

# Fairy hills: merging heritage and conservation

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*Fairylore in the British Isles has left significant imprints upon the landscape. One such imprint holds considerable potential for conservation since it links a heritage component to nature conservation. This article seeks to establish a context in which certain distinct tree clusters — sometimes referred to as 'fairy knowes' and 'fairy forts' — merit the attention of conservationists as features of the cultural landscape.*

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The landscape is a novel in which we can read about a region's cultural history. Interpreting the cultural landscape is of significance to conservationists because it leads to a better understanding of human relationships with the land. Such knowledge is, in turn, integral to any effective conservation programme since it allows for management practices that are sensitive to community needs. In recent years conservation biologists, especially in the Far East, have realised how important sacred groves have been in conserving biodiversity and assuring local support for the protection of these special forest fragments. In this essay we propose that a parallel cultural landscape feature exists in the British Isles in the form of wooded fairy hills. Further, we build a context in which the heritage value of these landscape features makes them potential tools for conservation.

## Context for Conservation

Places are, and frequently have been, thought to possess or be possessed by divine or mystical powers. Attitudes to such sacred and feared places vary from fear and inapproachability to attraction and reverence. These locales have drawn the attention of several academic disciplines interested in the conservation of nature since they often represent less disturbed natural habitats. As such, biodiversity is consistently used as a slogan for the ecological protection of these special semi-natural remnants. Indeed, work on Chinese, Indian, Micronesian and Thai sacred groves has shown that these exceptionally important cultural landmarks also effectively protect some of the world's biological diversity.<sup>1</sup>

A prominent example of this kind of research is illustrated by Madhav Gadgil of Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science. For over a decade he has studied India's traditional methods of conservation. By and large his work has generated a complex biological basis for the origins of Indian sacred groves. His research rests on a functional claim that a *refugia* system exists in India which manifests itself by the traditional network of sacred places in the ebbs of streams, rivers and valley catchments. Each dedicated to a specific deity, these sacred sites are largely free from exploitation. As such, they act as 'pristine' islands which protect some of the region's valuable plant and animal resources.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the people of the British Isles have also left undisturbed oases in the landscape based on similar beliefs that these areas were haunts for spirits and mythical creatures. The rich folklore of Scotland, Ireland and Wales provides numerous examples in which certain hills and mounds were recognised as the underground dwellings of the fairy folk. Traditionally such places were viewed with apprehension and fear yet they also represented gateways to another world. Often this was considered to be a world of art and music, which has led Dr. John MacInnes of Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies to suggest that the fairy hill is a "metaphor for the imagination".<sup>3</sup> Following in this vein we wish to establish the cultural significance of fairy abodes thus recognising them, not merely as biological adaptations which meet conservation needs, but as icons in the cultural landscape.

One could refer to thousands of places scattered throughout the countryside of the British Isles as fairy dwellings — be they fairy dells, forts, glens, hills, knowes, moors or raths. Historically folk tradition rooted the basis for identifying these places and this still lingers on in their local recognition. The decline of folklore beliefs, however, has meant that we must now specify our criteria in identifying such cultural landscape features. Whereas the heightened fairy faith parlance of centuries past allowed people to recognise these mythical spaces despite their physical variability, we now see their cultural significance mostly by the imprints they have left on place-names. In Scotland for instance, numerous hills and hillocks take on various words that refer to fairies, witches and other mystical beings. *Cailleach Bheur*, *Neimheadh*, *Sithe*, and *Sithean* are some Gaelic examples and in Wales, *Gwinllan*, *Gwynedd* and *Ydlan* offer a sample of Welsh words embedded with mythical meaning.<sup>4</sup>

These places, however, demonstrate relatively few common physical properties that would allow us to distinguish them within the landscape. As such, we will focus our attention especially on tree clusters and define the most typical 'fairy place' as a relatively small natural or artificial hillock, mostly wooded with mature deciduous trees (or Scots pine) of at least one generation. Additionally, such landscape features are usually fairly circular and visually distinct from their surroundings. This should not be taken to preclude what might be thought of as 'dormant fairy mounds', where evidence suggests that they were once wooded but have since been felled. Nor should it disqualify a site based solely on its visual characteristics. Our study of fairy knowes in Scotland leads us to propose that each of the following criteria is adequate to recognise a site as a 'potential' fairy place, although we emphasise that a combination of any of them is more credible:

- a cluster of mature native trees or shrubs, usually though not always, found upon a mound;
- a site protected in full or in part by local totem or taboo;
- a site which is associated with fairylore either by folkloric recollections or historical reference;
- an unmanaged/overgrown archaeological site (e.g. barrow, stone circle).

