"See ya na yon narrow road?": the search for Elfland in folklore of the Scottish border

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“See ye na yon narrow road?”
The search for Elfland in folklore of the Scottish border

by

Marvin ElRoy Howard

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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I would like to thank my parents, Gilbert and Winnie Howard, for guiding my first footsteps along the road that eventually would lead me toward Elfland. Their love and support is what has made it possible for me to come as far as I have. I would also like to thank the members of my committee for their words of advice and encouragement during the development and final stages of this project. Finally, to Brenda, who gave me the confidence to keep going when the road seemed to disappear into the mists of twilight, and who patiently endured the long hours, late nights, and rambling discussions about the fairies: together, we walk in love along the bonnie path to the land of Tir nan Og.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above glen car
In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.

Come away oh 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.

Stolen Child, W.B. Yeats
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INTRODUCTION

Investigating the land of Faerie can be treacherous work. The maps are sketchy, the landscape alters with every viewing, and even the entrances to the country may vary from visit to visit. Even those who are well versed in the study of the terrain give caveats against a casual survey of the territory.

Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words: for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. It has many ingredients, but analysis will not necessarily discover the secret of the whole. (Tolkien 15)

Yet, for many people in many different times and places, the trip has evidently been worth the effort. In our modern times, the doors to Faerie, or Elfland as it is sometimes called, are apparently shut. No one now travels there, or if they claim to have we consider them irrational or delusional. But just a few centuries ago, there were those who believed in all sincerity to know of that place, and more than that, they believed that some of the natives of Elfland apparently lived and interacted with us.

All that can be inferred of those alleged encounters, and of what motivated the people who claimed to have had them, comes from the tales and ballads that were carried down the years and collected by those who wanted to preserve those narratives. What makes the investigation of Elfland worthwhile are those tales, and the people who told them. Their stories are the only connection left to us to that time, and more importantly, to those whom the people of that time called the fairies.

Folklorists are not in agreement as to what specific sort of being the term fairy describes, only that it refers to a wide and only generally specified range of experiential phenomena. The definition varies depending on where, and when, and what culture the folklorist is studying. For the European variety of fairies, the most common description runs along the lines of:

supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great influence for good or evil over the affairs of man. (Tolkien 10)
For the most part, this is a reasonable working model. However, the fairies in folklore are not always described as being of “diminutive size”, often they look no different in appearance from humans. The rest of the standard description is, however, exceeding apt. The supernatural aspect of the fairies is the very thing that sets them apart from the humans who passed on anecdotes of encounters with them in folk narratives.

The folklore which deals with fairies describes them as being found in a variety of surroundings: sometimes these beings are thought of as living in caverns underground; sometimes as inhabiting particular natural features such as trees, rocks, wells, and stretches of rivers and streams at fords or pools — much like the dryads and nymphs of ancient mythology; and sometimes they are even thought of as living secretly in some part of a house or farm building. Regardless of culture or geographic region of the world, they are at any rate close to mortals and liable to be encountered by them. Context alone therefore becomes the crucial factor in determining just what sort of fairies are being examined and how they related to humans.

Scotland has long been a focal point for belief in fairies. Collectors of fairy lore found ample resources here, from the days of Michael Scot, the thirteenth-century philosopher and magician, past notables such as Sir David Lyndsay of the Mount, Lyon King of Arms to King James V of Scotland in the sixteenth century, and the Rev. Robert Kirk, whose researches culminated in his seminal work on fairy lore The Secret Commonwealth in 1691, up to Sir Walter Scott’s work in the early years of the nineteenth century. The interesting phenomenon that presents itself in the face of such widespread evidence of belief in fairies is why this belief not only persisted but apparently flourished in the Scottish Border and Lowland regions long after it had faded to the level of fireside tales in surrounding areas. A major factor that made this area unique during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was its geographical juxtaposition between two major powers.
A series of English invasions in the 1540s devastated much of the Lothians and the Borders. Intermittent warfare persisted on the Border until the end of the sixteenth century. After the Union of the Crowns in 1603 international squabbles died away only to surface in a different form in the Civil Wars of the 1640s and Scottish opposition to the Cromwellian regime in the 1650s... Throughout this period local raiding and feuding was also widespread. Until 1603 this was virtually a way of life for many Border families, by no means always at the expense of the English. (Whyte 76)

Unlike those who dwelt in the more secluded areas of Scotland, like the Highlands and the Orkney islands, the Border folk had the ill luck to be caught literally between the rock of the Scottish aristocracy, who lived mostly in the Highlands and coastal areas, and the hard place of the English.

The Border belief in fairies is fascinating, not just because it was so prevalent, but because the belief went beyond superstitious rumors and stories to complete acceptance of the existence of fairies on a par with humans. In an attempt to better understand this acceptance, some of the folk tales and ballads that were familiar to the Border people will be examined by placing them in the context of that period.

With respect to any given item of folklore, one may analyze its texture, its text, and its context... The texture is the language, the specific phonemes and morphemes employed... The context of an item of folklore is the specific social situation in which that particular item is actually employed. (Dundes 22-23)

Collected as these tales and ballads were, over decades by a variety of relative amateurs by modern standards, and subject in some cases to well-intentioned revision by those collectors and their editors, the actual texts themselves can only be surveyed for content and theme, and not for specific wording or language. The context in which these tales and ballads arose, however, is of critical importance in analyzing what role they played to the folk of the Border. By viewing them in this way, the Border belief in fairies and Elfland will be contrasted against the religious, economic, and political changes that followed in the wake of the Reformation in Scotland.

