

Photographing Fairies

Making and faking photos a century after Cottingley

19 February - 19 August 2021

[Stills.org/fairies](https://stills.org/fairies)





Detail, *The Cottingley Fairies*.
Frank Quitely (1996)

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Photographing Fairies

This project was inspired by the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Cottingley Fairy Photographs in December 1920. This infamous hoax by Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths produced the original viral selfies — photos of fairies which convinced many people of the existence of supernatural life, but also sparked fierce debate about the agency and ability of girls.

We wanted to find out what young people the same age as Frances Griffiths thought about these photographs now — would they ever be fooled by fake images? Can we believe what we see in the media? How do we navigate a world of airbrushing, filters and deep fakes?

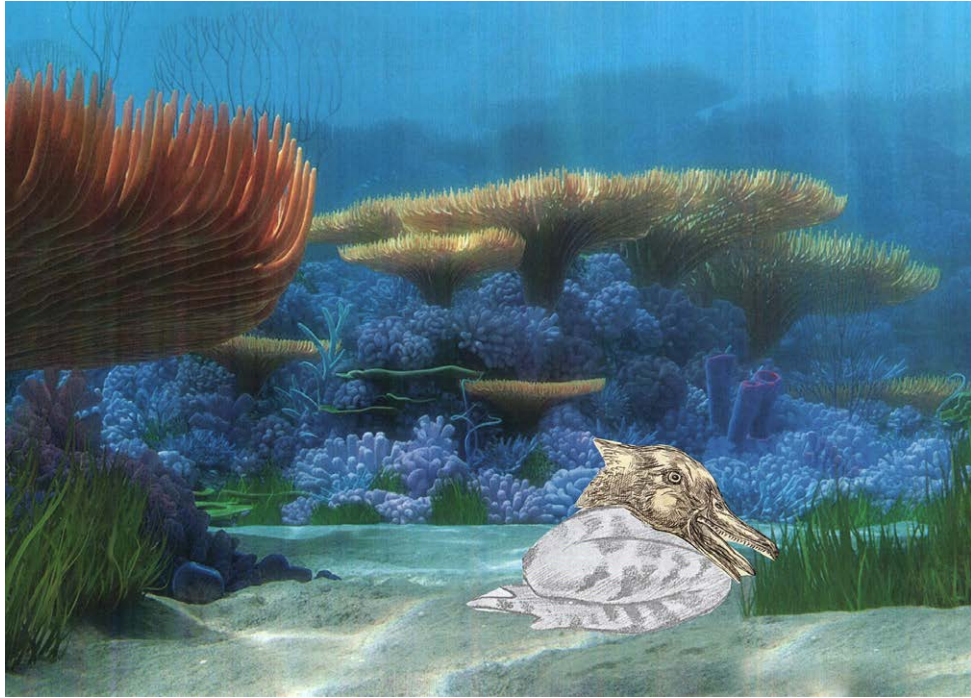
In September 2020, we started working with two groups of young people who meet regularly through Edinburgh Young Carers and Edinburgh Multi-cultural Family Base. We had hoped to get together in the Stills darkroom, set up portrait sessions in the studio and go out finding fairies around the city. Of course, these plans had to change due to Covid-19.

Instead, we spent a couple of hours a week together on zoom, led by artist Morwenna Kearsley in experimental image-making and image-faking. In 1917, Elsie Wright used scissors and glue to create fairies that convinced even Arthur Conan Doyle, so that's where we started. With a box of art materials each, the groups made collages, did collaborative drawings, and staged fake photographs.

Morwenna and the young artists overcame many challenges of working in lockdown — technical glitches, dodgy sound, tiny phone screens etc — to create interesting and beautiful works. We are proud to share them here.



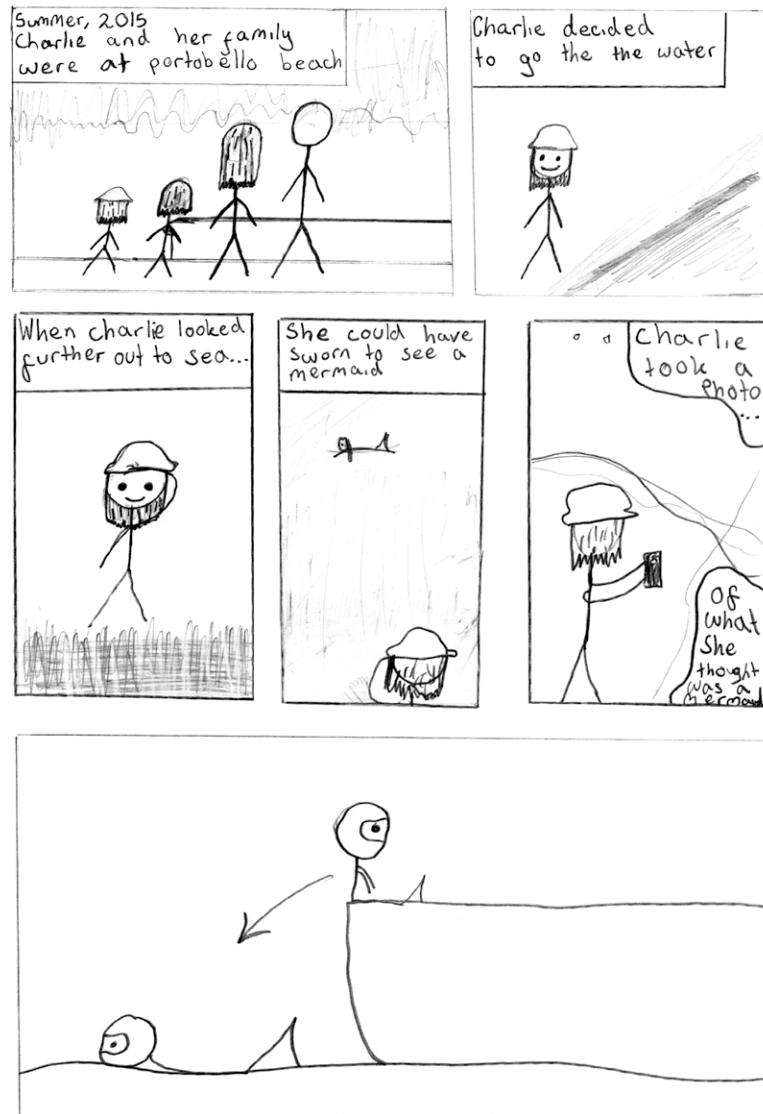
Contents of the art box:
 Scissors
 Glue
 Pens and pencils
 Pictures for collaging
 Coloured paper
 White card
 Sketchbook
 Sweets
 Cyanotype paper
 Bell jar
 Torch
 Black fabric
 Poems
 Comic
 Instructions



