a more realist polar opposite of spiritualist materialisation. Doyle considered Spiritualism to be true and Holmes to be fiction. McCabe’s comment inverts these ideas, drawing on the language of opposition. The illogicality that a fictional detective is more real than Doyle’s beliefs reduces Spiritualism to absurdity. McCabe inverts the intersecting claims on truth and reality to attack Doyle’s beliefs. Like Jastrow, McCabe employs polarised notions of scientific truth against spiritualistic fantasy to attack Doyle’s spiritualist faith, with which Cottingley had become connected.

Another critic, Major John Hall-Edwards ‘the famous authority upon radium’ also drew a polarised distinction between fantasy and reality when criticising Cottingley.[[50]](#footnote-50) In the *Birmingham Weekly Post* he highlighted Elsie was described ‘as a most imaginative child.’[[51]](#footnote-51) He also argued: ‘I believe that the inculcation of such absurd ideas into the minds of children will result in late life in manifestations of nervous disorder and mental disturbances. Sure young children can be brought up to appreciate the beauties of Nature without their imagination being filled with exaggerated, if picturesque, nonsense and misplaced sentiment.’[[52]](#footnote-52) The use of the word ‘inculcation’ implied Hall-Edward’s sees Doyle as the originator and owner of the idea. He portrays Doyle as the active agent placing dangerous ideas into the minds of imaginative children, susceptible to such ideas. Cooper states Hall-Edwards ‘was probably putting into words something that was felt by many. Any excursions into the realms of fairies, witches and spirits have links with black magic and all the gory trappings of horror films’.[[53]](#footnote-53) Hall-Edward’s criticisms draw upon wide-ranging fears of the occult and supernatural world, and the possible effect this may have on children. His criticism polarises supposed reality and sanity against fantastical madness. Hall-Edward’s takes ownership of the sane side of the argument to frame Cottingley in the illogical territory.

A slightly milder critic, escapologist Houdini enjoyed a personal friendship with Doyle. Whilst respecting Doyle’s personal beliefs, he retained an investigative rational opinion of them. In *A Magician Among the Spirits* Houdini wrote; ‘it is impossible not to respect the belief of this great author who has wholeheartedly and unflinchingly thrown his life and soul into the conversion of unbelievers.’[[54]](#footnote-54) However, Stashower notes Houdini’s ‘confidence plummeted when Conan Doyle wrote an ecstatic letter describing the Cottingley photographs as ‘a revelation’.[[55]](#footnote-55) Houdini remained cautious in his criticism though. He passes over Cottingley in a footnote:‘In speaking of Spirit photography, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle usually brings up as proof positive, that his fairy photographs are genuine.’[[56]](#footnote-56) This further demonstrates the interconnectedness of Cottingley and Spirit photography in the public domain. Houdini then quotes a newspaper report, claiming the fairies were copied from an advert for Prices candle makers.[[57]](#footnote-57) Houdini does not harshly criticise the affair, but the quote implies his scepticism. Through this method Houdini retains Doyle’s dignity to hold a religious belief. For example, Houdini states: ‘There are times when I almost doubt the sincerity of some of Sir Arthur's statements, even though I do not doubt the sincerity of his belief.’[[58]](#footnote-58) The personal relationship creates tension in Houdini’s response to Cottingley. His comments are marked with tension, between respectful restraint and his personal critique of the affair. Houdini’s language is more concerned with belief but still engages with the truth verses false debate which hallmarked responses to Cottingley and Doyle’s Spiritualism.

As discussed above, contrary to Doyle’s hopes, the press portrayal of Cottingley became conjoined with and intensified the ridicule of his spiritualist beliefs. Stashower notes ‘The Cottingley episode had made him an object of derision and given fresh ammunition to the opponents of his crusade’.[[59]](#footnote-59) Doyle’s *Manchester Guardian* obituary demonstrates the lasting perception of this: ‘His views were often challenged, especially his belief in fairies and the ‘fairy photographs’ and he was often involved in fierce controversy.’[[60]](#footnote-60) The fact the journalist specifically selected Cottingley demonstrates its notorious legacy in their mind.

To protect his spiritualist beliefs from the criticism connected with Cottingley, Doyle attempted to disassociate the two. Wynne points out that Doyle was ‘anxious to divorce the phenomena from spiritualism’ in case the pictures were uncovered as fake.[[61]](#footnote-61) An advert for the *Coming of the Fairies* read: ‘The book is totally unrelated to Sir Arthur’s spiritualist investigations. It is a simple statement of startling fact.’[[62]](#footnote-62) This is further reiterated in the book’s preface: ‘this whole subject of the objective existence of a subhuman form of life has nothing to do with the larger and far more vital question of spiritualism.’[[63]](#footnote-63) With his strong knowledge Doyle was highly aware of the distinction between theosophical fairy belief in nature spirits and spiritualist beliefs. Here he attempts to define this loose association between Cottingley and Spiritualism to the public audience. As we have seen, the press had connected the two under a looser conception of irrational and unfounded beliefs. Doyle seeks to separate the close connection formed in the public mind: ‘The connection is slight and indirect, consisting only in the fact that anything which widens our conceptions of the possible, and shakes us out of our time-rutted lines of thought’.[[64]](#footnote-64) To an unknowledgeable reader who had flicked through press reports presenting the two as mutually exclusive, Doyle must have appeared to propose an unclear and inconsistent boundary at the juncture connecting Spiritualism with Cottingley. Doyle was however attempting to draw a proper line of distinction and protect his spiritualist faith from the negative press attention Cottingley received.

