

Researching the role of the fairies in Irish children's present-day outdoor play experience

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Overview

1. Why research children and the fairies?
2. What do we know?
3. My proposal

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1. Why research children and the fairies?

The fairies (*Aos Sí*) are present in the Irish outdoors, though their ontological status (the nature of their being) is ill-defined.

Perhaps because of this, the fairies have been largely ignored in contemporary discourse on children's outdoor play in Ireland (and in the related research).



2. What do we know?

There is extensive literature on the fairies in Irish folklore, cultural and literary studies.



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Looking for a more contemporary understanding, I’ve found no recent work on children and the fairies in Ireland.

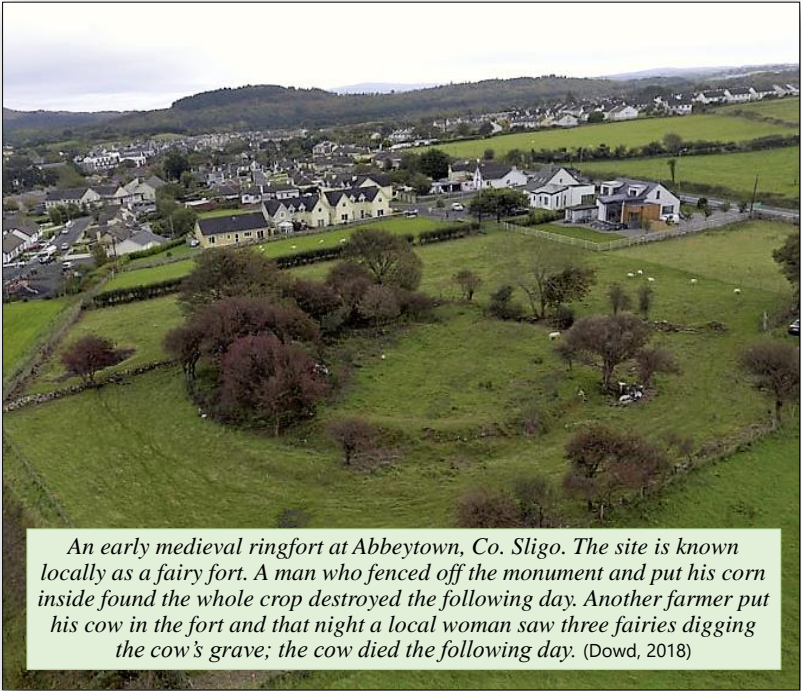
But I did find this 2018 paper on fairy archaeology:



Bewitched by an Elf Dart: Fairy Archaeology, Folk Magic and Traditional Medicine in Ireland

Marion Dowd (2018)

Though little discussed in archaeological literature, the interpretation of prehistoric artefacts as potent objects from the supernatural world, and their ability actively to influence the well-being of livestock and the household, illustrates the rich and complex lives many archaeological artefacts assumed several thousand years after their initial manufacture. (Dowd, 2018)



An early medieval ringfort at Abbeytown, Co. Sligo. The site is known locally as a fairy fort. A man who fenced off the monument and put his corn inside found the whole crop destroyed the following day. Another farmer put his cow in the fort and that night a local woman saw three fairies digging the cow’s grave; the cow died the following day. (Dowd, 2018)

There is interesting work from other countries:

- From the UK:



I believe in fairies

Sylwyn Guilbaud (2022)

As professionals [Playworkers], who uphold the importance of play and of the child’s immersion in their play, should we not within ourselves believe wholeheartedly in the truth of the child’s experience, even if it is unverifiable by our adult system of reification, even if it is transient, momentary? Should we not in our valuing, in our active respect, be willing to be altered by it in our own way of knowing, and to notice without prejudice when the child’s view interacts with the world in astonishing ways, offering new possibilities of knowing? Is it not time ... to allow ourselves to be altered by that pattern, and allow ourselves to doubt our own acquired doubt? (Guilbaud, 2022)

From UK via Italy

Children Who See Fairies

Simon Young (2018)

“By taking eighty-eight fairy experiences of English-speaking children aged from about three to ten, from the last eighty years, we look at the characteristics of fairy sightings among the very young. ... In natural settings children focus their experiences on trees: there is little interest in the flowers so common in contemporary adult fairy experiences. In some cases, meanwhile, fairies become a fixture in the life of a child, and here parallels with the psychological literature on ‘invisible friends’ are intriguing. We also look at the role of memory in the encounter as the child integrates and elaborates the experience; and the consequences for the grown child’s spiritual development.”