Sea Creature. Nabia (2020)

Yves Klein Flies Free. Chloe and Nabia (2020)





The Mermaid.
Charlie (2020)

Stills Creative Learning Programme

Emma Black

Stills opened in the heart of Edinburgh in 1977. It is the oldest gallery in Scotland dedicated to photography. Our founders believed that, through an open gallery and accessible facilities, everyone should be able to enjoy, experience and learn photography. This ethos continues to shape our work today.

Through our Creative Learning programme, we offer focussed and equitable pathways to participation. The Creative Learning programme has two strands: Stills School, which is an alternative photography school for 16–25 year olds who face barriers to participating in the arts, and individual community projects including *Photographing Fairies*.

During the pandemic, activities were delayed. Yet, we knew members of our community were at increasing risk of anxiety, unemployment and missed educational opportunities. We drew upon evolving best practice for blended learning and used our extensive knowledge of digital technology to deliver online activities to groups and individuals whose wellbeing was directly affected by COVID. Stills School was delivered as a digital learning programme. We worked with Alice to redevelop *Photographing Fairies* as an online project. Then, we began work with two women's groups to develop an employability skills project and exhibition on the image of women in the media. Our work transformed and our programmes thrived in new and innovative ways.

Throughout this time, the creativity and commitment of our participants and partners brought us great positivity. Thank you all!

The Cottingley Fairy Photographs



Frances and the Fairies. Elsie Wright (1917)
National Science & Media Museum/SSPL



Fairy-Children in a War Hospital.
The Sphere, January 1918



"Though time and space from you divide me, I have your picture still beside me"
Ellen Clapsaddle

Wartime Fairies

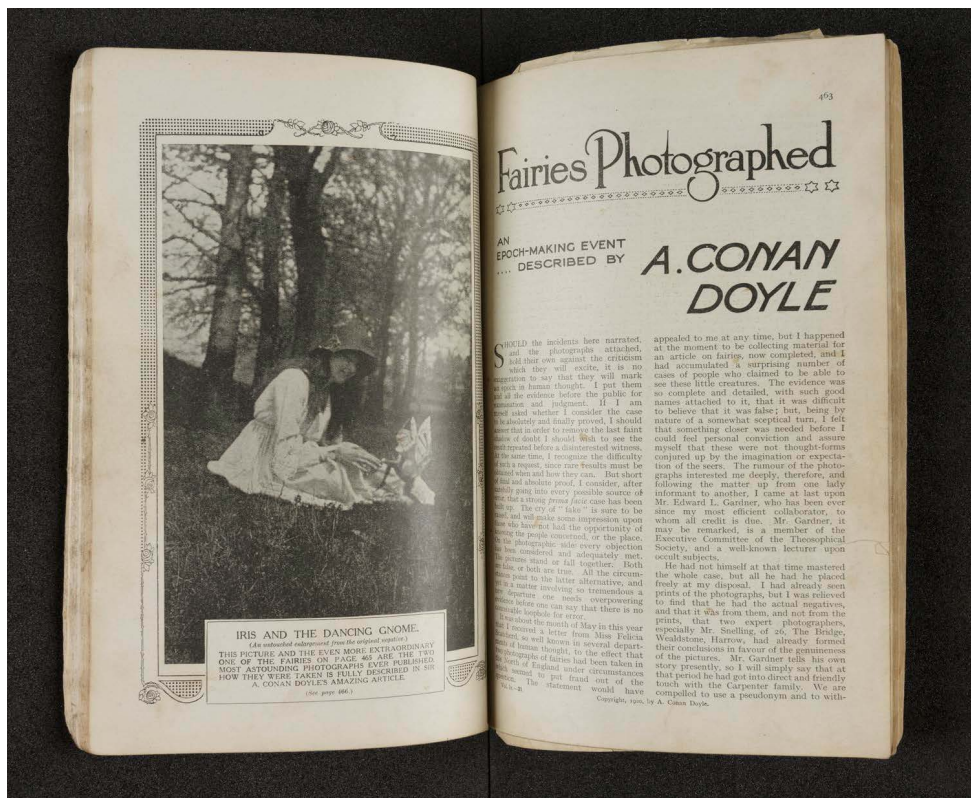
Alice Sage

Fairies were a fashionable obsession in the First World War (1914–18). There were fairy posters, fairy poems, fairy books, fairies in plays like *Peter Pan* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (both selling out in London theatres full of soldiers on leave), and every opportunity people had to dress a little girl up as a fairy, they took it. Fairies offered some magic, some distraction from bombs and bullets.

At the same time, photographs provided connection for separated families, as both studio portraits and home snapshots. This widespread access to cheap photography transformed how people conceptualised separation and memory — just as video calling has changed how we negotiate and understand our current pandemic. Portraits of loved ones kept them close.

Sentimental wartime postcards combined photography with creative techniques of collage, multiple exposures and composite prints to create images which weren't straightforwardly real, but nonetheless described emotional truths.

In the summer of 1917, when Frances Griffiths and her cousin Elsie Wright took their fairy photographs, Frances's father was away fighting. She and her mother had moved from South Africa to England, and moved in with Elsie's family in Cottingley. Her life had been upturned and she had found some friendship with the fairies down by the beck. At first, the girls' fairy photographs were shared like typical home



Fairies Photographed.
The Strand Magazine,
December 1920.
Science Museum Group

snapshots; Frances sent one to a friend, writing on the back:

Elsie and I are very friendly with the beck Fairies. It is funny I never used to see them in Africa. It must be too hot for them there.