## Historical rationale

Traditional beliefs in the British Isles ascribe typical fairy dwellings to caverns, hills, islands, rocks, trees, water bodies and wells. Certain taboos were often associated with these places relating to the belief that fairies inhabited them. Most typically these were concerned with restricting their access, especially at threshold times such as dawn and dusk, as well as restricting the removal of earth, stones and timber. Generally these places were left undisturbed and shunned. The Rev. Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle in central Scotland clearly refers to such taboos in his famous treatise on fairylore *The Secret Common-Wealth* dated 1691: <sup>5</sup>

There be manie places called Fayrie hills, which the mountain-people think impious and dangerous to peel or discover, by taking earth or wood from them; superstitiously believing the souls of their predecessors to dwell y<sup>r</sup> [there]. And for that end (say they) a Mote or Mount was dedicate beside everie church-yard, to receive their souls, till their adjescent Bodies arise, and so become as a Fayrie hill.

This quote also illustrates that the Brythonic and Celtic traditions repeatedly entangled the fairy world with the land of the dead. This land, thought to exist underground, revealed itself through such spirit haunts as barrows, tumuli and other burial places. The fairies and the spirits of the dead therefore co-existed spatially in these traditions. It follows that barrows, tumuli and other elevated areas came to symbolise the typical fairy abode. In Scotland and Ireland this affiliation was stronger if the mound was visually isolated, probably because islands were ancient Celtic doors to the other-



A fairy knowe just north of Pitlochry on the east side of the A9. Two grave slabs rest in this knowe and inscribed on one of them is a bird of prey and the date 1760.

photo: Alastair McIntosh

world.<sup>6</sup> From this we see that fairy habitations had important social roles in providing identifiable passageways to the otherworld. They were places where the mysterious and esoteric was grounded in order to explain the unknown and thus alleviate fear. Furthermore, in many stories they were considered to be the home of the original peoples of the Scot-Irish Gaelic continuum, the *Tuatha de Danann* — the peoples of the mother Goddess Anann — who fled the invasion of the Milesians (also known as Goidels) to live underground as the *Sidh* or the 'good people'. The inherent mysterious nature of fairies and wooded areas further meant that the fairy fort provided the community with social escape spaces. Consequently, they acted as means of maintaining certain spatial boundaries within and between communities.

A strong bond has traditionally existed between nature and the fairy folk. Tradition-bearers saw the fairies as mediators between many things, not least nature and humanity. For example, fairy associations with plants meant that certain species were reserved for their realm while others were for human use. This suggests a basic conception of resource partitioning within the fairy faith. As well as sharing resources amongst themselves, the tradition-bearers also allocated resources such as plants and space to the fairy race. Fairy hills were therefore a manifestation of a culture's association with nature.<sup>7</sup>

This tradition has therefore left hundreds of semi-natural woodland remnants throughout the countryside. Some of our fieldwork in central Scotland has demonstrated that many are still recognised as fairy knowes.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, other authors such as L. Stott have also supported the notion of an undying affinity between the Scots and fairylore. In 1992 he proposed that "the Trossachs in general, and Aberfoyle in particular, enjoy — in Scotland at least — an unrivalled reputation for fairies".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, our own preliminary observations in Ireland in May 1996 equally gave credence to the persistence of fairylore traditions. Stories of bad luck caused by damaging a fairy rath abound on the west coast. For instance, roads which have recently been straightened frequently negotiate around fairy raths, and Paul Murphus, the local historian of Kilbaha, Co. Clare, has recalled how, on one occasion, this has resulted from road workers refusing to cut into a rath because they found they became ill after attempting to do so. We are even further reminded of the importance of Celtic fairylore when author J M Synge voices to us that "Co. Mayo is more heavily populated with fairies than any other county in Ireland".

It is undeniable then that elements of fairylore survive in the British Isles to the present day and perhaps it is pertinent to ask how and why fairies continue to manifest themselves in folklore. One explanation for the persistence of fairies in folklore is that they are entities which exist in their own right in non-ordinary realms of consciousness. Another possibility suggests that they are an anthropomorphised way of thinking of nature's spirituality — the soul dimensions of life. And, as Mike Collard of Future Forests near Bantry, Co. Cork says, is there not a sense in which "we are all the fairies"? For at one level, one can view fairies as images of the human psyche's connection with the 'consciousness' of nature. At another, they can also be seen as images buried deep in the heritage of Celtic mythology. Either way none can deny that these mystical creatures are important to the history of the British Isles and its relationships with the natural world.

The defeat of the *Tuatha de Danann* by the Milesians serves as good illustration for what has happened to our bond with nature over the centuries. Figuratively, we drove the spirits of nature underground, beneath the threshold of the mind's eye. Subordinate to reason. Perhaps we are now ready to receive them back. Perhaps, as Peter Pan was, we too are ready to believe in the naivety of childhood, in that maturity which enables a co-existence between the wisdom of serpents and the gentleness of doves. Perhaps indeed, fairylore offers images in which the goal of a sustainable livelihood might find models in which nature could shine — unabated for future generations — to unconceal the light of Creation.

