

Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001)

Introduction: “Beware the Lychnobia People”

The main thesis of the book is that nobody has really looked at evidence of fairy belief in witch trials (or, indeed, at the witches and warlocks themselves—the focus has been entirely on the inquisitors), and that the record gives much detail of a once widespread pattern of belief. From the beginning of the study, say 1450 AD, until well into the nineteenth century people in the main did believe in fairies, and took them as part of the natural order.

In Chapter One, “The Nature of Fairy Belief” we learn that the earliest tangible evidence for fairies in British sources is as follows: “In strictly historical terms, they appear on the scene with tales about Thomas Rhymer at the end of the thirteenth century...” p.8, then we get a passing reference to King James’s VI’s famous study of the supernatural, called *Daemonologie*, published in 1597, and then “A hundred years later the respected and scholarly minister of Aberfoyle, Robert Kirk, produced a learned tract about them in which he drew upon oral informants and local traditions in the manner of a modern folklorist. He was the first person writing in English or Scots to use the expression ‘fairy tale’ though he conceived his dissertation as a serious contribution to contemporary science and theology, written, in part, for friends and acquaintances who were members of the Royal Society in London. He was by no means alone since a number of his contemporaries were turning their attention to matters of the occult and the supernatural. By the eighteenth century traditions about the ‘fairfolk’ were eagerly sought out and published by a host of so-called authorities who believed that the objects of their interest were no more, though the fairies continued to hold their place in the folk tradition. Writers such as Walter Scott and James Hogg, fostered a massive interest through poetry, story and ballad collection. Throughout the nineteenth century the elves littered the pages of Scottish literature, from which inspirational source they impacted upon painters and book illustrators. Folktale collections significantly added to the corpus of lore, as did the energies, or imaginations, of legions of antiquarians. Andrew Lang, inspired no doubt by Kirk, whose tract he edited, is generally credited with being the first to truly popularize some of the traditional material which he described as fairy tales, while J. M Barrie, from Kirriemuir in Angus, invented one of the most famous of modern sprites when he introduced the malevolent Tinker Bell in his much-loved play, *Peter Pan*.” pp.8-9

“That many people in pre-industrial Europe believed in fairies cannot be disputed on the basis of available evidence. They were a part of everyday life, as real to people as the sunrise, and as incontrovertible as the existence of God [...] It has been observed that the supernatural is the least studied of all topics in the folklore discipline, a circumstance that can be attributed to an academic bias against supernatural beliefs on ideological grounds: namely, that such beliefs ‘arise from and are supported by various kinds of obvious error’. A great deal of scholarly work has taken this perspective, a ‘tradition of disbelief’, as its starting point... The stance taken in this study is that it is irrelevant whether or not fairies existed; what matters is that people believed in the reality of the phenomenon. The

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folklorist is thus interested, as should be the historian, in the ‘reality of the supranormal experience and not in the reality of paranormal phenomena’ (reference).” p.12

“The fairies of Scottish folk, and for that matter the learned, tradition bear little or no resemblance to the vast majority of modern stereotypes of fairies. Rather, the images inherited by the twenty-first century find their inspiration in the butterfly-winged, diaphanously clad, frolicking nymphs of writers such as Shakespeare, and artists such as Blake and Fuseli, with a hefty infusion of later accretion. The romantic Cottingly Fairies (as discussed by writer Arthur Conan Doyle, who had a long-standing interest in the subject), the materialistic Tooth Fairy, and Walt Disney’s mischievous Tinker Bell are the pervasive iconographic forms in current popular culture.” p.13

“The [real] fairies were dangerous, capable of inflicting terrible harm, even death upon people and their livestock, and every precaution had to be taken to keep them at bay, or at least placated. Though they were occasionally benign, their proclivity towards cruelty and general malevolence meant that they were best avoided at all costs.” p.14

There’s a good plain expository section on Robert Kirk and what he said on the subject on pp.17-18. It emerges that one of the really decisive texts in the formation of the modern image of the fairy was Sir Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy*: “In his incomparably influential *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3) he characterised fairies as a capricious, diminutive race who dressed in green, rode horses in invisible processions, and inhabited conical-shaped hills. They frequently danced on the hills by moonlight, leaving behind circles or fairy rings in the grass; they attacked humans and cattle with elf-shot, and they enjoyed hunting.” p.18