But when the photographs appeared in the Strand a couple of years later, they went viral. The magazine sold out and the story was reprinted in newspapers across the country — the Cottingley Fairy Photographs seemed to fascinate everyone.

Their popularity was partly a matter of timing. In December 1920, conscripted soldiers were finally making their way home, to a country that was damaged and disillusioned. The short-lived celebration of the Armistice in 1918 had given way to uncertainty, unemployment and anger at a war that had needlessly torn apart so many lives, and a government that had sacrificed so many men. Those that did come home brought shell-shock and Spanish flu, which would kill so many more. Almost every family in Britain was in mourning. There was a crisis of mental and physical health that we can imagine all too well.

To most people during that time, the Cottingley Fairy Photographs were charming and nostalgic pictures of girls in summer dresses with flowers in their hair, having fun with trick photography. But there was a significant number for whom the discovery of fairies offered hope and magic, and a suggestion that there might be life beyond everyday perceptions.

Against that dark backdrop, the Cottingley Fairy Photographs were a glimmer of brightness.



Fairy Offering Posy to Elsie.
Frances Griffiths (1920)
National Science & Media
Museum/SSPL

The Aftermath

Two collaborators - minxes shall we call them? - have "deceived the very elect". More power to their scissors, we say!

Edward Clodd, Two Lectures on Occultism, 1921

The reaction to the Cottingley Fairy Photographs is as fascinating as the pictures themselves. It seems strange to us now, but the debates around the fairy photographs were real — even if the fairies clearly weren't.

The involvement of Arthur Conan Doyle was key. Without his promotion, the photographs would likely have remained lantern slides in Theosophist lectures, and fallen into obscurity. Doyle was famous worldwide as the creator of Sherlock Holmes, and had the platform of a bestselling author. On top of that, he was an infamously dedicated and outspoken Spiritualist. This made Doyle a very big and easy target for those who wanted to expose the false claims of Spiritualists and fraudulent mediums.

Sceptics were quick to point out the flatness of the fairies and the possibility of a hoax. Believers insisted the negatives were genuine and the girls were innocent. Arguments came down to judgements on Elsie and Frances themselves: were they capable of faking these photographs? Doyle and his sidekick Edward Gardner thought not, and frequently evoked their 'simplicity', character and class, stating:

we have certainly traced the pictures to two children of the artisan class, and such photographic tricks would be entirely beyond them.

Elsie and Frances's photographs took technical skill and



Detail, *The Cottingley Fairies*.
Frank Quitely (1996)

imagination to pull off. They planned, staged, posed and photographed these collaborative selfies all by themselves. Yet Doyle depicted them as accidental photographs, created in the moment by innocent, artless children, because this supported his own agenda.

Doyle wanted to prove that life existed on a spectrum of vibrations. Some humans had perception further along the vibration spectrum — clairvoyants, for example — and could see fairies and spirits. It seemed, also, that these talents were more commonly found in young women. So Elsie and Frances were cast as mediums in this occult drama, not as competent photographers.

Gardner swiftly took the original negatives and acquired the copyright, giving him control of the photographs and any income from them. Doyle changed their names in the Strand articles (further obscuring their authorship), but Elsie and Frances were quickly identified and — in today's terms — doxed. Journalists turned up on the Wright family's doorstep and hounded Elsie at work. They spotted Elsie's artistic talent and 'unusually imaginative temperament'. They also discovered that she had worked at a Bradford photography studio straight out of school, and had made many paintings of fairies, now displayed in her house. She was also clearly a young woman of nearly 20. All these facts were inconvenient for Doyle and Gardner.

Doyle was always careful to keep money out of his Spiritualist pursuits, fearing that it would attract cries of corruption. Unfortunately, that also meant that Elsie and Frances never got



Detail, *The Cottingley Fairies*.
Frank Quitely (1996)

any financial reward for their work, or compensation for their experiences. In 1983, Elsie recalled:

I thought it a bit ironical as I sat mending flaws in cloth in a weaving mill ... while at the same time Mr Gardner who was a theosophist was on a fully paid tour of the universities all over the USA telling our Fairy Story.¹

Doyle has often overshadowed Elsie and Frances in the telling of the story, and from the distance of a century, we can better see the power relations between two young female photographers and a world famous author.² By diminishing their role in creating the pictures, Doyle and Gardner robbed Elsie and Frances of power over their own images.

For most of their lives, Elsie and Frances were under scrutiny and subject to regular investigations, but they stuck to their story. Then, in the 1980s, following a series of articles in the *British Journal of Photography*, both women wrote separate memoirs giving their own account of what happened (some called them 'confessions'). Frances died in 1986, followed by Elsie in 1988, and the case was closed.

But the Cottingley Fairy Photographs did not go away. Frank Quitely and Paul Yellovich created this comic for *The Big Book of Hoaxes*, a collection of 'the greatest lies ever told', in recognition that the Cottingley Fairies were known around the world as treasures of contemporary folklore.

By the 1990s, the story around the Cottingley Fairy Photographs had changed, and Quitely and Yellovich's version foregrounded Elsie and Frances rather than Doyle. It was no

¹ Quoted in Joe Cooper, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies* (1990)

² Alex Owen, 'Borderland Forms: Arthur Conan Doyle, Albion's Daughters, and the Politics of the Cottingley Fairies'. *History Workshop Journal*, 38/1 (1994)
Nicola Bown, 'There Are Fairies at the Bottom of Our Garden: Fairies, Fantasy and Photography'. *Textual Practice*, 10/1 (1996)



Elsie Wright (about 1930)
*Frances Way née Griffiths with
her children* (1932)
Science Museum Group

longer about proving they were fake (or real...). Writers and artists were more interested in the personalities and motivations involved. The women's voices were amplified in books and academic articles, and these in turn inspired new interpretations.

