

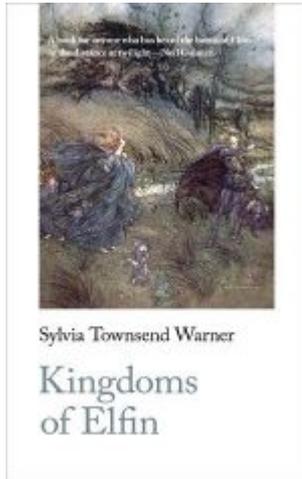
# The Scottish Kingdoms of Elfin

**By Kate Macdonald**

*Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote one great fantasy novel, *Lolly Willowes*, at the beginning of her remarkable writing career, and one great book of linked short stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, at the very end. It's a glorious sequence of stories, in which the courts of Elfin existed through history in our world, with their own customs and manners, attendants and events. History and comedy, romance and tragedy interlace.<sup>1</sup>*

As Neil Gaiman points out, Warner's writing career was not known for fantasy fiction. *Lolly Willowes* (1926) was succeeded by poetry and fiction distinguished by considerable individuality, but her output was mostly realist, and scholarly attention has largely been focused on these works. But in her eighties, in the last six or seven years of her life, Warner began to write stories into which it was 'a relief to escape from the human heart, which I was growing rather too familiar with'.<sup>2</sup> At that time Warner was recently widowed: her life companion Valentine Ackland had died from breast cancer in 1969, and Warner's diaries for the succeeding years, and some of her letters, give hints of the dogged endurance and desolation of spirit that she was experiencing. To escape into writing about something outside her grief-stricken existence would indeed have been a relief. But it may also have transmuted that grief into a bearable art.

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What I want to do here is examine how Warner chose to use fairy lore in her Scottish stories of Elfin. Her approach, as Ingrid Hotz-Davies suggests in her introduction to the new Handheld Press edition of *Kingdoms of Elfin*, is anthropological. Following what Katharine Briggs calls the tradition of ‘heroic fairies’,<sup>3</sup> Warner’s fairies are four-fifths of human height. Her descriptions are measurement-based, explaining (or airily not quite explaining) how fairies fly, and how they turn their visibility on and off. In this matter-of-fact detailing of the fantastic, she was influenced by the writing of T. H. White, whose biography she had written in 1967. In writing about fairies specifically, like Kipling (in *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies*) and Tolkien before her, she resisted the twentieth-century tendency to write fairies as ‘airy, tenuous, pretty creatures without meat or muscles, made up of froth and whimsy’, creating instead ‘a world in which imagination has superseded fancy’.<sup>4</sup> Warner was judiciously selective in her invention: her fairies are indifferent to sentiment, and have very little interest in human affairs, but they also demonstrate many of the classical fairy attributes.

Despite being about fairies who fly, the stories of *Kingdoms of Elfin* are not about magic. In Warner’s formulation, fairies *are* magic, in that they are magical creatures, and can become visible to humans when they feel it necessary – but they cast no spells. Her fairies are heartless and indifferent, long-lived, formal, articulate and intricate. They inhabit a stratified social hierarchy in which the working fairies can and do fly, and are celebrated for this, whereas the upper classes consider flying to be coarse, and unbecoming (although at least one Elfin queen ensures that her wings are oiled weekly). But there are variations: Brocéliande in Brittany is the proudest, most aristocratic and most hidebound of the Courts, in which a courtier who flies is at serious risk of *lésé-majesté*, whereas the fairies in Wales are so unrefined that they all fly up into ash trees of an evening to sleep.

Let us now proceed into Scottish Elfindom.

Elfhome on Eskdalemuir is, of course, the principal Scottish fairy kingdom, which Tiphaine, lover of Thomas of Ercildoune, rules until her death in ‘The Five Black Swans’. A later queen of Elfhome was abandoned by a secessionist group of

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Warner first mentions Elfhame in a much earlier piece of writing, a short article in the women's magazine *Eve* in 1927. There she used 'Elfhame' synonymously with the idea of elfin kingdoms in general. In 'The Five Black Swans', in which Queen Tiphaine lies dying, remembering her long-lost mortal lover Thomas, Elfhame has become a single court. The passion and freedom of their love is echoed in Warner's diary entries of the period, when she was re-reading her own and Valentine's letters, and remembering the days of their marriage before the irruption of Elizabeth Wade White into their lives and Valentine's bed.<sup>6</sup> Warner draws freely on the many iterations of the legend of True Thomas, Thomas the Rhymer, of Ercildoune, to explore the nature of fairy love. She described this to David Garnett: 'Elfins, as I saw them, seldom love, unless they are very young [...] or love a mortal, like Tiphaine.'<sup>7</sup> Love comes upon Tiphaine because Thomas, a mortal, can see her. The physical shock of this frees her from other fairy codes, and she takes to the air: 'It was the first time in her life she had flown, and the sensation delighted her'.<sup>8</sup> Back in the dying queen's bedroom, the principal emotions are expressed by the twin human children whom Tiphaine has adopted, and left to run riot over the castle. After their last, most shocking outrage, which rips a monkey in two on the Queen's own bed, they were 'strangled and their bodies thrown on the moor as a charity to crows'.<sup>9</sup>