“Speculations as to the origins of fairies are almost as numerous as the different types of their kind who once haunted Scotland. Some authorities considered them to be ghosts, or the souls of the pagan dead, existing in a limbo between heaven and earth, while others thought that they were originally nature spirits. To some commentators they were representative of a folk memory of an actual race of people driven by their conquerors into remote and inaccessible areas, or a similarly remembered race who were believed to be diminutive in size, or a shady recollection of the druids. Alternatively, they might be fallen angels cast out of heaven by God.” p.19

The great folklorist and pioneer of scientific field-collecting methods, John Francis Campbell of Islay (1821-1885), considered them a folk memory of the aboriginal inhabitants of Scotland, namely the Picts, p.21

Then we get chapter two: “The Wonderful World of Fairy” which begins with a quote from folklorist David Buchan: “the portrayal of both the personnel and the environment of the Otherworld conveys important cultural information about not only the world around, but the world around that”. p.35

“There is a suggestion here that Efland is to be identified with Purgatory or Limbo, the halfway house between Heaven and Hell, which was outlawed by the reformers as surely as it had been invented in the late twelfth-century. It is of note that Robert Kirk believed

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that the fairies were perpetually sad in Limbo, uncertain as they were about the fate that awaited them on Judgment Day.” p.37

Evidence from the witch trials suggests that: “Many people claimed to have seen the dead in Fairyland, sometimes known to them but sometimes not. Bessie Dunlop saw the laird of Auchenskeith riding with the fairfolk, though he had died nine years earlier.” p.46

“Kirk indicated that fairies were indistinguishable from humans in size and garb, with the implication that people could never know when they might be in fairy company.” p.47

“Musical talents were often bestowed upon human visitors to Efland. Orkney and Shetland are saturated in traditions about people whose musical accomplishments were attributed to the teachings of the trows [which was the name given to the fairy folk in the Northern Isles] [...] several Shetland fiddle tunes were accredited to the recollections of such visitants. Similarly, on the island of Skye, the gifted MacCrimmon family of pipers were said to have received their musical gifts courtesy of the fairies. The first MacCrimmon to inherit this gift, Iain Og, was playing his pipes when he was approached by a fairy woman who gave him a magical silver chanter:

Thug do mhaise 's ceòl do phiòba
Leannan sìth air do thòir,
Sineam dhuit an sionnsair airgid
A bhios binn hun chearb fo d' mheòir.
Your beauty and the music of your pipe
Have attracted a fairy lover to you,
Let me hand you the silver chanter
That will be sweet and faultless in your fingers.”

(p.84; the source is Alexander Nicolson, *History of Skye*, 1930, Portree 1994, p.130).

Chapter Four: “The Rise of the Demonic”

This has a historical slant, taking the story through from the Reformation to the end of the Seventeenth Century. “...an ever-widening gulf began to grow between learned and folk opinion. In essence, the fairies came to be presented as agents of the Devil and all those who had traffic with them as co-conspirators in his grand plan to wreak havoc on good and godly citizens.” p.106 Strong criticism for Kramer and Sprenger’s witch-hunting textbook, *Malleus Maleficarum*, here described as “this loathsome tome”, p.107 Then follows several tedious and superficial pages of church history.

In such a climate musicians were particularly subject to official scrutiny and ire: “According to *The Complaynt of Scotland* (1550), pre-Reformation Scotland enjoyed ‘sueit melodius sangis of natural music of antiquite’. Thirty-eight songs and ballads, including ‘Thomas Rhymer’, are recorded in this account. The degradation of the position and value of the music-makers, particularly in the Lowlands, began as early as 1449 when Parliament legislated against bards and other wanderers. A few years later an inquisition was ordered into the activities of ‘bards and masterful beggars’, a significant pairing. (ref. to J. H. Murray’s ESTS edn. of the *Complaynt*, and a piece by Cowan on the

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survival of folk beliefs and practices in post-Reformation Scotland). In 1549 the provincial council of the Church denounced 'all the books of rhymes and popular songs' which, when found, would be 'confiscated and burned'. In 1551 Parliament followed up by censoring [sic; ?censuring] many ballads, songs, blasphemies, and rhymes." Pp.114-5

