

## FOREWORD

*Do you believe in fairies?* This famous question to the audience in Sir J. M. Barrie's play "Peter Pan" is an opportunity for the children to shout "Yes!" to save poor Tinker Bell and renew the fairy-faith for another year.

It is not considered a proper question to put to professors of folklore and mythology.

Ever since the science of folklore became established in the nineteenth century, learned scholars have collected and studied fairy tales from country people, particularly in Celtic areas where the fairy-faith has always been strong. But the professors were not committed to the same faith as the story-tellers, for whom the fairies were *real* entities—not just interesting relics of folklore. It is one thing to collect stories about fairies—quite another to believe in them. Most folklorists were too worried about their reputations to risk being thought superstitious.

What makes the present book unique is not only that it is the most scholarly work on fairies ever published but also that the author, a distinguished scholar, did not hesitate to face up to the question of belief, and admit quite firmly that he recognized a case for the *reality* of fairy life. But Dr. Evans-Wentz was a very unusual and courageous man.

He was one of those rare people who combine good academic method with deep awareness of the higher purposes of study, a naturally religious man whose understanding opened a path to the luminous reality behind the traditions of folklore and the many names and forms of different religions. His fine scholarly background only provided a basic framework, a method and reference point for a journey into the meaning of life, a journey that took him thousands of miles to strange and dangerous territories with unfamiliar customs, that led from the haunts of fairyland to the Yoga and Buddhism of India and Tibet.

He was also a quiet, modest man with no desire for fame, so it is hardly surprising that he does not figure in any standard biographies, although all his books are key works. The following brief sketch of his life is compiled from various sources.

WALTER YEELING EVANS-WENTZ was born in Trenton, New Jersey, U.S.A. February 2, 1878. Later he came to La Mesa, California and lived there with his family for several years before leaving the county for his education. He studied at Stanford University, California, where he received his B.A. in English, May 1906, followed by M.A. in May 1907. After that he travelled to Britain, where he studied Social Anthropology at Oxford University under Sir John Rhÿs, Professor of Celtic.

Two other famous scholars exercised an important influence. At Stanford, Evans-Wentz had attended lectures on Psychology given by the great Professor William James, who also encouraged his studies in the fairy-faith, although warning him in a kindly way that a young student might find difficulties in putting forward a psychical explanation. James himself had risked criticism by affirming belief in psychical and mystical matters, but his own reputation in the field of psychology and philosophy was already unassailable. The two met again at Oxford when James came there in 1908 to receive a Doctorate in Science which the University conferred upon him. The other eminent teacher of Evans-Wentz was Andrew Lang, famous for his books on folklore and psychical research, who had also published some delightful collections of fairy tales. As it happened, Lang was appointed by the University of Oxford to be one of the two examiners of Evans-Wentz when he presented a thesis on the fairy-faith. The other examiner was Sir John Rhÿs, Principal of Jesus College, Oxford, who was his tutor in Celtic studies.

The present book grew out of those studies, in conjunction with field work in Wales, Ireland, Scotland and Brittany, where he collected first-hand reports of fairies. In its initial form the work was submitted successfully for a doctorate at the University of Rennes in Brittany, after which Dr. Evans-Wentz made

further expeditions in Brittany, Ireland, Wales, the Isle of Man and Cornwall, developing the work considerably, for which he was awarded a B.Sc. at Oxford University in May 1910. At a later date his own part-Celtic ancestry was affirmed in the hyphenated style of his name which he used for all his other books.

In its present form *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* was first published in 1911, after which, as Dr. R. R. Marett, once a fellow-anthropologist at Oxford, put it: "Dr. Evans-Wentz became a sort of scholar-gipsy, who for the next half-dozen years might be found ranging anywhere between Oxford and the Nearer East . . ."

His researches into common traditions of fairy-faith led naturally to more detailed study of pagan and Christian religious beliefs and practices. The background training at Stanford University had provided a sympathetic basis for investigations into comparative religion, for, amongst the aims set forth by the Trustees was the following:

. . . it shall be their duty to prohibit sectarian instruction, but to have taught in the University the immortality of the soul, the existence of an all-wise and benevolent Creator, and that obedience to His laws is the highest duty of man.

In 1917 he travelled in India, studying the mysticism and religious practices which he believed were once closely connected in both East and West. He wrote:

I have spent more than five years in such research, wandering from the palm-wreathed shores of Ceylon, and thence through the wonderland of the Hindus, to the glacier-clad heights of the Himalayan Ranges, seeking out the Wise Men of the East. Sometimes I lived among city dwellers, sometimes in jungle and mountain solitudes among *yogis*, sometimes in monasteries with monks; sometimes I went on pilgrimages . . .