One peculiar feature of the Cottingley legacy is the depiction of 'two little girls' at the centre of the story. As mentioned above, Doyle glossed over the fact that Elsie was officially an adult when the pictures were taken, and later representations have continued this mis-representation. In the Hollywood film *Fairy Tale: A True Story*, both girls look about 10; a recent newspaper headline is typical: 'Are fairies real? Two little girls once made many believe'.³

This insistence on the girls' littleness is a sign of fantasy itself, and we must wonder why it makes a better story than the truth.

³ *Fairy Tale: A True Story*, dir. Charles Sturridge (1997)
Headline from *The Gazette*,
24 July 2020



Detail, *Under the Dock Leaves*. Richard Doyle (1878)

The Ever-Changing Persistence of Fairies

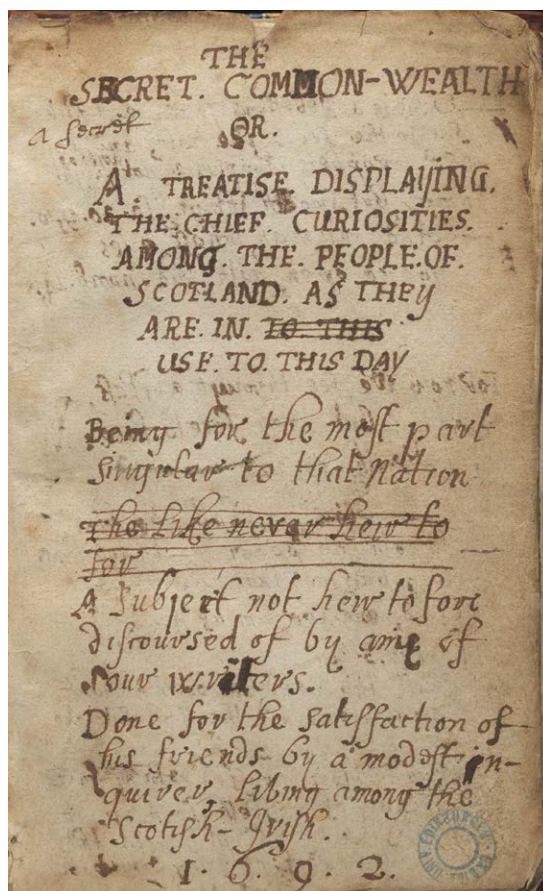
Sarah Dunnigan

Fairies have long been a source of fascination, perhaps sealed in our minds as the ethereal winged sprites of a Romantic ballet, the fairy godmothers of a Victorian children's picture book or, in a 21st century commodity culture of spirit and magic, as collectibles, gifts, even as part of a new 'self-care' regime. Culture remakes the fairies in its own image, for its own purpose.

Renaissance treatises sought to classify fairies amongst a diverse spirit world which included hobgoblins, brownies, pucks, ghosts, demons, werewolves, and witches; 18th century antiquarian works catalogued fairy beings alongside geological specimens and rare plants, the remnants of vanishing national cultures and regional traditions. But fairies are resistant beings, endlessly metamorphic, despite the best efforts of collectors, writers, and artists. *Peter Pan* may have contributed to sentimental, tinsel-tinged notions of fairies but Peter himself embodies that fairy elusiveness in deliberately remaining outside domesticity's safe and fixed enclosure at the end.

The deep historical wellspring of tradition and folklore in these islands, especially in Scotland and Ireland, sees the fairies as capricious, often malevolent beings, in fragile alliance with the human world, especially at those liminal times of the year such as Midsummer. If the balance is right, fairies can help and heal but there are plentiful stories of vengeful 'elf-shot' or of unwelcome fairy custodians at human childbirth who

Sarah Dunnigan is writing a book about fairies in Scottish literature and leads SELCIE, Scotland's Early Literature for Children Initiative, at the University of Edinburgh.

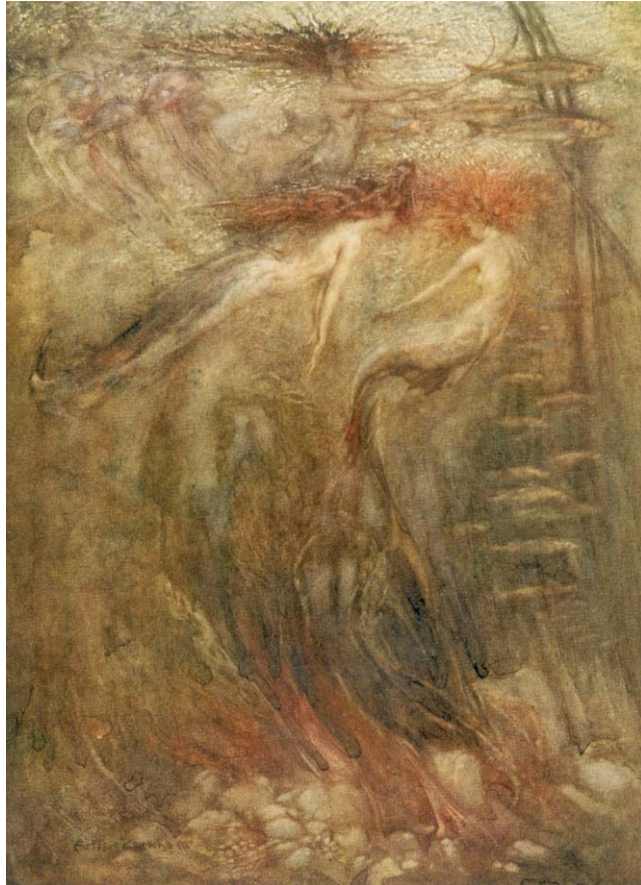


The Secret Common-Wealth.
Rev Robert Kirk (1692)
University of Edinburgh

leave changelings in place. Fairies can mix with the dead; Scottish witchcraft trials contain accounts of fairy communicants who saw loved ones, long gone, in the company of the Elpha quene. These dark and gothic underworlds are emotionally charged since often reached at the end of a journey of loss or longing — entering the fairy realm in folktale is often through curiosity or desire. In Scottish ballad tradition, the fairy queen can appear more like a vampiric femme fatale than any ethereal creature; fairy cruelty can inspire great deeds of love as when Janet, in Tam Lin, unspells a terrifyingly shape-changing lover.

