

Article: The Folklore of the Tanat Valley:
Fairies, Giants and Forgotten Ecological Knowledge

Dr. Jack Hunter
Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Welsh Fairies

‘Do the Tylwyth Teg ever pay you visits?’

‘The Tylwyth Teg, sir?’

‘Yes; the fairies. Do they never come to have a dance on the green sward in this neighbourhood?’

‘Very rarely, sir; indeed, I do not know how long it is since they have been seen.’

‘You have never seen them?’

‘I have not, sir; but I believe there are people living who have.’

George Borrow talking with a man from Pontfadog, *Wild Wales* (1872).

In his 1949 travelogue *A Wanderer in North Wales*, the Welsh Labour politician Cledwyn Hughes (1916-2001) – who was MP for Anglesey and later Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos – described his experiences walking around the valleys and villages of North Wales. Hughes was particularly interested in capturing the atmosphere of the places he visited, and this included the beliefs and traditions of the people he met. Throughout his book Hughes draws the reader’s attention to elements of folklore and superstition from the places he visited on his travels, all of which helps to make his writing especially vivid, and evocative of a sense of mystery. Indeed, Hughes identifies North Wales as being particularly rich in folklore relating to the fairies:

For a long time the fairies have lived with the Welsh. And perhaps with a greater love for the north of the country. Where there are none of the great cities of the industrial south [...] (Hughes, 1949, pp. 12-13).

Writing more than sixty years before Hughes, in 1887, clergyman and antiquarian Revd. Elias Owen (1833-1899) provided a useful overview of different Welsh names for the fairies, including ‘Y Tylwyth Teg’ (the fair folk), ‘Bendith y Mamau’ (blessing of the mothers), ‘Ellyllon’ (elves), ‘Dynion Bach Teg’ (little fair men), ‘Coblynau’ (goblins), and ‘Gwylliaid’ (wild mountain fairies), amongst others (Owen, 1887). The earliest written record of the most common Welsh term for the fairies – ‘Tylwyth Teg’ – is from a poem dated to c.1500, and was later incorporated into one of the first Welsh-English dictionaries in 1547: ‘tuylywth tec [=] Fayries’ (Suggett, 2018, p. 138). Twentieth-century folklorist Robin Gwyndaf gives a summary of the defining characteristics of Welsh fairies, he explains that they are generally understood to be:

[...] non-ghostly apparitions. Their habits and activities resemble those of men. It was once believed that the taller type were inclined to dishonesty. They stole butter and cheese and milked cows and goats. The smaller race, which figure most

prominently in Welsh tradition, on the other hand, were beautiful and gentle folk. They were playful, fond of music and dance, and kind to mortals. Reports of their actual size vary, but generally they were held to be the size of a six-year-old child [...] (Gwyndaf, 1997, p. 160)

In his travelogue, Cledwyn Hughes goes on to describe the kinds of landscapes, terrains and habitats that the fairies were thought to occupy in Wales, and hints at rare interactions between villagers and these elusive beings:

[...] the mountains and lakes and bogs of the North are the places which the Little Folk haunt now. Coming sometimes to upland farms, or seen by some late traveller in the moonlight [...] (Hughes, 1949, pp. 12-13).

For Hughes, and those he met in the 1940s, it was not beyond the realms of possibility to encounter the *tylwyth teg* on a cold night in the modern era. The early twentieth century ethnographer W.Y. Evans-Wentz (1878-1965) also agreed with the supernatural sentiment of Hughes' characterisation of Wales, arguing that the country possesses 'its own peculiar psychic atmosphere' (Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 9).



Tanat Valley looking towards the east

Tanat Valley Folklore

Of particular interest for the purposes of this survey is that Hughes makes direct reference to the Tanat Valley in Powys (formerly Montgomeryshire), Mid-Wales, where I have lived my whole life (more or less). He writes:

In the valley of the Tanat is Llanrhaiadr yn Mochnant [sic], with its rush of waterfall [...] In this valley, too, is Llangynog, in shadow of the Berwyn mountains [...] (Hughes, 1949, p. 23).