**Sleuths**

References to Holmes were regularly employed by the press in relation to spiritualism and also Cottingley. Pemberton views Holmes ‘not as the straightforward embodiment of scientific rationality, but as a more complex and ambiguous detective, associated with hunting, instinctual knowledge, and animal behaviour.’[[65]](#footnote-65) For Doyle’s readers Holmes embodied innate and intellectual sleuthing detective work. Therefore his creator should have been perfectly suited to solving the Cottingley case. However, Doyle is denigrated in the press as a pale shadow of his creation. Wynne, discusses a 1926 Punch cartoon which depicts Holmes tethering a cloud-headed Doyle to the ground.[[66]](#footnote-66) Holmes is used as a satiric device to ridicule Doyle. Furthering this reading the juxtaposition between hard-headed sleuth Holmes and Fairies can be seen as enigmatic perplexity which captured readers’ attentions. It also provided characters to personify the polarisation between logical and irrational beliefs. A logical Holmes stood as an opposite to Doyle’s seemingly unfounded beliefs. The *New York Tribune* commented: ‘When the keen mind that dealt for a generation in the searching materialism of Sherlock Holmes turns to fantasy the inevitable reaction is surprise’.[[67]](#footnote-67) This statement anticipates the public bemusement at the apparent incompatibility of Holmes and belief in fairies. Furthering this, the *Irish Independent* wrote ‘Who could imagine Holmes believing in Fairies or indulging in table-rapping?’[[68]](#footnote-68) ‘Doyle goes spook-hunting, and expects us to take him seriously’.[[69]](#footnote-69) Doyle’s investigations of fairies and spirits are presented side by side. This is then compared with Holmes as a device to express public bewilderment. The connection was abetted by the investigative mode that Doyle employed in *The Coming of the Fairies.* Doyle is polarised as a feeble, credulous investigator compared to his creation. This juxtaposition created a satirical story device for the press.

Some articles further this distinction, by subsuming Doyle into Holmes. For instance, a *New York Tribune* strapline read: ‘Two Girls who took them Psychically Gifted, Avers Sherlock Holmes Creator.’[[70]](#footnote-70) The comma denotes the juxtaposition between the mystical and the logical sleuth. The *Irish Independent* suggested Doyle ‘ring up Sherlock Holmes on the astral telephone and take down from his dictation some further adventures?’[[71]](#footnote-71) Another headline read: ‘Poor Sherlock Holmes – Hopelessly Crazy?’[[72]](#footnote-72) This headline entirely subsumes Doyle’s character into Holmes. It also employs juxtaposition to suggest that Doyle has transcended logical Holmes by believing the perceivably fake photographs were genuine. Conversely, the *London Illustrated News* review of Doyle’s book wished: ‘the affair could be thoroughly sifted by an impartial detective. What a pity that we cannot command the services of Mr. Sherlock Holmes’.[[73]](#footnote-73) This insinuates Doyle’s inadequacy as an investigator by denigrating his abilities to those of his fictional creation. Holmes is employed by the press, wishing to engage their readers, as a novel device to critique Doyle’s claims. These claims are portrayed as broadly fraudulent and uncritical and certainly below the standard of Sherlock Holmes’ sleuthing acumen.

Conversely, Doyle was also placed in the role of the sleuth, the investigator of unexplainable phenomena. Owen notes Doyle ‘thought of himself as existing in the tradition of scientific explanation whilst simultaneously challenging the arid materialism which it so often implied’.[[74]](#footnote-74) Pemberton also argues ‘That detectives should be gifted with the ability to detect clues through their instinctual sensibilities would have made perfect sense to many educated Victorians.’[[75]](#footnote-75) Doyle thought of himself as a rational investigator and this is congruous with the detective style employed in *The Coming of the Fairies.* For example, he wrote to Mary Doyle in 1918 ‘I never accept a supernatural if a natural explanation will suffice’.[[76]](#footnote-76) He views himself as sceptical and critical in deducing explanations. Correspondingly, David Gow, editor of magazine *Light*, places Doyle in the position of critical investigator. He argues ‘in the spirit of his famous detective, he took up the trail, examining clues and interrogating witnesses’.[[77]](#footnote-77) Here Doyle’s critical methodology is associated with Holmes, placing him on the logical investigative side of the polarity. Connectedly, one reviewer stated the *Coming of the Fairies* ‘Makes a serious presentation of case in favour of the existence of fairies’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Even some less complimentary newspaper reports make concession to Doyle’s critical treatment of the pictures. The *New York Tribune* stated: ‘He is the logical and clear headed scotch made advancing his theories in level tones for what they are worth.’[[79]](#footnote-79) Despite the majority of media coverage using Holmes as a device to argue for Doyle’s illogical support of the photographs, distinctions were not always clear-cut. Some sectors of the press and Doyle himself considered that the Doyle’s investigations had been conducted in a logical and evidentially based manner.