Fairy worlds are dynamic and creative, charged with energy. A late 17th century treatise written by a Scottish clergyman, Robert Kirk, gives vivid life to the dark undertow of fairy energy, describing genderless 'chameleon-like bodies' which 'swim in the air; near the earth...'. These are elusive yet embodied beings, strangely beautiful and uncannily close to us. We talk of 'seeing' fairies but often, in these early folkloric and literary accounts, they are just as much sensed, felt, perceived.

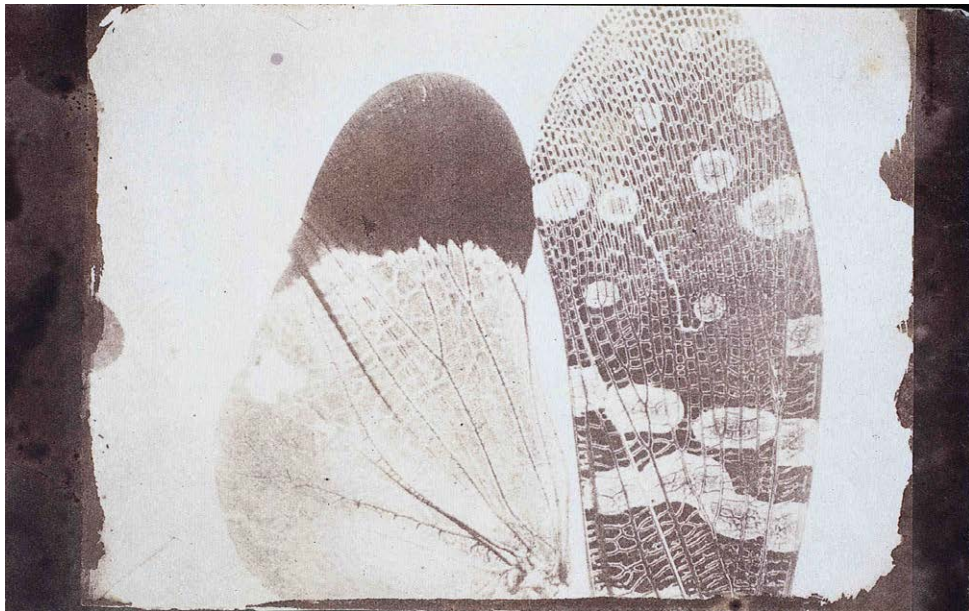
Fairies belong to earth, woods, and water; to trees, hills, and lochs; to places and spaces above, beneath, and around us which can be either capacious or tiny — the sea around the Shetland isles or a single flower. Fairies, and other kindred spirits, have long been associated with the green world — their powers linked to sacred places or wells, with various herbs, plants, and animals, often mirrored in the green fabrics of their clothes and shoes in Scottish tradition.



Mermaids. Arthur Rackham
(1914)
Mary Evans Picture Library/
Arthur Rackham

Associated with the earth, fairies embody wildness — *wilderit things* in the words of the 19th century Borders writer James Hogg — but also share in its fragility. In ballads and folktales, enchanted, fairy-haunted landscapes offer kinship and healing to those with sufficient sensitivity to the non-human. Those 'fairy sensitives' who enter a heightened, sensory world may not always be able to tell what they've seen, or may leave with a gift. But no-one gets out of fairyland unchanged; these transformative beings are themselves the source of further transformation. Fairies continue to live at the edge of our vision, our dreams and desires as well as our nightmares. Perhaps that is their gift to us — the opportunity for change, for renewal, as they recharge new imaginative visions.

Photography and Fairies



Photomicrograph of insect wings. William Henry Fox Talbot (about 1840)
National Media Museum.

⁴ William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844)

Fairy Pictures and Spirit Photography

Alice Sage

From its earliest days, photography promised to expand human perception and reveal new truths and knowledge.

In 1823, playing with a camera obscura in the Italian sunshine, Henry Fox Talbot became enchanted with his

*fairy pictures, creations of the moment and destined as rapidly to fade away.*⁴

So started his quest to fix these pictures permanently — to pin the fairies down. Once his new calotype process had achieved fixed photographs, Talbot's curiosity moved beyond the visible world. He supposed

the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness.

By the 1910s, developments in camera technology made these promises — to fix fleeting 'fairy' images and to see beyond darkness — into real possibilities. Popular, mass produced cameras gave ordinary people the power to freeze time and movement (the ubiquitous Brownie camera was even named after Scottish household sprites, suggesting domestic magic). Some extraordinary people even used cameras to access life after death, through the miracle of spirit photography.

The huge number of war deaths — plus the policy of not repatriating soldiers' bodies — led to a surge in occult and supernatural beliefs after 1915. Stories of telepathic communication, battlefield angels and superstitious objects were rife, as people came to terms with separation, unexplained disappearances and sudden death without the comfort of traditional funeral rites.