The legislation continued as urban communities joined in the assault. Dumfries council in 1538 outlawed minstrels, unless they were appointed by the burgh. In 1574 Glasgow attempted to banish 'all piparis, fidleris, menstrales, or any other vagabondis'. In the same year an act of parliament was enacted against all those who were idle, 'menstrallis, sangstaris, and taill tellaris'. Obviously such acts were directed solely at the unattached bards and minstrels of the folk, rather than towards those who were officially sanctioned by authority, since burgh records show that many towns employed entertainers throughout pre- and post-Reformation times. The legislation targeted those who were regarded as the custodians of the folk tradition; [wait a minute, it hasn't been invented yet; how about 'preserve the monopoly of burghal entertainers from interloping free-lance musicians and singers'?] to eradicate the bearers was to eradicate their lore. [well, hardly, once again, far too sweeping and superficial a conclusion from the evidence presented]

Complete annihilation, however, was seldom the aim of the early reformers. They made strenuous efforts to change the meaning or the context of many folk customs and beliefs, refurbishing them with a veneer of morality and edification, a time-honoured ploy which the medieval church had successfully manipulated ever since the conversion by, for example, distinguishing the already existing midwinter festival as Christmas and moving All Saints' Day from February to 1 November in order to capitalize on the popularity of Halloween...The adaptation of profane ballads as sacred songs...*Good and Godlie Ballads*...Nevertheless, many words from the original ballads survived, proving that such methods actually 'reinforced, rather than threatened, that tradition', the point being that people never actually forgot the original words...the Calvinist ascendancy was not a catalyst in the suppression of folk culture, it was part of an ongoing process. What it represented was a period of heightened social control which, in turn, led the Church and State to demand a higher level of conformity in folk belief and culture." Pp.115-6

"Fairies and ghosts were not the only entities subjected to the redefining process. Elsewhere in Europe werewolves, for instance, underwent a similar metamorphosis. Portrayed in medieval texts and cherished in the folk tradition as beneficent figures who actually fought the legions of Hell on behalf of their communities, [eh? This is not what appears in Zipes and others on the FT] it was not until the mid-fifteenth century that the benign nature of the werewolf was obliterated to be usurped by the vicious and terrible evil-doer intent upon devouring livestock and children; at approximately the same time the hostile image of the witch crystallized." P.118 [ref: a couple of books by Carlo Ginsburg].

The authors of this book view the witchcraft persecution in terms of power: a ruthless attempt by church and state (in Scotland, one could almost write that Church/State) to suppress alternative sources of influence and authority, especially as having sway with the common people.

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“...Lammas (1 August). The festival was one of several celebrating the harvest but it was also an occasion on which to choose a partner for handfasting or trial marriage of one year’s duration, at the end of which, if there was no conception, the couple were free to part. A shocked but fascinated canon breathlessly speculated of the famous Tailltenn Fair, held in Ireland at Lammas, that ‘promiscuous love-making resulted from the frenzied festival of gladness or with the object of magically assisting the fruitfulness of the soil. p.132. [So the famous words ‘It fell about the Lammas tide; / When corn rigs are bonnie...’ must once have had a resonance unknown to modern auditors]

There’s a dance apparently mentioned by more than one witch, which is supposed to be danced by Satan and his witch covens, called ‘Gillatrypes’. [vide, Burns’s celebrated poem, ‘Tam o’ Shanter]. Isobel Gowdie “She told her inquisitors that a woman, Jean Martin, named ‘Maiden’ by the Devil, was so called because ‘the Divill always takis the Maiden in his hand nixhim, whan we daunce Gillatrypes’. This piece ‘Gillatrypes’, was the same as that played by Gellie Duncan [so there’s an independent tradition of it, outwith Isobel Gowdie’s invention] when she led the diabolical procession into North Berwick kirk in 1589. King James, ‘in a wonderfull admiration [...] in respect of the strangeness of these matters’, was so fascinated that he had her play it for him. Four years later three women from Elgin ‘confissit thame to bein ane dance callit gillatrype singand a foull hieland sang.” p.134

“Descriptions of Scottish sabbats and encounters with the fairies frequently portray an image of revelry and general ‘disorder’. Whereas continental descriptions of sabbats [...] are often filled with horrific details of infant sacrifice, cannibalism, wild sexual orgies, and formal worship of the Devil, the Scottish meetings are more like a social gathering for eating, drinking and dancing.” P.135

Chapter Five: Writing the Fairies

This is all about *Thomas the Rhymer*, with a shorter section on *King Orfeo*, and various fairy references in the poems of Dunbar, Montgomerie and other courtly poets of the periods. Henderson and Cowan’s approach here is fairly superficial, however.

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