Despite the detective mode of the Cottingley writings and Doyle seeing himself in the tradition of scientific explanation, he publically appeared to detach his personal persona from that of Holmes. The press mooted Doyle’s dereliction of Holmes. The *Manchester Guardian* noted: ‘To most people Doyle is Sherlock Homes, and nothing more; to Doyle himself the Holmes stories were almost the least serious part of his work.’[[80]](#footnote-80) Similarly, the *New York Times* also reported ‘he was tired of hearing about his celebrated character, Sherlock Holmes’.[[81]](#footnote-81) The press perception was that Doyle was growing tired of Holmes in his later years. Like the Cottingley affair, the press employed Holmes to attack his spiritualist beliefs. This placed Holmes on a frontier of tension which threatened Doyle’s spiritualist faith. Crawley notes: ‘Doyle was conscious that the Holmes stories might be thought to have detracted from his serious work’.[[82]](#footnote-82) Holmes was so popular and Doyle’s spiritualist writings, the major cause of his later career, were less well received. It is arguable that Doyle felt the two were in competition. Due to this, press obituaries are right to suggest that Doyle might have grown careworn of his sleuth towards the end.

**Sprites**

Doyle presented Cottingley’s public meaning which became associated with Spiritualism and attracted many critics. However, the girls owned an alternative private meaning. Troubled by war, they sought solace in a world of play. Purkiss notes it ‘was not an attempt to bring fairies into the modern world, but to return to a world before the war’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Cut-outs transposed from the *Princess Mary Gift Book* reframed imagery harking back to Edwardian nursery play, as real. Owen notes the photographs were ‘currency in the old familial struggle between age and youth’.[[84]](#footnote-84) Frances recalls Elsie wanted to stop the adults mocking them about fairies. ‘‘‘That will shake them” she said. “They’ll have to stop making fun of us then.’’’[[85]](#footnote-85) Ironically Elsie employed the images as evidence for the existence of fairies, against adult family members. The girls were angered when the images were given a repackaged public meaning.[[86]](#footnote-86) Frances notes ‘It wasn’t a joke anymore. People were taking it too seriously and it had all got out of hand.’[[87]](#footnote-87) Owen argues the images ‘are a fragment of 1917 childhood which Conan Doyle appropriated and invested with new meaning, and the intentions and dreams of the girls were subsumed in the process.’[[88]](#footnote-88) The girls lost control of their own meaning and the images were now public discussion points. Deep tensions underlay who owned the truth behind these proofs.

In 1983 the girls revealed the hoax. Adding a later twist, Frances claimed to see real fairies.[[89]](#footnote-89) The photographed cut-outs acted as simulacrums of these beings. Photographic expert, Crawley notes ‘to Frances the making of the picture was a serious matter to help establish that fairies did exist.’[[90]](#footnote-90) But even Frances criticised Doyle’s investigation for lack of rigour: ‘They never sought for any explanation of fairy life. It was enough that they could get the copyright for the photographs we took.’[[91]](#footnote-91) Although faked, the photographed cut outs stood for evidence of real fairies. This sets up further layers of tension for ownership of the truth regarding the ‘real fairies’. As previously mentioned, Elsie in later life wrote a play. Here men discuss the content of a giant oyster shell which they are struggling to open.[[92]](#footnote-92) This provides a symbol of the girls’ ownership of the truth behind the Cottingley images, despite the raging press debates. However, Frances’ posthumously published memoirs provide a final word, leaving a chink open in the Cottingley investigation. Frances was the one who could see the real fairies in Cottingley beck.

To conclude, Owen succinctly describes the case: ‘This connection between fairyland and the occult or supernatural world of spirits was to be refigured in unexpected ways at Cottingley where an inventive childhood realization of Edwardian fairy conventions met the calculating scrutiny of an adult agenda and desire to believe’.[[93]](#footnote-93) This paper also describes how the overlapping themes of Spiritualism, Sprites and the sleuth Sherlock Holmes, created a milieu of overlapping identities and ownerships. It has extended the debate by discussing how the press and critics polarised Cottingley. They collapsed the debate into logical science against unfounded credulousness to help create a sensational press story. Doyle tried to navigate a difficult path through these to protect and proselytise his spiritual beliefs and defend against a barrage of cruel critics. Ultimately, the foundations of sprites, spiritualists and sleuths all lay in the pre-war era before the horrors turned the world. ‘Conan Doyle’s longing for a world remade, one in which magic and spirituality still had their place, found expression in a girlhood fairyland and the pretty dancing creature of ‘Alice and the Fairies’.’[[94]](#footnote-94) The girls also sought solace playing in fairyland, whilst escaping the worries of the First World War. We last hear of an aged Doyle with a Kodak and his housekeeper’s eight year old daughter with a music box trying to entice fairies.[[95]](#footnote-95) This provides a perfect ending to this discussion, whereby we see the dreams of fairy land put under the spotlight and finally coaxed back to the camera.

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