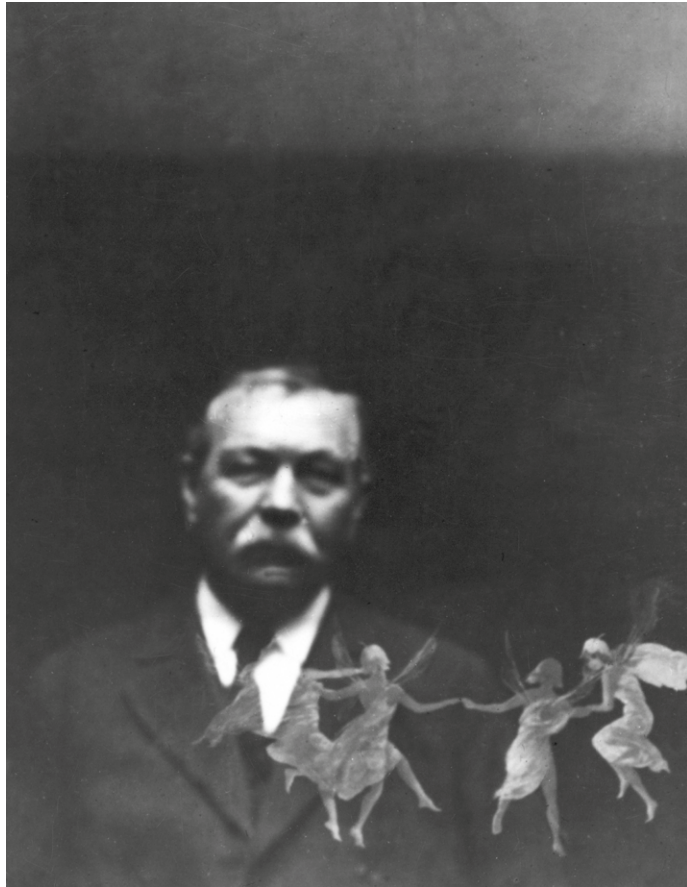
Spirit Photographs. William Hope (about 1920)
National Media Museum.

One of the more organised occult movements was Theosophy, founded by Helena Blavatsky in New York in the 1870s, and by the 1910s a worldwide religion based in India, led by the British social reformer Annie Besant. Edward Gardner had turned to Theosophy after a bereavement, and had risen to become president of London's Blavatsky Lodge, where he lectured on universal brotherhood, reincarnation, and the existence of elemental beings. Elsie Wright's mother Polly was interested in Theosophy herself, and saw her daughter's fairy photographs as evidence of 'nature spirits'.

Doyle's form of Spiritualism, on the other hand, was rooted in his belief in life after death, and communication with 'some other sphere'. Like his friend Oliver Lodge the radio pioneer, Doyle saw a continuity between cutting edge science and extra-sensory perception, shaped through a vocabulary of vibrations, waves, energy fields and electromagnetism. Fairies and photographs were both products of light, and were therefore potential tools of necromancy: communication with the dead. After the death of his son Kingsley in 1918, Doyle redoubled his commitment to Spiritualism, and in particular, the Spirit photographs of William Hope.

Hope was a high profile Spirit Photographer, and was the focus of intense investigations by parapsychologists including Harry Price and William Marriott. Time and again they proved that Hope's photographs of spirits were double exposures: he would use a prepared plate, with a photograph already exposed on it, which appeared as a ghostly presence when developed. This chicanery was so widely known that debunkers marked the plates to expose Hope's switcheroos.

At first, many assumed that the Cottingley Fairy Photographs



*Arthur Conan Doyle with
Fairies. William Marriott
(1921)
HarryPrice/MaryEvans*

had been made the same way. Marriott even produced a double exposure portrait of Doyle during a London lecture, which revealed fairies upon printing (the resulting picture is more sad than magical). Doyle had staunchly defended William Hope against what he saw as the underhand tactics of Marriott and Price, but this did not stop him and Gardner from marking the plates they gave to Elsie and Frances in 1920 as an apparent safeguard against fraud. Of course, the marks proved nothing — the girls' fairy photographs did not involve any surreptitious substitutions.

A believer until the very end, Doyle hoped that the Cottingley Fairy Photographs would 'jolt the material twentieth-century mind out of its heavy ruts in the mud'. I wonder how many of his readers thought of the deep muddy trenches of Flanders when they read these words, and their heavy consequences. Doyle's fairies promised instead 'that there is a glamour and a mystery to life'.

Glamour was a strange word to choose to describe the Cottingley fairies, but it was also perfect. In traditional folklore, glamour (from the Scots *glaumerie*) is the unique and special power of fairies to assume the form of human desires, and thus to deceive them, and lead them astray. Shape-shifting glamour makes fairies irresistibly beautiful and enchanting, but also masks the darker truths of supernatural life.

By 1920, the word had come to describe the kind of charismatic female beauty seen in fashion magazines and Hollywood movies, while retaining a sense of illusion and projection. So Doyle's use of 'glamour' unintentionally revealed his own enchantment and deception, while recognising the fashionable beauty of Elsie's fairies. He had certainly been led astray.



Belljar. Morwenna Kearsley (2020)



Articles of Glass. William Henry Fox Talbot (about 1840)

⁵ Morwenna Kearsley, *Sundae for Lee Miller* (2020)

A Contemporary Spirit Photograph

Morwenna Kearsley's black and white photograph of a glass vessel, against a black draped background, is a still life of formal severity to rival Henry Fox Talbot's *Articles of Glass*. The picture is so dark that the bell jar disappears around the edges. At the centre of the image, appearing to hover in the jar, is a smudgy figure — a fairy? cohering from a tangled web of light, like ectoplasmic candy floss. At a glance, it seems a clear human figure, but if you keep looking (or zoom in), it just dissolves.

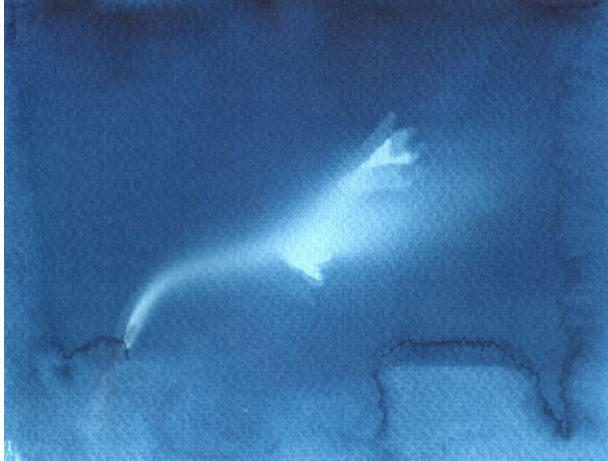
Kearsley described making this photograph:

I sit the empty bell jar on the cloth and focus the 5x4 plate camera on its gleaming edge; my back pushed up against the wall, another length of black cloth covering my head. When I'm ready, I load the darkslide, turn off the light and in the total darkness open the shutter.⁵

For eight minutes she held the faulty shutter release cable of the camera open with one hand, while moving the torch of her iPhone with the other. The phone, the eye of the camera and the hands of the artist connected, and Kearsley became a bionic conduit for the photograph; only later, when she developed the negative, did she know what she had summoned.