I lived in Llangynog from the age of four until I went to university, and today live just nine miles down the River Tanat, in the hills near Llangedwyn. The Tanat Valley is widely regarded as the gateway to the Berwyn mountains, and to Eryri beyond. The B4391 road, which runs along the valley, follows the river Tanat before climbing up steep craggy cliffs into the mountains. The Berwyn mountain range receives a very vivid description in Hughes' travelogue, along with an account of some of the traditions and beliefs associated with the hills by the villagers. He explains that:

The bleak Berwyn mountains with the Pennant Glen [is] famous as the haunt of the fairies. And the Hounds of Hell haunt and hunt these mountains. The Devil is their huntsman and the hounds are bright red and as they hunt in the air they drop blood to the slopes beneath [...] And they chase the souls of the newly departed [...] Their souls have been sent to the dark slopes of the Berwyns to wait, those who are damned (Hughes, 1949, p. 23).

Hughes goes on to explain that:

People have seen the Hounds in full cry across a low sky. Mountain farmers have heard the awful baying, the once heard sound of a lifetime. On wild nights late travellers pedal fast, and in the cars the eyes blink and watch as the road unfolds in the headlamps [...] Not with the best of Gay companions would I hike over the Berwyns at night when the wind is high and the rain hisses from the tops of the rocky places (Hughes, 1949, p. 23).

The Berwyn mountains also have a speculative linguistic association with the fairies - the poet and folklorist T. Gwynn Jones (1871-1949) suggested that the name might be a mutated form of 'Bryn(iau) Gwyn (ap Nudd)' - the hills of Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the fairies. He also offers the more likely suggestion that Berwyn is 'a metathesised form of *Bre Wyn*, the hill of Gwyn' (Jones, 1979, p. 52). He goes on to explain that 'The name of Gwyn', along with those of 'Bran, Branwen, Manawydan and others of the race of hero-gods, is particularly associated with the Berwyn district' (ibid.). This association may go some way towards explaining the Hounds of Hell so gorily described by Cledwyn Hughes, because Gwyn ap Nudd was said to lead the Wild Hunt across the sky with the red-eared Cŵn Annwn (dogs of the otherworld). Regardless of whether or not these etymological speculations have any grounding, it is clear that - at the very least - the Berwyn mountains and their valleys have an imaginative association with the fairies and the Wild Hunt. Indeed, the website of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (CPAT) has this to say about the Tanat Valley in particular:

It is little surprise that the dramatic landscape of the Tanat Valley has inspired numerous legends involving dragons, giants, serpents, fairies, brigands, princes

and saints [...]

(<https://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/tanat/tnfunera.htm>).

But references to folklore from the Tanat Valley are relatively scarce compared to other areas of Wales, and there is no single collection of folklore specifically from the Valley and surrounding areas. This project is the first part of my own effort to bring this local folklore together into one place, but it is not the first attempt. Writing in the 1930s, local archaeologist Robert Richards was faced with a similar situation in his attempt to collect what he could of the 'Tanat Valley's' folklore, which even then was beginning to disappear:

Traditions and fables, so it is sometimes claimed, die hard on the country side and one would naturally expect in the remoter recesses and valleys of our county, such as the Upper Tanat Valley [...] that heroic tales of long ago would be plentiful enough. One regrets to note, however, that they are much less frequently heard today than they were only a short generation ago. Can it be that our system of education has finally banished from our rural hamlets not only the terrifying ghosts which occasionally, it must be admitted, assumed most grotesque forms, but the gossamer-like fairy as well? (Richards, 1934, p. 168).



Craig Rhiwarth

In spite of the scarcity of accounts, however, I have been able to find some tantalising snapshots of the folklore of the Tanat Valley in various anthologies of Welsh tradition (cf. Owen, 1887; Rhys, 1901; Richards, 1938; Jones, 1979), as well as from Robert Richards' papers (1934; 1938). The stories of dragons, giants, saints and princes are perhaps the best known legends from our region (see Richards, 1934; Hunter, 2015, 2019 and 2020), but stories specifically referencing the fairies are much less well known. There is one particular location, however, at the foothills of the Berwyn mountains - which Cledwyn Hughes so evocatively described - that does get a specific mention in relation to the fair folk:

Mischievous fairies were said to haunt Craig Rhiwarth, a spot which it was said should be ‘avoided at all costs’ [...]