In order to achieve a better understanding of the religious aspects of the folk material under examination, it will first be necessary to discuss briefly the historical and theological
background of the period in general, and the religious concept of Purgatory in particular. The next section will then draw on the tales to illustrate what domestic life was like for a group of people whose encounters with the world of Fairie ranged from chance encounters in the wild to having supernatural creatures cohabit with them in their homes. The connections and similarities between Elfland and Purgatory, and the fate of the dead will then be discussed in the final section based upon a thematic examination of the ballads and tales.
BACKGROUND REVIEW

Plague, drought, and other random vagaries of rural life notwithstanding, the people of the Scottish Border and Lowlands have had one constant throughout their long history: repeated disputes between the Scottish Lairds and their English counterparts that often led to war. From William The Lion in the twelfth century to James V in the sixteenth, Scotland was in a near-constant state of armed conflict with England, and the border and lowland regions were often the venues for these conflicts. Military actions placed a burden on the rural folk in the form of conscriptions, shortages of food, and the simple dangers that came of trying to make a living in an area that could suddenly become a battlefield, but these were the same burdens that had been shouldered by the rural folk of the Border for centuries.

Wealth and power went with the land, and in the predominately feudal society of Scotland the nobility as the greatest holders of land wielded the greatest influence. The Scottish nobility played a decisive part in all national crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, largely determining the balance of the other forces in the realm. (Nobbs 25)

However, far more burdensome on a personal level than the burdens the military operations placed on the rural folk of the area were the sweeping religious changes of the Reformation.

Much like their contemporaries in many other countries of Europe during the sixteenth century, religious leaders in Scotland joined the swelling ranks of those who cast off the leadership of the Catholic church and replaced it with their own national religion. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland was founded in 1560 under the leadership of John Knox, with the support of influential members of the upper middle class, and unlike the Anglican church of England, rejected the validity of Episcopal rule.

In England, Episcopalianism emerged, not without birth-pangs but reasonably out of the Roman Church, and the same seemed likely to happen in Scotland. Even although our Reformation was vitiated by the political designs of Henry VIII and his daughter (it is sometimes forgotten that Knox and his company were subsidized by England) in its first stages the break was still not too great. Then unreasoned interference from an absentee king provided fuel for the fire of a small faction of extremists. Scottish history, unlike England’s, is full of extraordinary outcomes, minority ideas prevailing for no clear reason. The case of the Kirk is a good example of this: a small section of the community succeeded in ramming down the throats of
almost a whole nation a church form that went beyond anything prescribed by John Knox. (Scott-Moncrieff 14)

In order to increase his control over the people of Scotland, in the 1630’s Charles I began his attempts to influence Presbyterian doctrine and install bishops in the Scottish church hierarchy. In reaction, Scottish Presbyterians en masse subscribed to covenants or bonds, the most famous being the National Covenant of 1638, in which the Scots vowed to maintain Presbyterianism. After a series of poorly planned and executed military adventures against the Scots, which resulted in the Scottish army occupying parts of northern England, Charles I was forced to accept the Treaty of Ripon in October 1640. Obstinate to a fault, Charles convened the Long Parliament, thus setting in motion the events that led to the English Civil War.

In the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, the Scots pledged their support to the English parliamentarians in the English Civil War with the hope that Presbyterianism would become the established church in England. This hope was not fulfilled. In fact, after the Restoration in 1660, King Charles II restored the episcopacy and denounced the covenants as unlawful. Three revolts of the Covenanters in 1666, 1679, and 1685 were harshly repressed. Only after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which deposed the Catholic James II in favor of his Protestant daughter Mary II and her husband, William III, was Presbyterianism guaranteed in Scotland. This guarantee was incorporated into the Act of Union of 1707, whereby the parliaments of Scotland and England were united. After many centuries, the violent assaults on the Borders from outside had finally ceased.

While the martial conflict was drawing to its conclusion in the seventeenth century, echoes of an earlier revolution were still reverberating across the land. During the period of the Reformation, while many minor aspects of Christian faith were modified to fit the needs of a changing church, the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory was completely eliminated for the Protestants. Purgatory, simply defined, signifies a process of cleansing.
Now the pollution of the soul is by sin, which is an inordinate union with lower things; from which pollution it is purified in this life by Penance and other Sacraments. Now it happens sometimes that this process of purification is not entirely accomplished in this life, and the offender remains still a debtor with a debt of punishment upon him, owing to some negligence or distraction, or to death overtaking him before his debt is paid. (Pohle 76-77)

The doctrine arose from the notion that not all who died were fit to enter into Heaven, due to still owing penance for their venial sins, nor were they deserving of Hell. These souls suffering from their past sins were not beyond redemption, and their condition could be improved by the prayers and sacrifices of the living. For the Reformers, who based their salvation on faith alone rather than works, Purgatory had no place or justifiable function. Calvin described this Catholic dogma as “a pernicious invention of Satan, which renders the cross of Christ useless” (qtd. in Pohle 78). In England, this denial of the existence of Purgatory was first publicized in the 1549 edition of the Anglican Prayer Book, and can still be found in the Book of Common Prayer to this day.

Calvin notwithstanding, probably what motivated many of the early Reformers most was not the rejection of the doctrine altogether, but rather the particular practices that Rome attached to it from the period of the Papal Bull *Unigenitus* of 1343. In that Bull, the fate of the dead was supposed to be modified not just by prayers and sacrifices, but also by the purchase of indulgences on their behalf, money that was suspected by many over the years to have gone for the rebuilding of St. Peter’s in Rome or directly into the pockets of unscrupulous priests. This abuse was a popular rallying-point for the Reformers, who were quick to explain that by doing away with the doctrine of Purgatory, you also eliminated the abuses associated with it. Good intentions on the part of the Reformers aside, removing Purgatory from the Christian belief system had a psychologically devastating ramification: to the Protestants, the whole concept of an abiding-place between the grave and the Final Judgment was swept away.