Kearsley has identified the ghostly figure that appeared in the bell jar as Lee Miller, the mercurial surrealist photographer. The bell jar had been an intentional homage to Miller, so her spectral appearance hit Kearsley like a 'bolt of electricity'. The ritual in the dark room, the veil, the joining of hands, and the unpredictable and uncanny emergence of a new presence...

Morwenna Kearsley is a Glasgow-based artist who uses photography, film and creative writing to think about seeing and being.



Mysterious Cyanotypes.
Kelly Dunnett (2020)

Kearsley's solo seance — and the resulting photograph — shimmers with glamour and mystery.

Lee Miller, coincidentally, was born the same year as Frances Griffiths (1907). They were both in that first generation to visit the cinema as children, and have easy access to cameras — Miller learned to take pictures with her father's box Brownie. Lee Miller became an icon of glamour; her fairytale life story, from New York fashion model to Parisian surrealist and pioneering war photographer, is documented in intoxicatingly beautiful photographs that masked a dark reality of trauma.

Like the fairies in the Cottingley photographs, the being in *Belljar* is a real figment of the imagination.



In A Shaded Place. Wendy Murdoch (1995)

⁶ Wendy Murdoch, *Children & Computers: Collected Works 1995 – 2014* (2015)

Photography and Fantasy

The traditional image of the playing child as happy and carefree was not one that I saw when I looked through the camera's viewfinder.⁶

A boy has come down to the woods — to the shaded place of the work's title — and he has encountered something unnerving: his doppelgänger or clone. The boy we can see most clearly is frozen, fists clenched, mouth open in surprise or protest. His imperfect reflection makes a pacifying gesture, arms soft, hands open. They both melt a little into the grassy ground.

Mystery abounds in Wendy Murdoch's *In A Shaded Place*. This image is one of a series of photographs of Yorkshire children that Murdoch made in the early 1990s, in oblique response to seeing the original negatives of the Cottingley Fairy Photographs in the Brotherton Library, Leeds. The magic of Elsie and Frances's pictures resonated with her own innovations with digital technology, and her interests in fantasy, play and imagination. Murdoch pushed at the limits of photography, stretching the possibilities of the camera as a tool. It was through alteration and manipulation, that her pictures developed their meaning.

In 1918, Rose Fyleman wrote 'There are fairies at the bottom of our garden', evoking an overgrown territory beyond the manicured, domestic garden, towards the wildness of the woods. Murdoch explicitly referenced the Cottingley Fairy Photographs in her choice of location: the woods of the Yorkshire Dales. She found the liminal, shaded place of fairies and children, where the dappled light plays tricks; as it did for Elsie and Frances.



Adri Ré and Spikeasoarus.
Chloe and Nerea (2020)

A century after Elsie and Frances played in Cottingley glen, Nerea and Chloe took their Covidsaurs to their 'favourite tree' on the edge of an Edinburgh golf course — another liminal space, the private-public 'out of bounds'.

The fairies in Cottingley glen were friendly, but there is danger in this place; as well as the unexpected encounters, the children risk being absorbed by the fertile vegetation — notice the bodies merge with leaves and grass while they stand captivated by their own fantasies. They are also likely to be drawn, like Red Riding Hood, deeper into the forest:

There is no way of maturing, the fairytales repeatedly tell us, without entering the dark wood, whether we locate it in the outside world or the inner world of dreams and the unconscious.⁷

The shaded place of McMurdo's photographs is the overlap of these outside and inner worlds; as she describes, 'between external reality on the one hand and the imaginative world on the other'. This topography was charted by the mid-century psychoanalyst D W Winnicott, who described how a playing child

without hallucinating, pulls out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality.⁸

Commentators on the Cottingley photographs felt about for similar descriptions of children's creative processes. Doyle wondered if the fairies were 'thought-forms'. Edward Gardner found the origins in the girls' bodies: they emanated loosely-knit ectoplasm which formed into fairy bodies visible to only themselves and the camera. Fairy pictures, dream potential, thought-forms, ectoplasm, imagination — these words cluster in the shaded place between reality and fantasy.

⁷ Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood* (2003)

⁸ Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971)

Reflections on Social Media



Above: *Candyland*
Below: *Wig Shop*
Nerea and Skye (2020)



Teenage Gaze. Petra Collins
(2013)

Many people have written about the uncanny doubling in McMurdo's photographs, her anticipation of cloning technologies (Dolly the sheep was born the year after these photographs were made) and robotics, and how well they evoke Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage', when the ego emerges in response to seeing oneself as 'other' — an image of ourselves as seen by others.

Jacqueline Rose has identified a 'confusion of children and fairies' in the early 1900s, which led to fairies becoming smaller and more harmless, and children being idolised. Child readers in 1921 were certainly encouraged to identify with fantasy beings: 'remember to be the fairy when you are saying the fairy poems'.⁹

By the 2010s, identification with fantasies went far beyond poetry. Social media and smart phones turned cameras into mirrors. Self-portraiture is nothing new, but selfies reflected our image back to us in real time, along with the projected gaze, comments and judgements of innumerable others.

Since the early 2010s, photographer Petra Collins has celebrated the aesthetics of 21st century adolescent girlhood, of dressing up and mucking about for the camera — including bathroom-mirror selfies. Collins explained that social media profiles 'mimic our physical selves and a lot of the time are even more important'.¹⁰ A work titled *Teenage Gaze* foregrounds a sharp iPhone screen, complete with face-recognition rectangle, over the blurred figures of two girls posing together. Unlike Elsie and Frances, 21st century girls anticipate the attention of the outside world.

