

KATHARINE BRIGGS

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FAIRIES

HOBGOBLINS, BROWNIES, BOGIES,
AND OTHER SUPERNATURAL
CREATURES



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AND OTHER SUPERNATURAL CREATURES



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TO JOSEPHINE THOMPSON

**who worked valiantly on this book
from start to finish,
with a zest and pleasure which would
be an encouragement to any author**

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Preface

The word 'fairy' is used in various ways. There are a number of slang and cant usages of the word, varying from time to time, which are beside the point for this book. In fairy-lore, with which we are dealing here, there are two main general usages. The first is the narrow, exact use of the word to express one species of those supernatural creatures 'of a middle nature between man and angels' – as they were described in the seventeenth century – varying in size, in powers, in span of life and in moral attributes, but sharply differing from other species such as hobgoblins, monsters, hags, merpeople and so on. The second is the more general extension of the word to cover that whole area of the supernatural which is not claimed by angels, devils or ghosts. It is in this second, later and more generalized sense that I have often used the word in this book.

Exception might be taken to this use. The word 'fairy' itself is a late one, not used before medieval times and sometimes then with the meaning of mortal women who had acquired magical powers, as Malory used it for Morgan le Fay. The French *fai*, of which 'fairy' is an extension, came originally from the Italian *fatae*, the fairy ladies who visited the household at births and pronounced on the future of the baby, as the Three Fates used to do. 'Fairy' originally meant 'fai-erie', a state of enchantment, and was transferred from the object to the agent. The fairies themselves are said to object to the word, and people often think it better to speak of them euphemistically as 'the Good Neighbours', 'the Good Folk', 'the Seelie Court', 'Them Ones', or, more distantly, as 'the Strangers'. Throughout these islands many names are used for the fairies, the 'Daoine Sidh' in Ireland, the 'Sith' in the Highlands, the 'pisgies' in Cornwall. In the Lowlands of Scotland the Anglo-Saxon 'elves' was long used for the fairies, and Fairyland was called 'Elfame', but these names had limited and local usage, whereas the name 'fairies', however dis-trusted by the believers and debased by nineteenth-century prettification, was recognized everywhere.

At the inception of the book the idea had been to treat the whole area of fairy beliefs, as Thomas Keightley did in his *Fairy Mythology*; but to treat the fairies of the whole of Europe alone, even cursorily, would have been to produce a book ten times the size of this and founded on years of further research. I have occasionally mentioned a foreign fairy, for comparison or elucidation, but only in passing. A complete work on the subject remains to be written, though the mammoth *Encyclopédie des Märchens*,

now in preparation under the general editorship of Professor Kurt Ranke, will probably cover the subject adequately in its universal sweep. However, even within the range of our small islands and of some ten short centuries, enough matter will be found to enthral and horrify us.

This book is meant for browsing rather than for formal reference. As you read you will find words written in small capitals. This indicates that there is a separate article on the subject, so that you can turn from one article to another as you pursue your explorations of the terrain.

The folklorist who specializes in fairy-lore is often asked if he believes in fairies – that is, in fairies as a subjective reality. Strictly speaking this is an irrelevant question. The business of the folklorist is to trace the growth and diffusion of tradition, possibly to advance theories of its origin or to examine those already put forward. When he speaks of ‘true’ fairy beliefs, he ordinarily means those actually believed by people as opposed to the fancies of literary storytellers, who are sometimes imbued with folk tradition and sometimes spin their material out of their own heads or follow the current literary fashion. Nevertheless it is of interest to know whether folklorists believe in the subjective truth of the traditions they record, for this affects their whole treatment of the subject. For myself, I am an agnostic. Some of the fairy anecdotes have a curiously convincing air of truth, but at the same time we must make allowance for the constructive power of the imagination in recalling old memories, and for the likelihood that people see what they expect to see.

Various suggestions have been made in the past for the classification of folk-tales and folk beliefs, among them a practical and suggestive outline by Professor Gomme in his *Handbook of Folk-Lore* (1890), but this was not taken up, and the pressure of newly collected tales became immense. The need was finally met by Antti Aarne’s *Types of the Folktale* (1910), which, revised and supplemented by Professor Stith Thompson in 1928 and 1961, became the standard method of cataloguing folk-tales in all the archives of the world. So when a type number is given at the end of an article, it is to this work that I am referring. A *type* refers to a complete story, a cluster of motifs, while the *motif*, later classified by Professor Stith Thompson in his *Folk Motif-Index*, is the individual strand which makes up the tale. Cinderella, for instance, is Type 510 and is composed of motifs S31: Cruel stepmother; L55: Stepdaughter heroine; F311.1: Fairy godmother; D1050.1: Clothes produced by magic; F861.4.3: Carriage from pumpkin; N711.6: Prince sees heroine at ball and is enamoured; C761.3: Taboo: staying too long at ball. Must leave before certain hour; and H36.1: Slipper test. At the end of this book there is a list of the types and motifs to be found in the various anecdotes and beliefs mentioned in it.