The rejection of the Catholic doctrine had created a harsh either / or at the moment of death — either eternal happiness or eternal punishment. Those dissatisfied with this
did not reintroduce a purgatorial system in which the release from punishment depended upon the initiatives of those on this side of the grave with all its attendant ecclesiastical abuses. (Almond 79-80)

The doctrine of Purgatory, however debatable on theological grounds, can be seen to fill a very important need in people’s lives and give them great emotional satisfaction. When a person died, his or her relatives had a clear and exact picture of his or her condition in the afterlife. This enabled them to psychologically deal with the experience of bereavement, and eventually put it at the back of their minds and get on with their daily lives. Thus, death did not totally rupture family life and it was possible to maintain a proper regard for the ancestors by means of prayers for the dead. This created an intimate link, in God, between the Church in this world and the Church in the next. Everyone, living or dead, is in the hands of God and could be left in His care without undue feelings of anxiety or apprehension.

In theological terms there is a vast gulf that exists between the extremes of Heaven and Hell, and human souls usually fall between these limits. Few of us are totally evil or purely good; most of us lie somewhere in between: hence the need for salvation. On the borders of Heaven we can picture the angels and the saints; on the edge of Hell the demons and the old pagan gods that have been assimilated into the Christian mythos. Between these two extremes are ghosts, monsters, fairies, and all of the other inhabitants of the unknown. Once it is allowed in theory that spirits of any kind are accommodated in this wide range, then the mind finds it convenient to include in this vague region all the miscellaneous aspects of peripheral human experience, those things that we can’t explain but that are more or less morally neutral. In this way, whatever happened to a person, whatever one experienced, however inexplicable, was all safely contained within the domain of the Church.

There was another possible motivation behind the Protestant denial of the existence of Purgatory. Much like the argument used by those who hold that capital punishment is a deterrent to crime, many at the time felt that the threat of eternal damnation without the option of Purgatory would improve the general social condition.
The doctrine of eternal torment was also seen as necessary to good government. Indeed, the consistency with which eternal torment was defended as necessary to the state strongly suggests how fragile many perceived the state to be... The principle that secular crime was discouraged by the enormous disparity between the nature of the offense and the severity of the punishment was deep-seated. That sin would be similarly discouraged and public order preserved by the disparity between temporal sins and eternal punishments was seldom challenged. (Almond 160)

By this reasoning, one would think twice before committing a crime, especially if the punishment for that crime would result in eternal as well as temporal death. As many capital crimes were those committed against the wealthy and powerful, this placed one more potential safeguard on the status quo. Stealing a cow from a neighbor was a matter that could be dealt with in a relatively casual fashion, but transgressions committed against the aristocracy could result in the loss of both life and soul.

Since contemporary Protestant theology denied the existence of Purgatory, a widespread and negative emotional hiatus would have developed. There was now no buffer world intermediate to Heaven and Hell, and the concepts and images pertaining to it would be repressed. The result of this rejection of Purgatory was by no means the innocent and pure conception of God that was intended by the Reformers, with all the unnecessary trimmings and superstitions stripped away. Instead, for the ordinary folk a state of enormous bewilderment, not so much intellectual as emotional, would have been created. There would now be an obsessive terror of Judgement, far worse than that of the pre-Reformation period. In a cosmos devoid of the kindly prayers to Virgin Mary and the saints, and of the mitigating organization of requiems and Purgatory, the extremes of Heaven and Hell would stand out as an unrelenting dichotomy in black and white moralistic terms.

More than the torments of hell themselves, it was the emphasis on the eternity of them that was intended to provoke horror, effect repentance, and act as an incentive to a good and holy life. Unlike punishments on this side of the grave, the awesome ceremonies of hell went on for ever. (Almond 144)
The concept of impending eternal damnation would be impossible to bear if it was not countered by an equal sense of the love of God, but this appears to have been sadly lacking in the moralistic religion of the time.

The world these changes made must have become a dark and insecure place, which one can easily imagine. Gone was the clownish Devil who could be driven off by the sign of the cross, replaced by a supremely evil deity who filled the opposite end of the theological spectrum from God. Gone was a guarantee of salvation based on contrition and penitence for misdeeds, either in this life or in the next. Salvation could be gained instantly, and lost just as quickly. And also gone, at least according to official church doctrine, were the fairies. They were now re-classified as illusions cast by the Devil to tempt the unwary. In the third book, chapter five, of King James the First’s *Daemonologie* of 1597 he writes:

Epi. The fourth kinde of spirites, which by the Gentiles was called Diana, and her wandering court, and amongst us was called the Phairie... or our good neighboures, was one of the sortes illusiones that was rifest in time of Papistrie: for although it was holden odious to Prophesie by the devill, yet whome these kind of Spirites carryed awaie, and informed, they were thought to be sonsiest and of best life. To speake of the many vaine trattles founded upon that illusion: How there was a King and Queene of Phairie, of such a jolly court and train as they had, how they had a teynd, and dutie, as it were, of all goods; how they naturallie rode and went, eate and drank, and did all other actions like naturall men and women... the devil illuded the senses of senses of sundry simple creatures, in making them beleeve that they saw and harde such thinges as were nothing so indeed.

Phi. But how can it be then, that sundrie Witches have gone to death with that confession, that they have ben transported with the Phairie to such a hill, which opening, they went in, and there saw a faire Queene... (qtd. in Reed 174)

Regardless of official opinion, as time went on it became obvious, based on the folklore of the Borderers of that time, that the supernatural creatures themselves continued to come and go as they pleased. In the absence of satisfactory direction or explanation from the Church, and in the face of their own everyday experiences with fairies, the folk of the Scottish Border did what pragmatic rural people always seem to do: they accepted things as they were and got on with their lives. Their acceptance owed nothing directly to Christianity, yet curiously it came about with inexplicable consistency throughout the lowlands and border region. From
exactly what origin it came is uncertain. It seems to have been a mixture of pre-Christian
paganism leavened with a sprinkling of dimly remembered Catholicism.