At the outset of the Photographing Fairies project, the most relevant thing about the Cottingley Fairy Photographs was

⁹ Constance Spender, 'Poetry and the Child'. *The Argosy* (1921)

¹⁰ Quoted in Carmen Winant, 'Our Bodies, Online'. *Aperture*, 5 January 2017



Blurry screenshot of zoom workshop (2020)



Frances and the Leaping Fairy.
Elsie Wright (1920)

¹¹ 'How President Trump took fake news into the mainstream'. *BBC News*, 12 November 2018

¹² Ian Sample, 'What are deepfakes – and how can you spot them?' *The Guardian*, 13 January 2020

their fake-ness. In 1920, Doyle expected a 'cry of fake' to meet the pictures, but by 2019, this cry was a standard part of public discourse. Fake news — the petulant cry of then-President Trump — was 'a global problem challenging the way we share information and perceive the world around us', in both its real-fake and fake-fake forms.¹¹

Manipulated deepfake videos used artificial intelligence to swap voices and faces; sinister '21st century photoshoping ... weaponised against women'.¹² Selfie culture has produced its own forms of fake: filters, airbrushing and surgical enhancements create a feedback loop of aspiration and emulation.

And then 2020. In the last year, so much has changed that we cannot avoid rethinking photographs, digital images and our relationship to them. More than ever, we've relied on social media for social contact. Face-to-face is screen-to-screen.

Wendy McMurdo's *shaded place* might be the grey area behind/inside the black mirrored screens of our devices. The boy's reaction to his false reflection — gaping in frozen horror — recalls the alienation of seeing ourselves onscreen. We can even recognise that refracted gaze, drifting over the others' shoulder, familiar from video calls where eye contact is impossible. Frances and Elsie have the same unfocused gaze towards the fairies in their photos — a result of their flatness.

Communication in 2020 was a battle to break through the pain of glitchy self-representation. The shame of continuing to talk when your digital counterpart has frozen, mid-enunciation, on another's screen. You've frozen, you're mute. Most of us don't have the magic power of glamour to control how we appear to others.



The Vampire's Cave. Jayda Browne (2020)

Conclusion: The Vampire's Cave

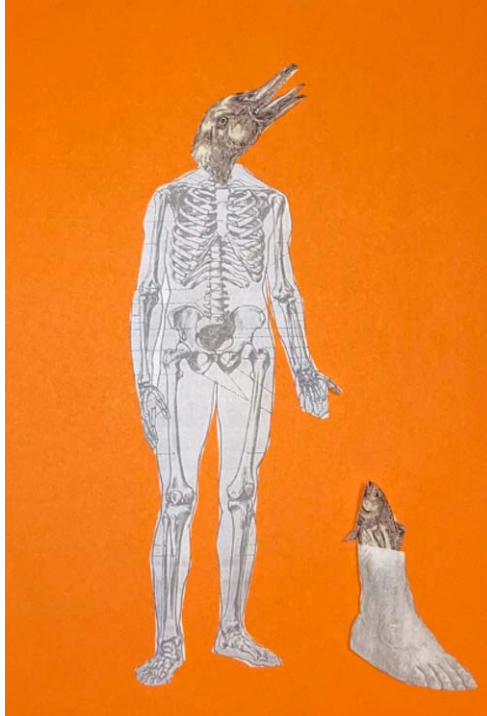
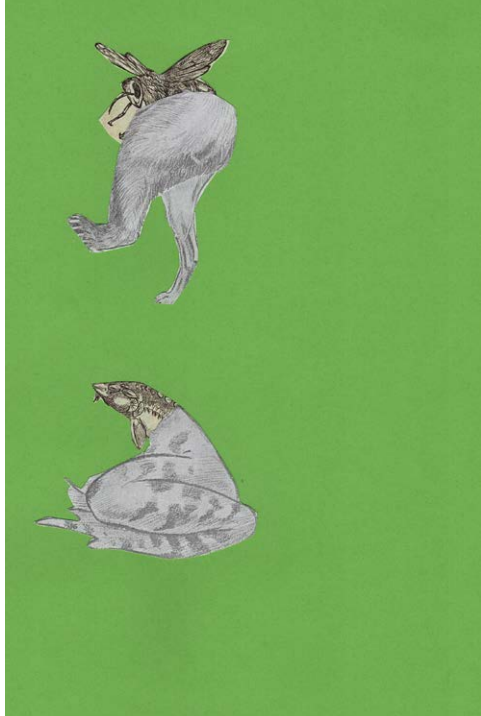
The mouth of the cave threatens with fangs of rock, framing the deep maw that sinks away into darkness. In front, a smartly dressed girl seems unconcerned as she strokes her long hair. Beside her, an upright mirror reflects with a glassy emptiness. The truth dawns on us — the girl is the vampire!

This self-portrait, made by 12 year old Jayda Browne during the Photographing Fairies project in 2020, responds to the Cottingley Fairy Photographs and their legacy. Browne's fantasy space is the darkest yet. She has turned away from the sparkle of fairies to the gothic glamour of vampires, and given herself the lead role in the supernatural encounter. The photo's revelation — that the girl is the nocturnal vampire herself — subverts the last two lines of Rose Fyleman's poem about 'fairies at the bottom of the garden':

*She's a little girl all day, but at night she steals away
Well— it's ME!*

Born a century after Frances Griffiths, and a year after Steve Jobs revealed the first iPhone, Browne has grown up in a photoshopped world of digital images and never known a time before Facebook. Christened the zoomers, so much of her generation's life is mediated on screen and performed for the webcam. Nearly 10% of her whole life has been spent in some form of lockdown.

No surprise then that Browne chose an empty mirror, with the black frame and proportions of a smartphone, to signify her status as undead. If, as McMurdo has suggested, 'children use creativity to get out of their own heads, out of their spaces', what might it mean for a girl create a picture of herself without a reflection? Is this a fantasy of invisibility, of being unfixed, unseen?



*Collage Creatures. Nabia,
Chloe and Morwenna (2020)*



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Artist Morwenna Kearsley worked with young people aged
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