

**Virtual Special Issue 2017: *Studies in Fairy Traditions*--podcast text (written and read by Juliette Wood)**

In the seventeenth century, the Oxford antiquarian John Aubrey famously predicted the imminent demise of the fairies. Despite Aubrey's fears however, fairies have proved surprisingly resilient, and fairy lore has provided a fruitful area of investigation for contributors to the journal *Folklore* since its founding in the late nineteenth century.

Interest in fairy traditions reflects, at least in part, the increased interest of the Victorian and Edwardian eras with its reaction to industrialization and move towards fantasy and mysticism. Alfred Nutt devoted one of his presidential lectures to 'Fairy Mythology' in English literature (Nutt 1897). The lecture focused on their important role in English and Shakespearean literature and their links to Celtic tradition. In addition, Nutt also laid the groundwork for a more general discussion of what he described as 'the essential conceptions which underlie generally that mythology, and from which it derives force and sanction' (31). His use of the term 'mythology' underscored the importance attached to this body of tradition and to the perception that there was a coherent and recoverable body of beliefs underpinning narratives about fairies. Even before Nutt's influential address, articles on fairy lore had appeared in the Society's journal. Walter Gregor, a founding member of The Folklore Society, published accounts of Scottish fairies (Gregor 1883). The Swansea-based solicitor and folklorist, Sidney Hartland, presented Welsh material (Hartland 1888).

The work of early researchers laid a foundation for a coherent approach to this area of investigation. Ideas about fairies conflated traditions from English and French medieval romances with material from Wales, Brittany, Cornwall, Scotland, and the Isle of Man--the so-called Celtic cultures. In this context, Irish fairy beliefs occupied a special place in as much as the Celtic Revival of the late nineteenth century viewed them as a critical feature of Ireland's cultural heritage. The term, fairy, encompassed a range of magical creatures and focused primarily on early modern examples. Katharine Briggs, one of the Society's most distinguished researchers in fairy scholarship, contributed articles throughout her long career. Briggs' work ranged widely, covering different types of fairies and their distinctive regional characteristics, as well as examples of contact between fairies and humans retold in her inimitable style (Briggs 1961).

Earlier studies concentrated on literature and favoured ancient origins, whether in the pagan or Celtic past or as a folk memory of a prehistoric race (MacCulloch 1932). No single origin theory has ever accounted for every aspect of this complex material, but various suggested influences have included folk memories of earlier inhabitants, debased pagan deities, the spirits of the dead, and early religious beliefs subsumed, at least in Europe, into a prevailing Christian culture. Subsequent contributors to the journal *Folklore* have continued to examine both literary and oral sources, but the focus has shifted from origin to include the function of fairy beliefs in different contexts.

Roger Lancelyn Green's article develops ideas put forward originally in Alfred Nutt's presidential address (Green 1962). It suggests that a 'new fairy-world made out of floating traditions both literary and popular' (93) emerged in the literature of the Elizabethan era from a fusion between the fairies of folk tradition and the supernatural beings of medieval romance. T. Corrigan Correll's article on the relation between fairy beliefs and magico/medical beliefs in Ireland reflects changing attitudes to Celtic fairy traditions (Correll 2005). Diminutive, winged fairies are not prominent in folklore; rather they were influenced by the rising popularity of children's literature in the Victorian era. As a staple for realizations of the fairy world in modern fantasy and film, they illustrate the ways in which traditional patterns can be varied to suit new genres (Wood 2006). Other studies examine the links between fairy belief and spiritualism (Young 2013): 139-56), disability and fairy belief (Eberly 1988), and eco-criticism (Letcher 2001). The articles covered in this Virtual Special Edition indicate that patterns of fairy belief have a long heritage, and new areas of research are an indication that they will continue to provide opportunities for further investigation.