Finally, fairy tales offer guidance about the spiritual properties of the universe. They
indicate the presence of supernatural powers or forces in the world that are reflections
of a higher law. This law is characteristically Christian in European fairy tales, but it
also frequently has a nondenominational or broadly mythic quality as well; that is, the
spirits or powers are not always a part of orthodox Christian iconography, suggesting
these tales may indeed predate Christianity. Furthermore, the cosmology depicted in
fairy tale is also frequently connected to social institutions, suggesting that these
institutions are ‘natural,’ that is, cosmically sanctioned and therefore justified.
(Jones 20)

Regardless of its roots, the ballads and tales that communicated this localized acceptance of
fairies as a part of daily life seemed to fulfill the need of the poor throughout history to
project their worst fears and jealousies onto those better off, and to project their hopes in the
form of magical beings from beyond the realm of man.
LIFE WITH THE FAIRIES

Like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, the fairies of Scottish Border folklore are so varied as to defy neat classification, but by focusing solely on those whose habits were most like humans it is possible to divide the human-like fairies into three groups. One major group of the fairies was known as “the people of peace”, the _seely_ or happy folk, and most commonly as “the good neighbors.” Living close to their human neighbors, their hills and green dancing rings were protected from the plow and their ways treated with respect. Closely related to the good neighbors, and sometimes intermingling with them, were the trooping or raiding fairies, who came forth from the fairy hills on special nights for their own fell purposes. The third major group of fairies who interacted with humans on a regular basis were the Brownies, who would adopt a human family and faithfully take on mundane domestic tasks.

The fairies, as might be expected when their anthropomorphic and possibly aboriginal origins are considered, are remarkably human in their organization — a peculiarity they share with gods. They marry and have children. In the latter event they not infrequently require the assistance of human midwives... They steal children, leaving changelings, and women, for whom they substitute sometimes blocks of wood which may be animated by magic... They are actuated strongly by the human passions of resentment and gratitude, revenging slights and rewarding services. Their chief distinction from human beings lies in their remarkable powers of magic. (Yearsley 12-13)

Obviously, no photographic or other scientific evidence exists to portray what life must have been like for the folk who lived surrounded by such interesting company, but in examining some of the tales told by the folk themselves about their experiences a complex and diverse picture emerges from the swirling brush strokes of time.

The good neighbors lived in small family groups and were different in habits and in dress from their trooping brethren. According to Allan Cunningham, who carried out his field work among the old folk of Nithsdale in the early nineteenth century, the bread of the good neighbors tasted of honey and wine, but they also enjoyed silverweed and the tops of young heather shoots. He learned from those who claimed to have seen them that the good
neighbors were a fair-haired race, small but well proportioned, dressed in green mantles inlaid with wild flowers, and when armed went equipped with bog-reed arrows carried in quivers of adder skin and tipped with poison.

Their fairy hills were cheek by jowl with the villages, and thus extremely familiar to their human neighbors who seem to have accepted them as part of ordinary life. They were much given to borrowing from human neighbors, but the loans were usually repaid in good measure. In “The Fairy and the Miller’s Wife” (Scott 313), a Lochmaben woman who filled a fairy’s basin with meal not only got her loan back but the basin along with it, and the assurance that “it would never be toom” [empty]. This seems to have been quite a common experience.

This cooperation with the good neighbors could extend as far as saving the life of the gracious human involved. In the simply-titled “Sir Godfrey McCulloch” (Aitken 20), Sir Godfrey discovers that a “little old man dressed in green” is living under his house when the little man asks him to move his sewer pipe as it has begun to leak into the fairy’s abode. The nobleman complies, and years later, after being convicted of murder during a cattle dispute, is rescued literally from out of the hangman’s noose by the fairy. This tale at least coincides with fact, according to Sir Walter Scott in Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, as Scott relates that Sir Godfrey’s trial took place in 1697 and after his rescue lived on the Continent for many years until he returned to Edinburgh and was executed (Scott 360).

Apparently, not only were fairies so closely related to humans that intermarriages could occur, but their children were also subject to some of the same frailties and infirmities as human children. “A Back-gaen Wean” was told by “a Whithorn woman of great age, still a believer in fairies” according to the tale’s collector, and tells of a rural woman’s encounter with a fairy woman whose child is “back-gaen”, and suffering for lack of milk (Aitken 15). After receiving “a wee drap o’ milk” the good neighbor gives the traditional benediction that the human woman would never want for as long as she lived. According to Hannah Aitken,
back-gaen usually means that the sufferer has had “a waff o’ the evil eye” — a rather interesting affliction in the case of a fairy’s child. The same theme is evident in “Nae Sark for the Bairn” (Aitken 15). In this tale, a Roxburghshire man hears a grievous noise by the side of the road as he is returning home late one night. Upon investigating, a voice calls out to the traveler and explains that his “bairn” has “nae sark” — in other words, the fairy’s child has no shirt to keep it warm. The man takes off his own shirt and gives it to the parent of the fairy in need, and as is common, the tale ends by stating that the man who aided the fairies prospered from that day on. Decent food and clothing were valued commodities to the rural folk of the border, just as they are to members of any group that has to struggle for survival, and surely these were necessities that the good neighbors with their magical abilities could have supplied for themselves and their children. Perhaps a better interpretation of the incidents related in these tales would be to see them as lessons of compassion, much like the parable of the “Good Samaritan” in the gospels. By doing a favor for those outside their own group, the tested humans earned a reward far more valuable than a simple cup of milk or a shirt. It could be that the fairies wanted the local folk to become “good neighbors” like themselves.

Sometimes no favor was asked of the humans involved in the tales of the good neighbors. During the incidents described in “The Gowan Dell” a farmer and his family were the beneficiaries of the fairy’s largesse (Aitken 21). After an extended drought had destroyed much of the local pasture land around Clackmannan, a local farmer named Sandy Crawford was given gold by the fairies to replace his cattle that had died from the drought and was further instructed to pasture them in Gowan Dell. To his surprise, the grass in that dell was miraculously green and luxurious despite the lack of rain, and the milk yielded from Sandy’s cattle was superior in quality and quantity to any seen before. Sandy’s human neighbors, jealous at his prosperity in the face of their own misfortune, took their own cattle to the dell but “not a single coo but Sandy Crawford’s ga’e a drap o’ milk!” Again, there is a biblical
resonance to this story, somewhat reminiscent of the twenty-third Psalm. Trusting obedience in times of difficulty is rewarded, while bitter feelings and hard-heartedness lead to frustration.

