‘A Shy and Fugitive People’: Andrew Lang and the Fairies

By Andrew Teverson

For Andrew Lang, the realm of fairy land was synonymous with escape. Writing in *The New Princeton Review* in 1888, the same year in which he assembled his authoritative edition of Perrault’s fairy tales and completed his own novel about fairy abduction *The Gold of Fairnilee*, Lang lamented the insistence in modern writing upon the ‘ugly, manly face of life’ (he had in mind the naturalism of Émile Zola and Alphonse Daudet), and instead celebrated what he called ‘literary anodynes’: fictions that counteract the mundanity and disappointment of reality by offering ‘diversion, or comfort, or oblivion […] the draught magical which puts pain and sorrow out of mind’.[1] Once such anodyne, Lang goes on to observe, is administered to ‘lovers of the Fairy Queen’. ‘To get into fairy-land,’ he writes ‘[…] is the aspiration of all of us whom the world oppresses’.[2]

These observations do much to contextualise Lang’s prolific and enduring engagement with the worlds of fairies in his writing. The fairy tale anthologies that he edited in collaboration with his wife between 1889 and 1910, his burlesque novels of a fairy court *Prince Prigio* (1889) and *Prince Ricardo of Pantouflia* (1893), his earnest reconstruction of the Tam Lin legend in *The Gold of Fairnilee*, and his apparently inexhaustible contribution to scholarship concerning the savage origins of fairy tales, may all be seen as a dimension of his life-long endeavour to, as he told Henry Rider Haggard in a letter of 1887, return imaginatively to ‘a better place than Marloes Road’ — Marloes Road being his home in Kensington, London.[3]

Escapist though he professed himself to be, however, Lang could never conceal

from himself, or indeed his readers, the fact that the fairy lands he wrote about sprang from and were modified by the sober realities of daily life. In his introduction to the 1893 edition of Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, written in 1691 and first published by Walter Scott in 1815, Lang retells a story about a young girl who has heard the superstition that those who see fairies must stop their eyes from 'twinkling' so as not to 'lose the vision'.[4] One afternoon in the Spring of 1746, whilst reading in a window seat at the house of Lord Lovat at Gortuleg, the young girl looks up to see 'a company of headlong riders hastening to the castle'.[5] Believing these riders to be the *Sleagh Maith* (Good People), she endeavours to keep her eyes fixed steady upon the horde so that they don't disappear. But the figures, it transpires, are not fairies at all; they are the insubstantial and tattered forces of Charles Stuart, fleeing their annihilation at the Battle of Culloden and hoping that Lord Lovat will help them disappear into the Hebrides. Fairy beliefs, the anecdote suggests, are intertwined with real histories; more than this, they often cluster around sites of personal or, in this instance, national trauma.

A similar proximity to the real may also be observed in Lang's own fictions of fairy land. *The Gold of Fairnilee* is about a young man named Randal whose fascination with the Queen of the Fairies results in him being trapped in fairy land for seven years. In generic terms, the novel fulfils the fantastical and otherworldly requirements demanded by Lang of his fictions. Simultaneously, however, this marvellous story of fairy abduction takes place against a backdrop of historical violence and cultural dislocation. Randall's father has died fighting the English at the Battle of Flodden Field (1513) and one of Randall's earliest memories is of seeing his father first as a defeated ghost with a broken spear and then as a corpse stretched out on a shield. Randall's flight from reality is occasioned, at least in part, by this early moment of childhood trauma and loss: he believes that the Fairy Queen will compensate him for an insufficient and troubling reality. The fairy realm in *The Gold of Fairnilee*, however, turns out to be a place of danger, illusion, and entrapment, where history, seasonal change, and human life, stalls, and Randall, like Kai in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen', must be rescued from this fate by his companion Jeanie and brought back to the real world to find his place there. The logic of Lang's fiction, in this respect at least, tends to contradict his professions about the virtues of escapism in his non-fiction.

Jeanie's narrative trajectory too provides a realistic counterpart to Randall's

journey into the fantastic. As a baby, she was accidentally carried away from a house in Northumbria during a cross-border raid made by the Scottish in revenge for an English theft of cows (Jeanie is bundled up in a carpet along with other treasures). Her arrival is described in terms that foreshadow Randall's abduction by the fairies, but in this case the borders she crosses are not those between reality and the fairy realm but between the warring Kingdoms of England and Scotland. In making this implicit parallel, Lang, perhaps unconsciously, reveals the paradigmatic character of the fairy land in the novel: Randall's transactions between the world of the real and the world of fairies becomes a means of thinking about the nature of the borderlands in which Lang was born, about his own journey away from the borders to live in London, and about political transactions between England and Scotland which, even as Lang wrote, were being tested by the rise of Celtic nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century.

Likewise the story of Jeanie and Randall's eventual marital union following Randall's rescue from the Fairy Queen symbolises the historical union of England and Scotland, and affirms Lang's ongoing commitment to unification at a time when he felt it to be under threat from divisive nationalist factions. Lang's fiction may not concern itself, like Zola's or Daudet's, with the sordid underside of human life, with adultery, divorce proceedings, cynical atheism and 'the brutes who kick women to death'.[6] No less than the French naturalists, however, Lang's preoccupations are rooted in modern concerns and modern anxieties.

As a scholar, Lang repeatedly argues that Fairies are survivals of obsolete civilizational beliefs and practices. In his introduction to Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth*, he describes fairies as 'composite creatures' assembled from memories of a pre-Christian Hades, ancient beliefs in local spirits from Greece, Rome and Egypt, and half memories of an ancient cave dwelling race.[7] The possibility that Lang never entertains is that fairies have survived into the modern age because they have an ongoing relevance to the present. His own fairy narratives, however, and their success in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, suggest precisely this — that fairies persist, and become figures of fascination in this period, not because they offer an escape into the past, but because they speak powerfully, if indirectly, about present concerns. This ultimately is the paradox that characterises Lang's correspondence with the fairies: he sees in them an imaginative vehicle of escape, but stubbornly, and against his own

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