These travels led throughout India to Tibet. He lived as a Buddhist monk and spent three years with Tibetan Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub until the Lama died in March 1922. The result

of this association was the publication of a group of rare Tibetan religious works, based on the Lama's translations edited by Dr. Evans-Wentz:

- The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1927; 1949; 1957)  
*Tibet's Great Yogi . . . Milarepa* (1928; 1951; also a condensed version adapted from the original, 1962)  
*Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines; or, Seven Books of Wisdom of the Great Path* (1935; 1958)  
*The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (1954).

These important works are masterpieces of scholarly presentation, but more than that they also express the insight of a man who understood religious teachings from his own experience and practice as well as from study.

In 1931 Oxford University conferred upon Dr. Evans-Wentz the degree of Doctor of Science in Comparative Religion, a rare honor since he was then the first American—and one of only six other persons—to receive this degree.

In the following year in San Diego, California, he attended meetings of the Self-Realization Fellowship, under Paramahansa Yogananda, a famous Yogi whom Dr. Evans-Wentz had met in India. During those travels he had encountered various great Indian sages—teachers who have since become legendary. In Puri, Orissa, he had met Sri Yutkeswar Giri, a *guru* of Paramahansa Yogananda, and in 1935 he visited the ashram of the famous Sri Ramana Maharshi at Tiruvannamalai, South India. His conversations with this realized sage were included in the published *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, first published by the ashram in 1955. Dr. Evans-Wentz also maintained close contact with Buddhist organizations such as the Maha Bodhi Society. He was welcome in many different religious groups, recognizing the contribution all could make in uniting East and West with mutual understanding and religious insight.

Towards the end of his life he retired to San Diego, California, where he spent twenty-three years in all. He was naturally drawn closer to the Self-Realization Fellowship who had

a colony at Encinitas, California. In 1946 he had written a warm tribute to Paramahansa Yogananda as a foreword to the latter's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. During the last year of his life, Dr. Evans-Wentz worked with a secretary from the S.R.F., living quietly and unobtrusively while writing his last book *Sacred Mountains of the World*, calling sometimes for research information at the San Diego State Library, only two blocks away. The manuscript had been completed when he died, in his 88th year, July 17, 1965.

In his will he made generous bequests to assist religious activities. He left \$3,000 in cash and other property in India, to the Maha Bodhi Society, as an endowment fund to establish a Buddhist educational or religious center in the Kasar Devi village of India. He left over 2,000 acres of land near Tecate to the State of California, to be used as an experimental reforestation and recreational area, and as a game refuge; this estate included Coochama, a mountain sacred to the American Indians. Dr. Evans-Wentz intended this mountain to symbolize good will and fraternity between the races and faiths of East and West, and granted permission for cultural or religious organizations to erect a shrine on Coochama. Other property was willed to the Boy Scouts and the Y.M.C.A. in San Diego. Dr. Evans-Wentz left mineral rights to all his property—some 5,000 acres—to Stanford University, proceeds to be used to establish a professorship in Oriental philosophy, religion and ethics. Some of his Oriental manuscripts were left to the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, others to Stanford University.

Dr. Evans-Wentz was cremated July 21, 1965, and the funeral service included a reading in English from his own edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, invoking the Perfect Enlightenment of Pure Reality. It was the end of a long pilgrimage.

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*The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* was his first book, but already there were clear indications of a keen and sympathetic

mind that would not be satisfied with merely formal study. He faced up to the key questions avoided by other folklorists.

What are fairies—those romantic and sometimes mischievous little people—pixies, nixies, elves, fauns, brownies, dwarfs, leprechauns, and all the other forms of the *daoine sidhe* (fairy people)? Are they real? Folklorists said they were fragments of ancient religious beliefs, occultists thought they were nature spirits; the peasant traditions said they were fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved nor bad enough to be lost. There is some truth in all these views.

We have to disentangle a wide range of conflicting material—the animism of primitive races, the symbolism and exaggeration of folk religious memory, the classical references of Horace, Ovid and Homer, the sophisticated literary fairies of Shakespeare and the Countess d'Aulnoy, and the household tales of folk heroes like Jack the Giant-Killer, transplanted from early Indo-European tradition.

When all this is sifted and evaluated there remains a body of tradition and testimony, even into modern times, of an elusive ghostly order of life on the borderland of mind and matter and usually surviving in the natural setting of wild and lonely places, rather than the sceptical bustle of towns and cities. These fairies are more often reported in Celtic countries where the traditions are richer, although I once heard the same fairy tale in a version from Crete that T. Crofton Croker described as from Knockgrafton, Ireland. The faith that is needed to see fairies is not easily acquired; it is part of an ancient tradition and a way of life alien to modern urban man.

Dr. Evans-Wentz dedicated this book to two famous Irish Celts—the poet and mystic George W. Russell who wrote *The Candle of Vision* under the name "A. E." and the poet W. B. Yeats, who edited that wonderful anthology *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1889). It may have been Yeats' book that excited the interest of Dr. Evans-Wentz in the first place, while it seems to me that A. E. is very likely the anonymous Irish seer that Dr. Evans-Wentz mentions in his own book.