Despite all of the positive examples, however, it was the generally expressed opinion in the area that sensible folk had no wish for either the fairies’ company or their favors. The tales relate that not all of the fairies that interacted with the border folk were deserving of the appellation of “good neighbor”. Their activities could seem mild on the surface, such as responding to the rashly spoken wish from a hard-pressed housewife. But once across the threshold it took all the skill of the local wise-women – women of natural lore who would in later years be persecuted as witches – to get the unwelcome helper out.

More serious than simple interference in human life were the mischiefs performed by the fairies on their hapless victims. “Gilpin Horner” was told by “a man called Anderson,” who was from Todshawhill, to a friend of Sir Walter Scott, who originally printed the tale in The Lay of the Last Minstrel (Aitken 17). In this tale a fairy follows a man back to his home, thoroughly disrupting the household with his mindless violence and mayhem despite all efforts by the farmer to make the fairy feel unwelcome. In an odd twist that serves to reinforce the capricious nature of these beings, Gilpin Horner only leaves when he hears someone call his name from far off. Gilpin may have something in common with Shakespeare’s Puck, in that he had to respond to the sound of his master’s call.

The fairy attempts at humor didn’t always leave the human victim standing empty-handed. In “A Fairy Joke” (Aitken 18), which occurred near Galloway, a farmer’s daughter who was winding flax on a spindle while tending the family’s sheep found a pot of gold in the field. After marking the spot with her distaff, the girl returns to her family to get help in retrieving the gold. However, the fairies weren’t idle during her absence. When the girl has led her family back to the field, the entire field is “a forest of rocks and spindles,” with “wee fowk clad in green” laughing. The disheartened family was ordered by the fairies to turn
their backs for a moment, and when they looked back they found the field restored and the
daughter’s spindle fully wound with flax. Regardless of the narrator’s claim “that’s nae
carry clash, for it happened amang my ain honest fowks that wadna lie for naebody,” the
tale holds a valuable lesson for the border folk who were leery of dealing with the fairies:
their behaviors and activities were quite similar in outcome to the those exhibited by the
aristocracy. One never knew how an encounter with them would turn out, but the woe often
seemed greater than the weal.

And this was a very good reason for being leery of the fairies. In spite of all
propitiation, they remained an unpredictable element, capable as it suited them of revenge or
gratitude, kindness or spite. In an encounter between human and fairy, the physical
appearance of the fairy was no guide. Whereas the good neighbors for the most part were
distinguishable from the other fairies by their habits and behaviors, the trooping fairies had a
distinct tendency toward taking what did not belong to them. This group of fairies, most
famous from the ballads, were human in height and appearance but, rather than living near
humans, would visit the land of humans from their own country of Elfland on cross-country
mounted forays, which were called appropriately enough by the locals “Fairy Rades.” These
trooping fairies were at their most dangerous during their Rades, carrying off cattle, goods, or
most importantly, humans. Sir Walter Scott places the time of the Rade on Halloween, as in
“Tam Lin” (Scott 381). In Aberfoyle the Rade took place on the last night of every quarter
and allegedly was only visible to those with second sight. In Nithsdale the event was
expected at Roodmas (an old name for Christmas), and was warily observed by the village
folk from houses protected by rowan, or mountain-ash, branches (Aitken 3). The old folk
charm against witches: “rowan tree and red thread, put the witches to their speed.”
(Henderson 188) may be connected to this ward against fairies, since the berry of the rowan
is red in color and holly berries also are considered proof against a witch (Henderson 189).
When adults were the targets of the Rade, the fairies would often substitute a wooden stock
or simulacrum, or when a child was taken, some elderly, peevish, unattractive, thoroughly expendable although musical member of their own race.

All this coming and going on the part of the trooping fairies must have been provoking, but the changeling business was serious. The purpose of this swapping of fairy for human seemed to vary from encounter to encounter. Women were usually carried off as midwives or to care for children, though occasionally a fairy child might be brought to a human nurse. But sometimes the fairies’ motives for abduction were quite human. In “A Wyf to Sandy Harg” (Aitken 16), a recently married man, Alexander Harg, comes upon fairies building something by the seashore. When he inquires as to their activities, they inform him a local man has married a woman that the fairies find quite attractive. In order to get her for themselves, they are building what they describe as “a wyf to Sandy Harg.” Sandy rushes home and keeps his wife safe through the night as voices, rushing winds, and odd noises assault the house, then finds a simulacrum of his wife abandoned by the unsuccessful fairies in his yard the next morning.

A grown-up person snatched away had a fair chance of getting home at the end of the seven-year period when the devil’s “kain” was due. Kain, or “cain,” derived from the Gaelic, means rent in kind, or a tax. It was a regular legal term of the time with usage going back to the curia regis at Lanark in the twelfth century. Not surprisingly, those taken seldom settled back into the mortal way of living upon their return, as with Thomas the Rhymer. A child who was taken often was never heard of again, with only a rude changeling left in its place. According to Lewis Spence, the marks of a changeling were “its wan and wrinkled appearance, its long fingers and slightly bony development… its fractious behavior and voracious appetite. In Scotland its large teeth and fondness for music and dancing usually betrayed it” (Aitken 13). In doubtful cases it fell to the minister to make the final judgement. The last resort was to threaten burning. The chances were that a changeling thrown into the fire would vanish up the chimney and the genuine child would be returned by the fairies.
Changeling tales are very consistent in plot and motif, probably because their subject matter was so serious, and also because popular belief held that the issue of what happened to the soul of a child who died before baptism was unresolved.