True oral tradition is a great stimulus to creative imagination, and from time to time I have touched briefly on the creative writers who have been

stimulated by fairy-lore and have in their turn influenced it. The rise of tradition into literature and the descent of literature into tradition is a fascinating study. The visual arts have also had their place here, and the small collection of fairy pictures in this book is an interesting comment on the fluctuations of traditional fairy beliefs through the centuries.

A Note on the Pronunciation of Celtic Names

The exact pronunciation of many of the Celtic names is hard to convey by English literature. A further difficulty is that the actual pronunciation varies in regional dialects, particularly in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Welsh is well standardized, but impossible for anyone of non-Cymric breeding to pronounce. We have consulted leading authorities on the Gaelic both of Ireland and Scotland, on Welsh and Manx, and they have kindly given us an approximation to the native pronunciations. These apply only to the titles of articles, but with the help of the specimens given the diligent reader may hope to pronounce the other names occurring in the text with some degree of accuracy. It seemed best to avoid peppering the articles with brackets.

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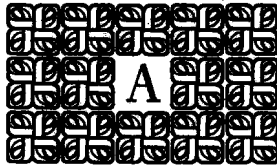
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Abbey lubber. From the 15th century onwards, the luxury and wantonness of many of the abbeys began to be proverbial, and many folk satires were spread abroad about them. Among these were anecdotes of the abbey lubbers, minor devils who were detailed to tempt the monks to drunkenness, gluttony and lasciviousness. The best-known of these tales is that of **FRIAR RUSH**, who was sent to work the final damnation of a wealthy abbey. He had very nearly succeeded in doing so when he was unmasked, conjured into the form of a horse by the Prior, and finally banished. He took other service, and behaved more like an ordinary **ROBIN GOOD-FELLOW** until the Prior again caught up with him and banished him to a distant castle. After their experience with Rush, the friars repented and took to virtuous living, so that their last state was better than their first. Rush worked mainly in the kitchen, but abbey lubbers as a rule haunted the wine cellar. The Abbey Lubber has a lay colleague in the **BUTTERY SPIRIT**, which haunted dishonestly-run inns, or households where the servants were wasteful and riotous or where hospitality was grudged to the poor. There was a belief described by **J. G. CAMPBELL** in his *Superstitions of the Scottish Highlands* that **FAIRIES** and evil spirits only had power over goods that were unthankfully or grudgingly received or dishonestly gained. The Abbey Lubber and the Buttery Spirit must have owed their existence to this belief.

Aedh (ay). The son of Eochail Lethderg, Prince of Leinster, who was playing **HURLING** with his young companions when he was carried into a **BRUGH**, or palace, of Fairyland by two **SIDH**-women who were in love with him, and held captive there for three years. At the end of this time Aedh escaped and made his way to St Patrick, and begged him to free him from the fairy dominion. Patrick took him in disguise to Leinster to his father's court, and there restored him to humanity and freed him from the timeless life of the fairies (see **TIME IN FAIRYLAND**). This account from *Silva Gadelica* (pp. 204-20) is one of the earliest stories of **CAPTIVES IN FAIRYLAND**.

[Motif: F379.1]

Afanc (avanc). There was some doubt about the form taken by the monster which inhabited a pool called Llyn yr Afanc on the River Conwy in North Wales. It was generally thought to be an enormous beaver

because the word *afanc* is sometimes used for beaver in local dialects. Llyn yr Afanc is a kind of whirlpool: anything thrown into it will whirl round about before it is sucked down. It used to be thought that it was the Afanc which dragged down animals or people who fell into the Llyn. It was thought to be either a monstrous beaver or a kind of crocodile. According to a 17th-century tradition told in Rhys's *Celtic Folklore* (p. 130), the Afanc, like the Unicorn, was allured by a maiden who persuaded it to lay its head in her lap and fall asleep. While it slept it was chained and the chains were attached to two oxen. When they began to draw it, it awoke and made for the pool, tearing away the maiden's breast which it was holding in its claw. Several men hauled on the chain, but it was the oxen's strength that was effectual, as the Afanc itself confessed. The men were disputing as to which of them had pulled the hardest when the captive suddenly spoke and said:

‘Had it not been for the oxen pulling,
The Afanc had never left the pool.’

[Motif: F420.1.4.]

Aiken Drum. The name ‘Aiken Drum’ is best known in the Scottish nursery rhyme:

There cam’ a man to oor toun,
To oor toun, to oor toun,
There cam’ a man to oor toun
An’ his name was Aiken Drum.