7

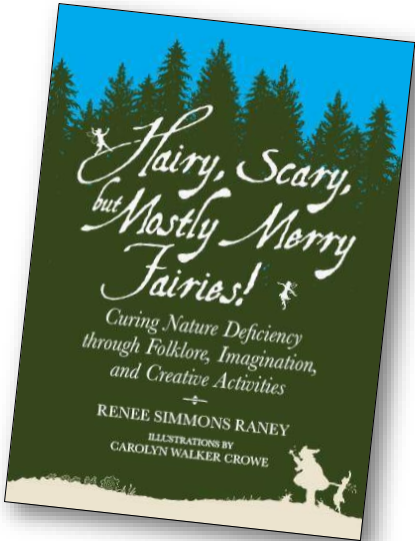
- From the USA, a practical proposal for engaging with the fairies as a cure for nature-deficiency:



Hairy, Scary, but Mostly Merry Fairies! Curing Nature Deficiency through Folklore, Imagination, and Creative Activities

Renee Simmons Raney (2017)

Combines fairy lore and Raney’s own experience of fairies with nature activities, to create an integrated resource book for learning about the natural world, while getting closer to the fairies that co-exist there.



8



3. My proposal

There is clearly a gap to be addressed in researching the role of the fairies in Irish children's present-day outdoor play experience.

Possible research questions could address:

- Children's belief in and beliefs about the fairies;
- Children's experiences of the fairies:
 - Children who have seen fairies;
 - Children who are able to sense their presence in other ways.
- Children's awareness of traditional fairy lore;
- How are the Irish fairies experienced by children from diverse cultures?

9

- Children's experiences in relation to features in the landscape associated with the fairies:



Fairy mounds and fairy forts



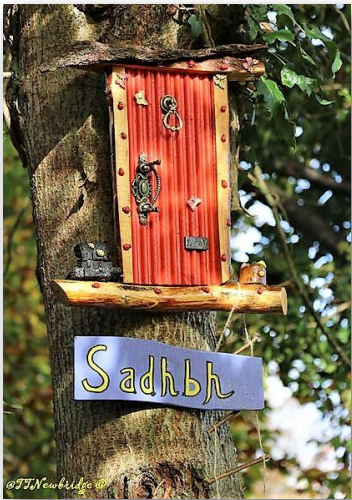
Fairy rings



Fairy thorns and other fairy trees.

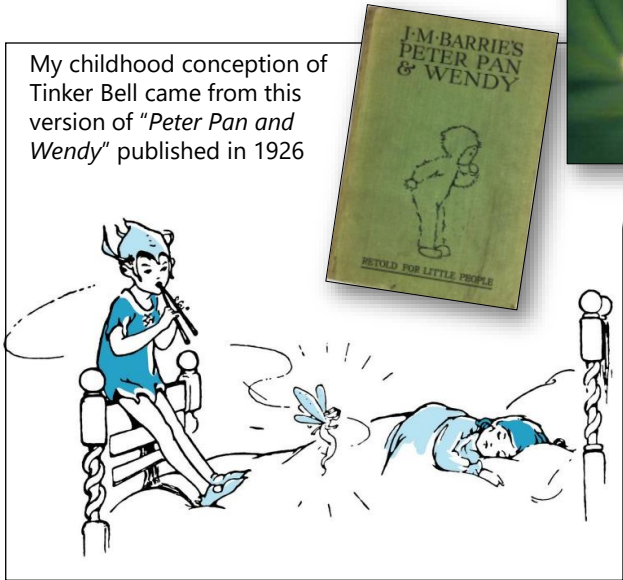
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- Children’s interaction with human-created manifestations of fairydom, such as fairy woods and fairy walks.



- The effects of modern disneyfication of fairies on how children perceive the natural fairies today.

My childhood conception of Tinker Bell came from this version of "Peter Pan and Wendy" published in 1926



Tinkerbell in the 1953 Disney film of Peter Pan



Tinkerbell in 2012

Methodology

- ☐ Children should be involved in designing the research.
- ☐ Children could be actively involved as peer-researchers throughout.

Methods to consider:

- **Survey:** A wide-reaching on-line survey to get a broad idea of children's belief in, beliefs about, and experiences of the fairies in contemporary Ireland.
- **Focus groups:**
 - Discussion with children who have seen or experienced fairies.
 - Discussion bringing together believers and sceptics.
- **Transect Walks:** Children guide adult researchers through (a) known fairy landscapes and/or (b) human-created fairy manifestations.
- **Creative methods:** Drawings, photo-voice etc.
- **Interviews:**
 - Child researchers conduct peer-to-peer interviews (perhaps school-based);
 - In-depth interviews with children who have seen or experienced fairies.



Conclusion

- ☐ Who here has sensed or experienced the presence of the fairies in the Irish countryside?
- ☐ Who here has seen a fairy?
- ☐ Who here doesn't believe the fairies exist?
- ☐ Who here thinks this research is worth doing?
- ☐ Who here would like to be involved?

THE END

Thanks for listening

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15

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16