In Scotland, unbaptised infants are supposed to wander in woods and solitudes lamenting their hard fate, and I know that a few years back, at Chuldeleigh, in Devonshire, a servant in the clergyman’s family asked her mistress, whether what the people of the place said was really true, about the souls of unchristened babies wandering in the air till the Judgement Day. (Henderson 100)

And again, according to Henderson:

In the southern counties of Scotland, children are considered before baptism at the mercy of the fairies, who may carry them off at pleasure, or inflict injury upon them. (Henderson 6)

In “Tibbie’s Bairn” (Aitken 9), which took place near Dumfries, a child is swapped for a changeling by the fairies while the mother was out getting water from the well. A neighbor tricks the changeling into revealing its nature by playing music for it, then throws the fairy creature into the fire to make it leave. “Riddling in the Reek” was collected near Galloway and starts abruptly with the realization on the part of the parents that they are harboring a changeling (Aitken 12). A local wise-woman is consulted, and she binds the changeling before holding it over the fire. The discomforted fairy disappears, and a knocking at the door reveals the couple’s true child. Both of these simple tales are representative of this group of tales in general as to a remedy for how to deal with the changeling, but the issue of baptism is not touched upon.

Even in Catholic days the question of what happened to the soul of a child who died before baptism was not satisfactorily answered (Pohle 94), nor was it dealt with consistently by Reformation writers. The days before baptism were therefore the time of greatest danger, and according to Jeanie Laing the commonest safeguards employed were fire and cold iron (Laing 34). As late as the sixteenth century some midwives still carried fire in a circle round mother and baby, night and morning. Sometimes a smoothing iron was kept in the bed. Laing suggests that iron would be an unknown and therefore dangerous substance to witches
and fairies, who belonged to the Stone Age. Regardless of the measures taken, evidently the period between birth and baptism left the state of the child’s soul in question, and thus subject to the powers of the fairies whose own domain was also between Heaven and Hell.

Tales of the trooping fairies lack one major motif found in tales of the good neighbors: rarely is it mentioned that the humans involved prospered from their encounters with the trooping fairies, regardless of whether the Rade was successful or not. However, there was one group of fairies with whom humans were capable of peaceful co-existence. These were what Hannah Aitken calls the “rough fairies” (Aitken 27). Chief among them was the Brownie, who unlike the more physically human-like fairies was almost always kindly disposed and capable of real devotion to the family he chose to serve.

After settling in with a rural family, the Brownie became a faithful servant working in kitchen, farm, and field. He would not ask for recompense, subsisting on a diet of unboiled porridge and milk, sometimes accompanied with handmade cakes of meal fresh from the mill, toasted over the embers of the fire and spread with honey. Most tales and ballads about the Brownie describe that there is only one taboo area associated with this helpful creature: they would not accept gifts and would be forced to leave the household if a gift was offered.

William Henderson relates various examples:

“A new mantle and a new hood
Poor Brownie! ye’l ne’er do mair good.”
“Gie Brownie coat, gie Brownie sark,
Ye’se get nac more o’ Brownie’s wark.”
“Red breeks and a ruffled sark!
Ye’ll no get me to do yer wark.”
(Henderson 210-11)

Children could safely be left in the care of this uncouth but faithful servant and according to Thomas Wilkie, one of Sir Walter Scott’s tale collectors, he was often appointed guardian of money buried by a hunted man, a contrivance which probably accounts for finds of “fairy gold” in later centuries. Dr. Robert Simpson suggests that some of the seventeenth century
Brownies may have been Covenanters on the run, sheltered through the winter by friendly farmers and showing their gratitude by working through the night:

None of the domestics to whom the secret had not been committed by the master durst approach the scene of their operations. There was an eeriness about the thing and an uncomfortable idea that the place was haunted; and this helped to keep the secret. The farmer would have been found guilty of reset had the thing been known, and punished accordingly; and that punishment was not light... It happily never occurred to the persecutors to suspect that the Brownies were anything else than what popular belief had assigned them. (Aitken 29)

Kitchen loving, and unafraid of fire or iron as the other fairies were reputed to be, the Brownie has too much in common with the Roman *lar*, or domestic god, to pass for a native Borderer. At any rate, a household blessed with a Brownie was one to be envied.
THE FAIRIES, PURGATORY, AND THE DEAD

The link between the fairies and the dead is persistent in the tales and ballads of the Scottish borderers. A prime example of this link is in “The Miller’s Tale” (Aitken 7), where the fairies’ corn has to be ground on the one night of the year when the kirkyards are empty. The narrator of the tale, owner of the Kirkcormack Mill which still stands on the old Kirkcudbright road close to Kirkcormack Kirkyard (Scott-Moncrieff 5), declared that he, his grandfather and his great-grandfather had all actually experienced occasions when the fairies employed the spirits of the unsaved dead as labor to make use of the mill at Halloween. As previously mentioned, just as in many other areas of lowland Scotland, it was a firm belief in Galloway that fairy power was at its height at Halloween. In a mixture of pagan and Christian superstitious lore, lintels were hung with rowan branches and doorsteps ornamented with knots, whorls and crosses, drawn with the charred end of a stick from the hearth, in an effort to bewilder any spirits trying to enter. The trade of miller at that time went beyond the simple grinding of grain. Like many of the trades which required more than lay knowledge, there were secrets that were passed down from master to apprentice.

There were, too, magic words, such as the horseman’s word, the mason’s word, the miller’s word, and so forth. In order to be a true miller, it was requisite to be a millwright, and to be initiated into the mysteries of the ‘miller’s word,’ or power of working the mill by magic. (Laird 55-6)

This secret knowledge could account for the drawing of the attention of the fairies, and for the miller’s attempts to forestall their usage of the mill. Stone whorls, called by the locals “fairy whorls,” were kept in some mills and fixed at night on the spindle to keep the fairies from setting the mill going. This tale, and others like it, demonstrates that spirits of the dead were somehow under the control of the fairies. This raises the issue of what motivated the fairies, beings capable of powers beyond our own, to employ the dead in this fashion.