His book is excellently arranged in four main sections. The first section is a very substantial one, presenting the living testimony for fairies as collected by Dr. Evans-Wentz. Here the materials are classified under individual countries, headed by short introductions from recognized authorities like Dr. Douglas Hyde, Professor Anatole Le Braz, Sir John Rhÿs, Dr. Alexander Carmichael, etc. The second section of the book deals with the recorded traditions of Celtic literature and mythology. In the third section Dr. Evans-Wentz examines different theories of fairies and discusses the religious aspects. In the final section he puts forward a rational case for the reality of fairy life.

Some of the on-the-spot investigations by Dr. Evans-Wentz were of unusual interest. In Scotland he visited the district of Aberfoyle where, over two centuries earlier, a local minister the Rev. Robert Kirk had investigated the fairies of the district much as a visiting anthropologist studying a primitive tribe. Kirk's little book *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* dates from 1691. His tomb is in Aberfoyle, but legend has it that he does not truly lie there. According to his successor the Rev. Dr. Grahame, he swooned away while crossing a fairy hill, and after apparent death and burial appeared in a dream to a relative stating that he was a prisoner in Fairyland. He gave instructions for his release, but his cousin was too frightened to carry them out, and so Mr. Kirk was lost for ever . . .

Dr. Evans-Wentz reviews the various theories usually put forward to explain away the fairy-faith—that fairies are a folk recollection of an ancient pygmy race, that they are mythological personifications of natural phenomena, or remnants of ancient religious beliefs. In the last part of his book he correlates fairy life with the ghosts and spirits of psychical phenomena, quoting the French researcher M. Camille Flammarion who made a similar suggestion in his book *Mysterious Psychic Forces* (1907):

Either it is we who produce these phenomena, or it is spirits. But mark this well: these spirits are not necessarily the souls of the

dead; for other kinds of spiritual beings may exist, and space may be full of them without our ever knowing anything about it, except under unusual circumstances. Do we not find in the different ancient literatures, demons, angels, gnomes, goblins, sprites, spectres, elementals, etc.? Perhaps these legends are not without some foundation in fact.

The conclusion of Dr. Evans-Wentz is that "we can postulate scientifically, on the showing of the data of psychical research, the existence of such invisible intelligences as gods, genii, daemons, all kinds of true fairies, and disembodied men."

It took courage for a scholar to publish such views. Folklorists were alarmed at what seemed a concession to superstition and imagination, although they could not fault the author's sensible and careful scientific method. At least one lover of fairy lore was offended that fairies should be connected with "ignorant and senseless spooks . . . who agitate tables . . . or otherwise behave in the aimless manner of idiots." In contrast, W. B. Yeats, twenty years earlier, had found a country sceptic who didn't believe in ghosts although he had no doubts about the "gentry" as they call fairies in Ireland:

'Ghosts,' said he; 'there are no such things at all, at all, but the gentry they stand to reason; for the devil when he fell out of heaven, took the weak-minded ones with him, and they were put in the waste places. And that's what the gentry are. But they are getting scarce now, because their time's over, ye see, and they're going back. But ghosts, no! . . .'

That was before 1889, but fairies, although scarce, have been reported frequently ever since, as the wonderful stories in this book demonstrate. And those who disparage such accounts as the illusions of simple-minded peasants should reflect that much testimony is from highly intelligent educated persons.

Long after the first publication of Dr. Evans-Wentz's book, people have continued to see fairies—in fact, they even claim to have photographed them! In 1920 the late Sir Arthur Conan

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Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes and also a sincere Spiritualist, first published an account of what he claimed were real fairies photographed by two little girls in Yorkshire, England. His full-length book *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922) gave a fuller account, and it should be said that in spite of many attacks the evidence has never been conclusively discounted. In fact, it has been rather strengthened by other writers: Geoffrey Hodson *Fairies at Work and at Play* (1925) and E. L. Gardner *Fairies; the Cottingley Photographs and Their Sequel* (1945).

An Irish friend once told me that he had seen fairies on the Hill of Howth at early morning: "little men about three feet high—riding on donkeys to scale." It seems that fairies are basically impersonal spirits that can take on different forms in relation to the convention of the viewer. This protean aspect would explain the variable size of fairies, why they are sometimes seen in rather stylized period costumes, and also their metamorphoses in the realm of psychical phenomena. I have a strong suspicion that in the newer mythology of flying saucers some of those "shining visitors" in spacecraft from other worlds might turn out to be just another form of fairies.