(<https://www.cpat.org.uk/projects/longer/histland/tanat/tnfunera.htm>).

Craig Rhiwarth is the highest Iron Age hill fort in Wales, and was later extensively mined for slate in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The mountain towers high above the village of Llangynog at the Western end of the Tanat Valley, and is littered with abandoned mining equipment, and caves that sink deep into the mountainside. In his 1938 paper on the archaeology of Craig Rhiwarth, charting its use by humans over the centuries, Robert Richards explains that the mountain:

[...] is the earliest haunt of fairies with which I was privileged to be intimately acquainted. The rings with which the southern slopes of the hill are more or less covered mark the exits from which the fairies emerged when twilight gathered, or mist descended, on the hill, and into which they disappeared again with the emergence of the full daylight (Richards, 1938, p. 196).

He goes on to describe the two different kinds of fairy rings found on the mountain – ‘those formed of rushes, or coarse grass, *cramcwelli*, that are occasionally seen on hill tops [...] and which are of natural formation’, and the circular stone structures that once supported the conical thatched roofs of roundhouses during the Iron Age (p. 196). There are also other stories about Craig Rhiwarth that hint at its fairy-haunted status. The following story was collected by the folklorist John Rhys (1840-1915) and published in his 1901 book *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*, in a chapter on Welsh cave folklore:

Take for instance a cave in the part of Rhiwarth rock nearest to Cwm [G]lanhafan, in the neighbourhood of Llangynog in Montgomeryshire. Into that, according to Cyndelw in *The Brython* for 1860, p. 57, some men penetrated as far as the pound of candles lasted, with which they had provided themselves; but it appears to be tenanted by a hag who is always busily washing clothes in a brass pan (1901, p. 456).

The reference to the hag’s brass pan here is curious, and may be a continuation of the broader theme of magical cauldrons in Celtic mythology. It is also of interest to note that the mythical witch Ceridwen was reputed to have stirred her cauldron (or, rather, got Gwion Bach to do it for her), on the shores of Llyn Tegid (Bala lake), just a little deeper into the Berwyn mountain range. According to the classifications of Welsh fairies compiled by the American folklorist Wirt Sikes (1836-1883), the cave dwelling hag of Craig Rhiwarth might also be understood as one of the Gwyllion – ‘female fairies of frightful characteristics’ who live in the mountains, typified by ‘the Old Woman of the Mountain’ (Sikes, 2020, p. 65). Robert Richards also recorded the following snapshot-story of a female apparition associated with Craig Rhiwarth:

A lady all dressed in white was for many years the unhappy denizen of one of the disused quarries in the Rhiwarth Valley (Richards, 1934, p. 168).

Interestingly, more local folklore, this time concerning the nearby Llanymynech Hill – another fairy hill about sixteen miles to the East of Craig Rhiwarth, following the river Tanat to the border with Shropshire – also refers to ‘fairy washer women’ living inside the mountain there. Revd. William Bingley reports:

The cavern in Llanymynech hill, not far from Oswestry, has been long noted as the residence of a clan of fairies, to whom the neighbouring villages attribute many surprising and mischievous pranks. Whilst they have stopped to listen at the mouth of the cave, the people state that they have sometimes even heard the little elves in conversation, but this was always in such low whispers, that the words which were reverberated along the sides and roof of the cavern could not be distinguished. The stream that runs across a distant part of this cavern is celebrated as the place where the fairy washerwomen and labourers have been heard frequently at work (Bingley, 1839, pp. 322-323).



Llanymynech Hill

There are other fairy traditions surrounding Llanymynech Hill, including the following description of tunnels thought to lead out underneath it, beneath the rivers, into the surrounding countryside and beyond:

Tradition says this labyrinth communicated, by subterranean paths, with Carreghova Castle; and some persons aver that they have gone into it so far as to hear the rivers Fyrnwy and Tanat rolling over their heads, and that it leads down to Fairy-land (Llwyd, 1832, p. 295).