An answer to this question is given in “Nurse Kind and Ne’er Want” (Aitken 14), which was collected near Nithsdale, a village in Galloway. In this tale, a woman nursing her
own child is visited by a fairy woman who asks her to look after the fairy child as well. As she cared for the two children, rich food and clothing were provided by the fairies, marking the fairy women as one of the good neighbors. What sets this tale apart is that after some months of looking after the fairy child, the good neighbor rewarded the human woman by leading her to a land under a hill and giving her many gifts, among which was the ability to see the human dead working the fields in fairyland. The human woman was informed that "her lost friends" were there as punishment for their misdeeds in life. The comfort afforded by this knowledge is similar to that provided by the condition of souls in Purgatory. The woman in this tale is allowed to return to earth after her otherworldly experience, but when she abuses her gift of second sight has it taken away. Traveling to Elfland while still mortal is evidently a perilous venture, as other humans who go there do not fare as well as this woman did. The ballad of "Tam Lin" provides an illustration of the dangers involved.

"Tam Lin" (Leach 38), or "Tamlane" as the Robert Burns version is known, is a story of rebellion and redemption. It begins with the minstrel’s mysterious warning to young girls against visiting Tam Lin, but Janet defies him and her family by going to his dwelling at Carterhaugh "as fast as she can hie." Janet is seduced by Tam Lin, and finds herself pregnant by him. Regretting her rash act, she returns to Carterhaugh to pluck abortive plants “to scathe the bath away.” Again she meets with Tam Lin, who begs her to keep the child in order that he might be freed of the power of the fairies. Tam Lin tells her how seven years before this time he was captured by the Queen of the Fairies, after a fall from his horse, and taken away in “yon green hill to dwell.” Now he is afraid that he will be offered as the tithe which must be paid to the devil by the fairies every seven years and beseeches Janet’s help. Janet is convinced by Tam Lin’s story and he describes in detail the process by which he may be disenchanted. That Halloween, Janet confronts the Queen of the Fairies as the fairies are riding toward their hill and claims Tam Lin as her own by virtue of the child she carries. The ritual fulfilled, Tam Lin is released to Janet’s keeping, but the ballad closes with the Queen
worrying that another victim must now be found and sacrificed in lieu of Tam Lin. On one level, Janet has paid for her own rebellious act by saving Tam Lin from his fate, thus balancing the scales where her condition is concerned. But the story is really about Tam Lin, not Janet. His accidental fall from a horse, which can be interpreted as resulting in his premature death, is what made his soul subject to the fairies. Tam Lin, for reasons not mentioned in the ballad, could not be released from Eltland through his own power. He has served his time in Eltland, but is not yet safe until a living person has interceded on his behalf, in much the same fashion as the way that the souls of the dead in Purgatory were believed to be succored by the prayers of the living.

The link between the dead and Eltland also accounts for the tradition that fairyland is underground. Lochs near the tops of the higher Border hills were said to be entrances to fairyland. The situation of fairyland, just below the earth’s surface but not beyond human reach, seems to have a connection with the fairy nature, held to be lower than that of christened men but not so low as that of demons.

Again, living persons are sometimes stolen by the fairies and dead images left in their place, the connection of which with death is obvious. In many stories the hero who visits the fairy kingdom is warned against tasting the food offered to him there, lest he become subject to the fairy power, and so impotent to leave it... Universal superstition has postulated an underworld peopled by the dead, and this has resulted in the belief that death may be vanquished and the dead restored.

(Yearsley 14)

This belief that entering Eltland would lead one either to or near the land of the dead is spelled out more explicitly in the story of Thomas of Ercildoune, who like Tam Lin had a life-changing encounter with the Queen of Eltland while journeying in the Scottish countryside.

The ballad of “Thomas the Rhymer” has its roots in the fourteenth-century romance of Thomas of Ercildoune’s enchantment by a “ladye bright,” and of his sojourn in Eltland. The lady is queen of a realm not in heaven, hell, or earth, but “another countrie.” In the version given in Sir Walter Scott’s “Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,” Thomas is dared by
the queen to kiss her, but is warned by her that if he does so she will have his body. In an
older version recounted in Aytoun’s “Ballads of Scotland,” Thomas is sexually attracted to
her, and asks “do give me leave to lie thee by.” The queen warns him that if he sins with her
there will be a price to pay, and even as he lies with her she entreats “I pray thee, Thomas,
thou let me be!” Scott’s version ameliorates the near rape to a mildly sexual encounter, but
in either version Thomas recognizes that in some way he is bound for what he has done, and
when the lady bids him accompany her, they leave “living land” and she transports him to
“fair Elfland.” As they travel beneath Eildon hill, they come to a garden where Thomas,
hungry after his long journey, reaches for some fruit growing on a nearby tree. The queen
stops him with the warning that “If thou it pluck, soothly to say, thy soul goes to the fire of
hell; it never comes out or Domesday, but there in pain aye for to dwell.” In recompense for
denying him physical nourishment, she shows him “the fairest sight, that ever saw man of thy
countrie,” the roads leading to heaven, paradise, purgatory, and hell. She then shows him her
own country, and warns him not to speak, as her husband, the King of Elfland, would
understandably take it poorly if their adultery were discovered. One can only imagine the
scene which would arise if, in a land where spirits of the human dead are working off their
sins, a living voice were suddenly to ring out.

Much like the same situation that Tam Lin found himself in, at the end of seven years,
the devil’s tithe is due and, for his faithfulness in not betraying her to the King, the Queen
transports Thomas back to earth rather than see him taken to hell. As a parting gift, Thomas
asks for “some token, ladye gay, that I may say I spoke with thee.” The Queen grants his
request by making him a minstrel, and when Thomas objects that of harping “ken I none, she
gives him the gift of being incapable of lying. Thomas of Ercildoune gained his freedom
from Elfland by gaining the love of the Queen of Elfland, not with the aid of a living person.
However, tradition holds that although Thomas was allowed to return to earth, upon his death
he must again return to Elfland, there to serve out his indebtedness to the Queen.
The dead having unfinished business on earth is a recurrent theme in other Border ballads such as “The Demon Lover,” “The Cruel Mother,” and “The Wife of Usher’s Well.” While not directly related to issues of fairies or Elfland, these ballads do reinforce the concept that to many borderers, the relationship of the dead and the living was not changed by the arguments and opinions of those leading the Reformation.

