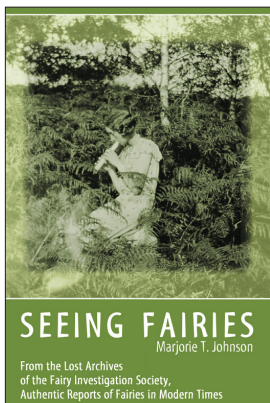


BOOK REVIEWS

SEEING SEERS: AN EDUCATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FAIRY BELIEFS



Marjorie T. Johnson. *Seeing Fairies: From the Lost Archives of the Fairy Investigation Society, Authentic Reports of Fairies in Modern Times.* Edited by Simon Young. San Antonio: Anomalist Books, 2014. 363 pp.

As anyone with an interest in British fairy-lore will know, fairies were often characterised as mischievous, malicious, even malevolent beings. Their general portrayal in pre-industrial popular belief is of a race of supernatural creatures whose favourite pastime was to cause trouble, even harm and death, for the fearful ‘folk’ of the British Isles. These, however, are not the creatures we are presented with in Marjorie Johnson’s *Seeing Fairies*.

Seeing Fairies is what its title suggests: a collection of fairy sightings – more than four hundred of them in fact, making this one of the densest records of fairy encounters ever compiled, rivalling Walter Evans-Wentz’s 1911 *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Counties* and Janet Bord’s 1997 *Fairies: Real Encounters with Little People*. A myriad of memorates and anecdotes are recounted by the late Marjorie Johnson, whose eagerness to share her own personal experiences, opinions, and emotions fosters a sense of informal familiarity between writer and reader. This makes me reluctant to refer to her simply as Johnson, so forgive this break from academic tradition.

It took Marjorie, a lawyer’s secretary from Nottingham, from 1955 to 1996 to write up her collection of memorates. She gathered her material primarily from the Fairy Investigation Society (FIS), which was founded in 1927 by Bernard Sleight and Quentin Craufurd. It is Craufurd who fondly pens the foreword to *Seeing Fairies*; a retired naval scientist, Craufurd claimed to have communicated with fairies via radio. His foreword reproduces conversations he purportedly shared with them – conversations which sparked his decision to found the FIS, a society which, in its heyday, boasted a host of colourful, upper middle class individuals as its members, who met periodically to discuss spiritualism and fairy sightings.

Marjorie, who claimed to have frequently encountered fairies throughout her life and thus dubbed herself a ‘fairy seer’, was secretary of the FIS by 1950, and in that role she received numerous letters recounting fairy sightings worldwide. She kept a record of these letters and, long after she stepped down as secretary, continued to gather material for a book. Sadly she did not live to see it enter print in Britain; it was three years after her death, in 2014, that *Seeing Fairies* was finally published in English, thanks to the work of editor Simon Young, a British historian with an interest in fairy lore.

Young (commendably) stays as faithful to Marjorie’s original manuscript as possible, choosing not to rectify the structural problems of the piece. Despite being divided into

seventeen thematic chapters – ranging from ‘Nature Spirits in Gardens and the Countryside’ to ‘Angels and Angel Music’ – *Seeing Fairies* would have benefited from further subdivisions. It might also have benefited from a re-structuring; Marjorie recounts the anecdotes of fairy sightings in an order that is neither chronological nor geographical. This results (as is candidly admitted by Young) in a rather random, turbid, and plethoric sequence of examples, which could have been aided by subtitles and the addition of an index.

Structural issues aside, however, *Seeing Fairies* offers a fascinating insight into modern British fairy belief, so enthusiastically recounted by Marjorie. Her writing style is straightforward but meticulously detailed; she introduces each informant by title, name, and place of residence, before providing an exact date and often time (sometimes as specific as 2:30 am) for the informant’s fairy encounter. She then presents the memorate, either by paraphrasing or quoting directly from correspondences with them. Her writing is also rather (forgive the sanctimonious quotation marks) “scientific”, peppered with terms characteristic of spiritualism and parapsychic research: ‘astral projection’, ‘ectoplasm’, ‘electrical ethers’, ‘cosmic space’, ‘vibratory rate of atoms’, and so on. However, these terms are interspersed throughout such fantastical accounts that *Seeing Fairies* proves to be a peculiar mix of erudition and whimsy.

The fairies portrayed by Marjorie and her contributors are not of the same ilk as those malicious creatures of pre-industrial folk belief; at the most, they are distant relatives. Some misbehaviour is recounted (e.g., fairies leading people astray, or hiding possessions) but these activities are generally harmless, more mischief than malevolence, and on the whole Marjorie’s fairies are more akin to – indeed, may have set the precedent for – the benevolent, saccharine creatures of modern popular culture. As nature spirits, they help plants to grow and fruits to ripen; they tend to flowers and protect trees; they aid animals and even, occasionally, humans. There is something sweetly pastoral about these descriptions: fairies who frequent fairy markets, push wheelbarrows, go lamb-riding, and on hot summer days sit on toadstools in the shade of turnip rows and partridge-watch for pleasure. And such descriptions are so vividly and meticulously detailed – everything from the fairies’ heights and the materials of their clothes, to their odours (some apparently smell of fungus) and the sounds they make – that the reader can easily imagine experiencing the encounter themselves.

It is not, however, just the benevolent nature of these fairies that may seem unfamiliar to the reader, but their modernity. A lot of Marjorie’s anecdotes come from the 1950s and 1960s, but some are as late as the 1970s, 80s and 90s, and it is novel, for those familiar with the work of Evans-Wentz, for example, to read of fairy encounters that involve cars, trains, planes, bus depots, the wireless, television sets, washing machines, dishwashers, etc. Such fairy stories seem incongruous in industrial and post-industrial contexts. However, the relative modernity of these sources makes them more, rather than less, interesting. Taken as a primary source, *Seeing Fairies* provides remarkable insight into the mutability of fairies by demonstrating how perceptions of them change over the centuries. The fact that Marjorie seemed to believe wholeheartedly in the authenticity of the accounts she relayed does not detract from the value of this book as an academic resource. If anything, it greatly increases it, demonstrating the extent to which fairy-beliefs survived deep into – and probably beyond – the 20th century.

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