

W. Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, (Oxford,1911)

Wentz's dates are 1878-1965. This is a book by a thoroughly "modern" man, a graduate of Stanford and student of the great psychologist William James (1842-1910), who yet, seemingly, entertains a firm belief in fairies. Wentz did lots of field work in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Man, Brittany and Cornwall, so it is very much part of the pan-Celtic movement at the time. Wentz was much influenced by the great anthropologist Andrew Lang (1844-1912) into believing that the ultimate explanation is psychic.

He discusses folklorist David MacRitchie's famous work *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890) which is the main source for theory that the fairies represent a distorted memory of an earlier earth-dwelling pygmy race, and cites the evidence against it, pp.xxii-xxiii.

He then passes to the theory that fairy belief is a survival of Druidical lore, pp.xxiii-iv, and it is obvious that there is a lot of serious argument on this subject going on in the pages of heavyweight Victorian journals.

Wentz also cites the mythology theory--that fairies are shrunken figures of the old pagan divinities, p.xxiv.

He sees America, interestingly, as part of a great modern Celtic empire stretching to the Pacific, p.xxviii

He quotes a story from an informant called Steven Ruan, a piper of Galway, about fairy gifts (for their influence was not always malign) and there's numerous references to pipers and their connections with the fairies: "There used to be an old piper called Flannery who lived in Oranmore, County Galway. I imagine he was one of the old generation. And one time the *good people* took him to Fairyland to learn his profession. He studied music with them for a long time, and when he returned he was as great a piper as any in Ireland. But he died young, for the *good people* wanted him to play for them." p.40

There's a lot of what a modern reader might think mystical mumbo-jumbo in Wentz's book, the writer believes in fairies, and in Atlantis, too, and for a particularly vivid example of rabid Celtic mysticism from which this kind of thing springs, see p.59.

It seems that Alexander Carmichael, the distinguished Scottish folklorist has an introductory article about the importance of the fairies, and drawing attention to the number of compounds--fairy-this, fairy-that, he says "The blackchanter of Clan Chattan' is said to have been given to a famous Macpherson piper by a fairy woman who loved him;...and the Macrimmons of Bororaig, [sic] pipers to the Macleods of Macleod, had a chanter called '*Sionnsair airgid na mna sithe*', 'the silver chanter of the fairy woman.' p.86

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Wentz cites one John Dunbar of Tomatin, in Inverness-shire: “My Grandmother believed firmly in fairies, and I have heard her tell a good many stories about them. They were a small people dressed in green, and had dwellings underground in dry spots. Fairies were often heard in the hills over there (pointing), and I believe something was there. They were awful for music, and used to be heard very often playing the bagpipes.” p.95

And this, interestingly from Edwardian musicologist and folk-song expert Frances Tolmie of Skye (1840-1926): “As a child I was not permitted to hear about fairies. At twenty I was seeking and trying to understand the beliefs of my fathers in the light of modern ideas. I was very determined not to lose the past.

The fairy-lore originated in a cultured class in very ancient times. The peasants inherited it; they did not invent it. [are we recollecting “trickle down” theories of cultural transmission at this point?] With the loss of Gaelic in our times came the loss of folk-ideals. The classical and English influences combined had a killing effect;” Tolmie continues, “so that the instinctive religious feelings which used to be among our people when they kept alive the fairy-traditions is dead. We have intellectually-constructed creeds and doctrines which take its place.” p.99 [So fairy lore is seen by one prominent intellectual of this period at least as not inimical to orthodox religious belief? Do we recollect Robert Kirk’s pronouncements about this?]

And in the Isle of Barra, in the Outer Hebrides, Wentz got this, further underlining the connection between the fairies and superior gifts in music: “I heard my father say that a neighbour of his father, that is of my grandfather, was married twice, and had three children from the first marriage, and when married for the second time, a son and daughter. His second wife did not seem to be kind enough to the children of the first wife, neglecting their food and clothing and keeping them constantly at hard work in the fields at herding.

One morning when the man and his second wife were returning from mass they passed the pasture where their cows were grazing and heard the enjoyable *skirrels* of the bagpipes. The father said, ‘What may this be?’ and going off the road found the eldest son of the first wife playing the bagpipes to his heart’s pleasure; and asked him earnestly, ‘How did you come to play the bagpipes so suddenly, or where did you get this splendid pair of pipes?’ The boy replied, ‘An old man came to me while I was in the action of roasting pots in a pit-fire and said, ‘Your step-mother is bad to you and in ill-will towards you.’ I told the man I was sensible that that was the case, and then he said to me, ‘If I give you a trade will you be inclined to follow

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it?’ I said yes, and the old man then continued, ‘How would you like to be a piper by trade?’ ‘I would gladly become a piper,’ says I, ‘but what am I to do without the bagpipes and the tunes to play?’ ‘I’ll supply the bagpipes,’ he said, ‘and as long as you have them you’ll never want for the most delightful tunes.’ The male descendants of the boy in question were all famous pipers thereafter, and the last of them was a piper to the late Cluny MacPherson of Cluny.” pp.203-4. [So fairy intervention is cited as the reason for Calum Piobaire’s skills, founder of the famous dynasty of Macpherson pipers pp.103-4]

On Barra he met an aged piper, Donald McKinnon, then ninety-six years old, from whom he got a good stock of fairy lore, pp.105-7, including the fairies ability to confer high degrees of technical skill instantaneously, in this case to a boat-building apprentice.

For more on this, see Wentz’s section on ‘The Minstrels or Musicians of the *Sidhe*’, pp.297-300, which notes the vast superiority of fairy to mortal music--its ability to induce healing slumber and to transform.

“Perhaps in the first musician, Cascoradh, though he is described as the son of a *Tuatha De Danann* minstrel, we behold a mortal like one of the many Irish pipers and musicians who used to go, or even go yet, to the fairy-folk to be educated in the musical profession, and then come back as the most marvellous players that ever were in Ireland;” p.299

...”we meet with another fairy musician. And to him O’Donnell says:--’By Heaven’s grace again, since first I heard the fame of them that within the hills and under the earth beneath us make the fairy music--music sweeter than thy strains I never heard; thou art in sooth a most melodious rogue!’” p.299

”The Silver Branch and the Golden Bough” section occupies pp.336-7. retelling the familiar use of silver bough or golden bough to enable the bearer to enter the Otherworld and return. We may recollect that Virgil has Aeneas descend into Hades to visit the shade of his father wielding one. The Golden Bough is the classical form, the Silver Bough is the Celtic one. Wentz enlarges on the Celtic Cult of Sacred Waters, and Celtic Water Divinities, occupies pp.427-33

And for The Cult of Sacred Trees, see pp. 433-439.

For the importance of the cave in pagan initiation ceremonies, and their role as antechambers to the Otherworld, see pp.447-52.

Andrew Lang, although not included in the index, crops up prominently in the closing chapters dedicated to a scientific explanation; as does, interestingly, Sigmund Freud.

Strange book, the second half is much better than the first. Has little to say,

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specifically, about Scotland, though. It's mainly Irish.

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