Many people still have the fairy-faith but do not wish to invite ridicule by talking about it. Only a few years ago a Radio Eireann reporter of my acquaintance interviewed a woman in the West of Ireland who had been "infested with fairies" for several weeks after cutting down a fairy thorn bush, and I once recorded a delightful story from an Irish lad about a man in County Wicklow who was riding his bicycle home one evening when he was "lifted up by the fairies and deposited in a tree with his bicycle between his legs." Another friend of mine has heard the Banshee, that weird spine-chilling fairy wail that heralds a death in the family.

I have never seen a fairy myself, but I am always glad to hear about them. As Dr. Evans-Wentz shrewdly observed, there are many things one has never seen but which no sensible person would wish to deny existence. And it would be a mistake to imagine that all the tales are from Ireland and other Celtic

countries. There is a Fairy Investigation Society in Britain, and in their 1963 Newsletter they reported some fascinating fairy viewings in Buckinghamshire.

It is easy to ridicule the subject, but as with the world of psychical phenomena, there is a formidable and consistent body of evidence, accumulated over many years.

I see nothing extravagant in the conclusions of Dr. Evans-Wentz in linking together religion, ghosts and fairies. Civilized man has cut himself off from the age-old metaphysical significance of the journey of the sun, the movement of the seasons, and the mysterious green world of nature. Insulated in cities by bricks and concrete, pampered by science and confused by the impatient and intricate demands of the practical world, he has become separated from that great stream of bright legend and myth that is the mystery and art of folk cultures; his mystical vision has atrophied. The literature of cities is a fragmented materialistic chaos, a mixture of truths, half-truths, imagination and dimly-recalled symbols seen as through a distorting glass, lacking the clear inspired meaning that shone from the folk and fairy tales and the earlier religions. Man became lost in the labyrinths created by his own practical skills—religion a bureaucracy and fairies an old wives' tale. If uneasy spirits disturbed modern men they were more often the less articulate raps and fragmentary communications of formless spirits or the dead wandering in uncharted limbo. Only in the remnants of folk cultures can we find that luminous stream of tradition that connects man with his ancient origins.

We can be grateful to the late Dr. Evans-Wentz for this fine scholarly book, but most of all for his basic attitude and sympathetic reporting. It is no use chasing fairies with the techniques and disciplines of science and scholarship if we lack a sense of wonder and humility of spirit in these matters. Fairy tales certainly throw light on the origins and beliefs of our long past ancestors, but far more important they communicate a mood and an atmosphere concerned with *intuition*. The fairy-faith opens the door to religious awareness.

Stories of fairies embody all that is romantic, wistful and melancholy—the sudden fear and aching longing for lost worlds, strange countries, dreams of beauty beyond the mundane imperfections of here and now. This is the feeling in Keats's wonderful lines about "magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." There is some of this feeling too in that strange story reported by Lady Archibald Campbell in 1907, when she spoke with an old blind man and his wife living in an Irish glen who claimed to have *caught* a fairy and kept it captive for two weeks—a little red-capped fellow, not two feet high, his hair reddish, his skin very clear but dark in color. The little red cap fitted neatly upon his head. His dress was green, soft to the touch, shorter than a kilt; his boots were as soft as moss over his naked legs. It was a Leprechaun—the fairy that might bring luck to a poor man, for he knows where the crocks of gold are hidden:

I gripped him close in my arms and took him home. I called to the woman (*his wife*) to look at what I had got. 'What doll is it you have there?' she cried. 'A living one,' I said, and put it on the dresser. We feared to lose it; we kept the door locked. It talked and muttered to itself queer words . . . It might have been near on a fortnight since we had the faery, when I said to the woman, 'Sure, if we show it in the great city we will be made up.' (*i.e. become rich*). So we put it in a cage. At night we would leave the cage door open, and we would hear it stirring through the house . . . We fed it on bread and rice and milk out of a cup at the end of a spoon . . .

But finally it got away and they had bad luck ever since. The old man said sadly:

For me, though I've lost my sight, the day I took the leprechaun I thought no harm, only that we would be made up. I am thinking different now by the way things have gone. Sure, we are among them in God's world who are born to be poor.

There is also a sad enchantment in those lines by that great

Irish mystic and poet W. B. Yeats, whose vision fused together ghosts, fairies and magic:

Come away, O human child!  
To the waters and the wild,  
With a faery, hand in hand,  
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

In the magic private world of the child and the vision of the mystic there are more enduring truths than the chapter and verse of the sceptic or the flashy ephemeral gains and losses of the material world.

The fairy-faith is inseparably connected with that same area of human consciousness that has to do with religious experience, with metaphysical insight. It is concerned with a greater reality beyond the everyday world of human frailty and limitations. It was that great unknown which Dr. Evans-Wentz explored boldly and sympathetically, travelling from the Celtic world of fairies to the far-off territories and religious traditions of India and Tibet.

This is a great book, equally important to scholar and mystic.

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*Leslie Shepard*

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