### **Recommendations for conservation**

Agreement exists in the conservation literature that wildlife and landscape conservation can and should, wherever possible, occur in multiple objective contexts. Such an observation is important since most small and distinct fairy hills and similar landscape features occur within the confines of private farms and estates. As such their management will vary to accommodate different situations. These could include grazing, shooting and timber production but generally this essay advances conservation as the most pressing and traditional designation, though this would not preclude amenity and even an element of sensitive cultural tourism. We also suggest that fairy hill conservation should steer towards strengthening their heritage as long standing semi-natural woodland remnants while emphasising the enhancement of their habitat complexity.

A fairy mound's most visible attribute is often its circular cluster of mature trees. The viability of this characteristic is the prime objective for management. Management recommendations therefore require the protection of regenerating saplings during their stages of vulnerability. Given that fairy hill trees are usually broadleaves and/or Scot's pine, and given the historical fairylore associations with certain plant species, a further recommendation is to ensure that the regenerating understorey trees which will reach the sub-canopy consistently include native species such as apple, elm, hazel, holly, oak, rowan, yew and thorns. Rowans should be especially favoured as a sub-canopy species because of its particular associations with fairylore where its berries were thought to be a special food for the fairy folk.

We have seen that the fairy hill once represented one of Celtic culture's thresholds into the spiritual realm of nature. As such these places were minimally disturbed because they were both venerated and feared. Laissez-faire conservation is what has handed them down to us and consequently might best preserve them for future generations. Accordingly, they should be rendered free from excessive grazing, damaging recreative activities and resource extraction. In advancing this perspective we posit that these sites follow their natural course only if their viability is assured. Fencing should remain consistent with traditional methods and the 'image' of the sites. Small stone walls and natural fences should therefore be favoured. Natural fences would include hedges or other thicket-like shrub barriers of holly or gorse. Once fenced these sites could possibly become (re)colonised by woodland plants and animals thus increasing in habitat (perhaps even species) diversity. Given the rare presence of total-

ly unmanaged and ungrazed woodland remnants in the countryside, they would also increase the landscape's diversity. They might also become more effective as dispersal islands and stepping stone habitats. Finally, they could potentially attain an increased social significance, not only because they would represent rare semi-natural conditions, but also because they would depict a unique management style which might draw attention to their history as remnants of fairylore.

In managing these sites in a landscape context one should equally consider their distinctiveness in their surroundings. Therefore clearing vegetation around some of these fairy mounds will sometimes be necessary to enhance their visual integrity. This procedure should focus on already existing sites and does not favour artificially creating fairy hills by clear-felling trees around hill tops since this would be ecologically unsound and would undermine the historical rationale of the fairy abode. Although the possibility of creating new fairy mounds in areas devoid of existing woodland should not be dismissed as unrealistic since, according to the leading conservationist Partha Sarathy, the establishment of new sacred groves in India has been extremely successful.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Raising the public's awareness about fairy hills is crucial to ensuring their wide-spread protection. It also has a part in changing attitudes and values about heritage and conservation. The benefits of this could range from enhancing our respect for nature and places, to providing landscape familiarity, communal interaction and perhaps even spiritual inspiration. Indeed, it often only takes a little time spent contemplating in a fairy knowe for the imagination to turn back to ancient druidic times and for the mind to suppose that perhaps such places are remnant links with the sacred groves of our own archaic past.

Public awareness is also essential if fairy hill conservation is to obtain some form of public policy recognition. The Woodland Grant Scheme is a likely source of funding for compensating the expenses of those land custodians who wish to manage the fairy groves on their property with conservation in mind. Organisations such as Scottish Natural Heritage, the Forestry Commission, English Nature, Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Farming, Forestry and Wildlife Advisory Group for Scotland also consider funding projects which involve the conservation of certain cultural landscape features. It remains up to British and Irish conservationists to recognise fairy mounds as elements of the cultural landscape and to promote them as such by devising various mechanisms for their protection.

We have attempted to demonstrate that fairy hills deserve recognition as special conservation sites because they embody remarkable potential for rekindling a communion with heritage, place and nature. We have written this article because the Good People have enchanted us, especially with their representation of a more harmonious relationship with nature and community. We might ponder whether the observance of totem and taboo in particular, or the cultivation of a reverence for nature in general, are ways in which nature conservation is encoded in the meaning of local practices. Many places, such as the Isle of Eigg in the Scottish Hebrides, have a fairy knowe

to which musicians are said to have put their ear to the ground to hear and learn new tunes. Legend also has it that Ireland's greatest harpist, Carolan, slept in a rath — an activity which, according to tradition, grants either the gift of virtuosity or madness.

As a largely disembedded culture, we might pick-up some valuable tips from such myths. The potential is particularly strong because many of the fairy worlds fruit's are of the arts — poetry, music, storytelling, painting. The arts therefore help us know and respect nature and this is a powerful realisation for conservationists, especially as we begin to appreciate the ways in which our culture foster a merging of heritage and nature.

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