The description of this incident as merely 'deplorable', rather than tragic or grotesque, indicates how Warner's Elfins did not share the warmer passions of Scottish ballad tradition, on which she had grown up. Warner's paternal grandmother was Flora Moir, the daughter of an Aberdeen wine-merchant and an

Orkneywoman,<sup>10</sup> who had grown up in Edinburgh.<sup>11</sup> Warner herself was an omnivorous semi-autodidact, with the run of her father's study (he was a schoolmaster at Harrow). Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg are quoted and cited in the Elfin stories — her use of the term Elfin itself could well have come from Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* — as authorities. As well as having a thorough knowledge of the early, Scottish, accounts of fairies and witchcraft that would have brought about *Lolly Willowes* in the 1920s,<sup>12</sup> Warner later refreshed her early childhood reading about fairies with the works of Katharine Briggs.<sup>13</sup> These encyclopaedic works, as well as others from the Folklore Society, for example, would have been the best synthesis of scholarly work on the British fairy tradition available to Warner when she was writing her Elfin stories. However, nothing is recorded in her diaries or letters about any extra research. The Elfin stories came from her imagination and her life's reading. In 1973 she realised how, lying on her chaise longue, 'I read ballads, & realised how early I was blooded to Elfin.'<sup>14</sup>

It is not possible to summarise the peculiarly Scottish elements in Warner's Scottish fairy society here. It would need a thorough grounding in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditions, and a good knowledge of the work of the collectors Robert Kirk, the Campbells of Islay and Tiree, James Macdougall, J M McPherson and David MacRitchie to show what Warner borrowed and what she invented. Her borrowings are clear from browsing through Briggs alone, and she also invented with joyous enthusiasm:

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Warner's fairies mingle easily among humans, being undisturbed by cold iron, churches or crosses: 'Theologically identified as the scattered remnants of Satan's host, rationally dismissed as superstition, they were a race of pragmatists.'<sup>16</sup> In 'The Occupation', the Secessionists from Elfhame discover that a nearby church has a crowd of people in it every seven days, and watch with a connoisseur's

interest the performances of the man in the black addressing the throng. When, shortly afterwards, they move into the nearby house for the winter, its housekeeping improves after the working fairies observe with horrified fascination how the minister's wife will cleave a sheep's head and draw out the brains and tongue to make a regale for the minister and her son, but never washes up. In this story, although the fairies mean no particular harm to the manse's inhabitants, they also treat them with indifference, shutting the newborn baby in the meal-kist to silence its cries, and leading the mathematically inclined elder daughter to believe in the devil. The minister becomes obsessed with Robert Kirk's *The Secret Commonwealth* (1691), and, like him, refuses to baptise his newborn child, believing it to be a changeling. He soon goes mad, and the fairies are mildly interested, but only as much as we might be interested in a devastated nest of birds: what is there to be done when Nature takes its way?

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Loneliness is a disturbingly common factor in the stories of Elfin. The fairies' dispassionate interest and unconcern with human fears, loves, desires and needs are relentlessly described by Warner. They give expression to the desolation in her own heart, in which there was no hope, no respite from her existence without her lover. To match the isolation of the human who cannot understand the fairy throng around him, she created the loneliness of Snipe the exile in Catmere: "There was no need for him to remain in his room, but as no-one invited him out of it he did so."<sup>17</sup> Developing the point from the fairy in isolation among his own kind, she introduces Sir Glamie:

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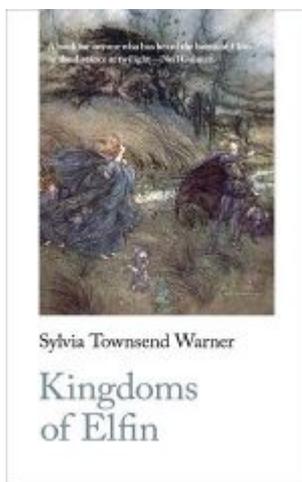
The utter loneliness of an Elfin ghost ignored by his kind is on a par with the lonely human captive imprisoned for decades. It is hard to avoid noticing that Warner's saddest stories of Elfin are located in Scottish settings. Suffolk sees picaresque adventure, Brittany has stately ritual, Lapland has witchcraft, Austria has astonishing banquets and Persia has a murderous tyrant, but simple existential isolation is confined to the Scottish experience, the moors on which 'nothing stirred except the sheep wandering slowly over the waste. Nothing sounded except their baa-ings and the sudden cackle of a grouse'.<sup>19</sup> When Professor Sutherland is ejected from the Foxcastle broch, 'a couple of sheep took fright and galloped off, their hoofs drumming on the shallow turf. The hill had been fired, nothing remained of the heather except a few charred stumps. He would not have known where he was except for the peat hags and the hurrying burn in the valley.'<sup>20</sup> This association between fairies and humans and Scotland, and the sadness of loss and exile, is relentless, the one influencing the other, and cannot be accidental.

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*