This is quoted in full by Iona and Peter Opie in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* as, ‘There was a man lived in the Moon’. It is, however, the name given by William Nicholson to the Brownie of Blednoch in Galloway. William Nicholson wrote several ballads on folklore themes; ‘Aiken Drum’ is to be found in the third edition of his *Poetical Works* (1878). Aiken Drum in the nursery rhyme wears entirely edible clothes, a hat of cream cheese, a coat of roast beef, buttons of penny loaves, and so on, but the Brownie of Blednoch was naked except for a kilt of green rushes, and like all BROWNIES he was laid by a gift of clothing:

For a new-made wife, fu’ o’ rippish freaks,
Fond o’ a’ things feat for the first five weeks,
Laid a mouldy pair o’ her ain man’s breeks
By the brose o’ Aiken-drum.

Let the learned decide when they convene,
What spell was him and the breeks between;
For frae that day forth he was nae mair seen,
And sair missed was Aiken-drum!

[Motif: F381.3.]

Aillen Mac Midhna. A fairy musician of the TUATHA DE DANANN who came every year at Samhain Eve (All-Hallow Eve) out of Sidhe Finnachaid to Tara, the Royal Palace of the High King, playing so marvellously on his *timpan* (a kind of belled tambourine) that all who heard him were lulled asleep, and while they slept he blew three blasts of fire out of his nostrils and burnt up the Hall of Tara. This happened every Samhain Eve for twenty-three years, until FINN of the FIANNA Finn conquered Aillen and killed him (*Silva Gadelica*, vol. II, pp. 142-4). He conquered him by himself inhaling the fumes of his magic spear, whose point was so venomous that no one who smelled it could sleep, however lulling the music.

[Motifs: F262.3.4; F369.1]

Aine (*aw-ne*). The fairy goddess to whom, with her sister Fenne (or Finnen), Knock Aine and Knock Fennine on the shores of Lough Gur are dedicated. They were the daughters of Egoabal, a king of the TUATHA DE DANANN. Of Aine there is a version of the SWAN MAIDEN story, very similar to those of the GWRAGEDD ANNWN of Wales. One day, as Aine was sitting on the shore of Lough Gur combing her hair, Gerold, the Earl of Desmond, saw her and fell in love with her. He gained control over her by seizing her cloak, and made her his bride. Their child was Earl Fitzgerald, and the TABOO imposed upon his father was that he must never express any surprise at anything his son might do. One night, however, showing off his skill to some maidens, he jumped into a bottle and out again, and his father could not restrain a cry of surprise. Fitzgerald at once left the castle and was seen swimming across the lough in the form of a wild goose towards Garrod Island, under which his enchanted castle was said to lie. At the same time, Aine disappeared into Knock Aine. This story was collected from informants by Evans Wentz and included in *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (p. 79). A somewhat similar story is the more widely known LEGEND OF MULLAGHMAST.

[Motifs: C30; C31; F302.2]

Ainsel. This is a variant of the 'Noman' story and is told in Richardson's *Table-Book* about the FARIES of Northumberland. A widow and her little boy lived in a cottage near Rothley. One night the child was very lively and would not go to bed when his mother did. She warned him that the faries would come and fetch him if he sat up too late, but he only laughed and went on playing. She had not long blown out the candle when a lovely little creature jumped down the chimney and began to frisk about in front of the boy. 'What do they ca' thou?' he said fascinated. 'Ainsel,' she answered. 'And what do they ca' thou?' 'My ainsel,' he answered, cannily, and they began to play together like two children of one race. Presently the fire got low and the little boy stirred it up so vigorously that a cinder blew out and burnt little Ainsel on the foot. She

set up a yell quite disproportionate to her size, 'Wow! I'm brent!' 'Wha's done it? Wha's done it?' said a dreadful voice from the chimney, and the boy made one leap into bed as the old fary mother shot down on to the floor. 'My ainsel! My ainsel!' said the little fary. 'Why then,' said her mother, 'what's all this noise for: there's nyon to blame!' And she kicked Ainsel up the chimney.

[Type 1137. Motif: k602.1]



Allies's list of the fairies. Jabez Allies (1787-1856) in *Antiquities of Worcestershire* (second edition, 1852) included in the book an enlargement of an earlier pamphlet on 'The Ignis Fatuus or Will o' the Wisp and the Fairies', in which he linked many of the place-names of Worcestershire with the names of the FAIRIES in the anonymous 17th-century pamphlet THE LIFE OF ROBIN GOODFELLOW and in Drayton's *Nimphidia*. One was a piece of popular journalism and the other a conspicuous example of the fashionable interest in the DIMINUTIVE FAIRIES among the Jacobean poets, but both works are founded on a common folk tradition which endured until well on into the 19th century.

From *The Life of Robin Goodfellow* Allies quotes:

Pinch and Patch, Gull and Grim,
Goe you together;
For you can change your shapes,
Like to the weather.
Sib and Tib, Licke and Lull,
You have trickes too;
Little Tom Thumb that pipes
Shall goe betwixt you.

And from Drayton's *Nimphidia* he quotes the list of Queen MAB's Maids of Honour:

Hop, and Mop, and Dryp so clear,
Pip, and Trip, and Skip that were
To Mab, their sovereign, ever dear,
Her special maids of honour;