According to James Reed, the earliest version of “The Demon Lover” is a broadside by James Harris called “A Warning for Married Women,” which details the misfortunes of a woman named Jane Reynolds (Reed 185). Reed argues that this broadside later became the source for the oral ballad. In the broadside, Ms. Reynolds had “plighted her troth” to a sailor, but was afterwards married to a carpenter when word came that her love’s ship had gone down at sea. To her horror, the spirit of her lost husband arrived one night and carried her away to be with him. The ballad version of the story is much like the broadside, but varies in one important aspect: in the ballad, the spirit has been replaced by a demon who takes the woman off to hell. Interestingly enough, the two versions of the story can be read as a religious discourse. The broadside provides an example that love does not necessarily end at the grave, and that the dead can return to deal with the living. In the ballad, however, there is a marked anti-Catholic message. A widow marrying a carpenter can be seen as an allusion to becoming a nun, as the portrayal of Jesus as a carpenter is a common Christian motif. The replacement of the late husband by a demon provides a strong indictment of Catholicism, taking the message of the story from love conquering the grave to damming those who follow Papist traditions. This change in message is not overly surprising when the religious mood of the times is taken into consideration, but the omission of the husband’s condition following his death stands out when compared to other ballads dealing with revenants.

In most cases, the return of the dead is presented as merely factual, neither spooky nor spiritualistic, and their return is usually a manifestation of love or guilt. In “The Cruel Mother” (Aytoun 366), the theme is that of illegitimate birth followed with infanticide,
bringing about a retributive visitation from the spirit of the dead child. The spirit of the child itself is restless because of the mother’s crime, and returns to earth solely as a reminder of guilt. The earliest printed versions are late eighteenth-century, but the theme of unwanted pregnancy and infanticide has allowed oral versions of the ballad, such as “Old Muvver Lee” (Reed 188), to continue into this century.

In “The Wife of Usher’s Well” (Sidgwick 60), the revenants appear without malicious purpose: they come neither to chide, punish, nor warn. Nor do they appear to be made restless in their graves by the grief of the living. Instead, they are described as wearing clothes made in Paradise. In the ballad, their overnight visit is a result of the mother’s prayers that her dead sons be returned to her, and return they do, but only for that night and only until the dawn. This visit would be comforting to anyone who has lost a loved one, and it demonstrates that the concerns of the living can affect the dead even after they have passed beyond the pale.
CONCLUSION

In an oral tradition that goes back at least as far as Ulysses in western culture, there are tales of humans that have had commerce with the land of the dead, and in the cases of people like Orpheus and Hercules, mortals have been able to travel to that underworld and return to our own. The folklore of the Scottish border continues that tradition, with variations peculiar to that region coloring the older motifs. Unlike the dead of classical Hades, the dead of the Christian Hell are beyond reach by mortals, but, at least in the folklore, some of the Scottish dead whose fate was undetermined were reported to have dwelt for a time under new landlords. This folklore mirrored the desires and dreams of a group of people whose daily existence was fraught with hazardous uncertainties.

As marvelous as some elements of the folktale may be, the depiction of social life is never far from the truth. Reality underpins even fantasy; not even fantasy is independent of the social conditions in the narrator's real life. Narrators use their own environment as a model for heaven and hell; they do not question the assumption that the earthly way of life continues in the next world. (Rohrich 192)

The folklore that spoke of the fairies, whose history in Scotland reaches back beyond the time of the Reformation, helped to fill the void created by the elimination of Purgatory and its function of providing penitence to those not yet ready for Heaven. Despite their official elimination and damnation by Protestant church leaders, widespread belief, the popular acceptance of and interaction with fairies continued in lowland Scotland long into the eighteenth century.

In the face of first-hand testimony, both from the learned and the common folk as to the existence and reality of fairies, a simple and basic question arises: where are the fairies now? It may be that they could not fit into the modern world, and left to pursue their own way of life. Others reasons could be that the world became too Christianized and less tolerant, a situation that forced them to abandon us. In any case, based on the dates given by the collectors of the tales and ballads, the number of reported sightings and interactions with fairies in lowland Scotland peaked in the early to middle eighteenth century, fell off for a
time, then resurged briefly in the last decade of that century. Those tales that arose during that latter time — “Farewell to the People of Peace” (Aitken 122), “Farewell to the Burrow Hill” (Aitken 122), and “The Forsaken Fairy” (Aitken 123) — are extremely brief and have but one common theme: the fairies are going away. The stories have no moral, no explanation, nothing beyond the basic motif of people encountering a group of fairies traveling along the highways and byways on their journey away from the land of humans. “The people of peace shall never more be seen in Scotland” (Aitken 122).

Perhaps it was simply that their time with us was done. By the end of the eighteenth century, the religious conflicts in Christianity were for the most part over, the industrial revolution and the age of reason were flowering, and the standard of living in lowland Scotland was approaching parity with other parts of Great Britain. Nowadays their rings are subject to the plow and their hills merely a place for hikers. But regardless of why they left, or if they ever were here in reality, some of what they brought to the world they left with us. J.R.R. Tolkien writes:

“It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be ‘primarily’ true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had once possessed... Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men — and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused.” (Tolkien 65-66)

For a time, in that place, people believed that fairies walked among them. They were not of us, and not all that they did was understandable to us. In their cruelty they were no better than we, and their kindness was no greater than the standards we set for ourselves. However, we are somehow diminished by their loss. Maybe someday we will know their like again.
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