According to this story, then, there is a tunnel that runs beneath the river Tanat that leads down to fairyland - a quite specific association between the fairies and our valley. But the fairies do not always live underground. Revd. Elias Owen, himself a resident of Llanyblodwel in the Tanat Valley, also recorded local belief and terminology in the area relating to fairy lights - corpse candles, or what are widely known as will-o'-the-wisp. He explains:

The Rev. T. H. Evans, in his *History of the Parish of Llanwddyn*, states that in that parish Will of the Wisp is called 'Yr Ellyll Dan'. This is indeed the common name

for the *Ignis fatuus* in most, if not in all parts of Wales [...] (Owen, 1887).

‘Yr Ellyll Dan’ literally translates as ‘The Fire Elf/The Elf Fire’ – mysterious orbs of light that would lure unsuspecting travellers off the beaten path. It is also of interest to note in this context that the infamous 1974 Berwyn Mountain UFO incident – much like Gwyn ap Nudd’s Wild Hunt – involved strange lights and sounds in the sky above the Berwyn mountain range (Roberts, 2010). The incident was initiated with an immense boom and earthquake felt by villagers for miles around at 8.38pm on January 23rd 1974. The rumble was followed by the observation of strange lights in the sky above the Berwyn mountains. Witnesses to the event described the sound as an ‘ominous rumbling,’ ‘frightening’ and as a ‘terrific explosion’ (Roberts, 1998, p. 28). The theme of sound in association with the Cŵn Annwn also emerges in the writings of the independent Welsh minister Edmund Jones (1702-1793), who collected accounts of apparitions across Wales in the eighteenth century, primarily for the purpose of demonstrating the existence of the spiritual world. He records beliefs about the Cŵn Annwn at this time, stating that:

[...] there were [...] often heard before burials what by some were called *cŵn annwn* (hounds of hell), by others *cŵn bendith eu mamau* (hounds of the fairies), and by some *cŵn nybr* (sky-hounds). The nearer they were to a man the less their voice was [...] and the farther, the louder (sometimes like the voice of a great hound sounding among them), like that of a bloodhound; a deep, hollow voice (Jones, 2003 [1780], p. 59).

Interestingly, on driving up into the mountains to offer first aid in the event that the boom was the result of an air crash, the chief witness at the centre of the incident – Nurse Pat Evans from Llandderfel (just across the Berwyns from Llangynog, about 9 miles along the B4391) – described seeing a large, stationary and strangely luminous object, surrounded by smaller moving lights. The following extract is taken from an interview with Pat Evans conducted by UFO researcher Andy Roberts in 1998:

We could see to our left [...] this huge round, orange ball sitting on the mountain. And so we looked at it, couldn’t make it out so we went further up to the county border as we called it. So we turned round and sort of parked. Now it was to the right as we were heading for home. We opened the windows and looked down and there was no sound, it was quiet, there was nothing really, just looking at this huge orange ball, and there was no windows in it, no doors and it seemed to be pulsating or glowing, like a huge ember. There were no flames shooting or anything like that [...] It was very uniform, very round in shape [...] Whatever it was it did not appear to be obviously three dimensional [...] It was a flat round, looking at it like that [...] They were like torch lights, not great big torches as searchlights, more like fairy lights really from where we were standing and they seemed to be pretty uniform, sort of coming toward this thing (Pat Evans, in Roberts, 2010, pp. 42-43).

There are clear parallels between this experience and the folklore surrounding the Berwyn mountains and the Wild Hunt, as well as with the local concept of the Ellyllon Dan, fire elves, or will-o’-the-wisp. There are also resonances in this story with other elements of what are often called ‘high strangeness’ experiences – that is experiences

with multiple baffling components – the fact, for instance, that ‘there was no sound, it was quiet,’ the strange behaviour of the luminous object, its apparent two-dimensional nature, the movement of the smaller surrounding lights, and so on (see Hunter, 2021 for more on the phenomenology of high strangeness experiences). Combined with the broader ‘mysteriography’ (as Andy Roberts terms it) of the Berwyns and Tanat Valley, could this encounter also represent a part of the fairy folklore associated with the mountain range? Certainly researchers have suggested much stronger links between UFO phenomena and traditional fairy-lore than the advocates of the nuts-and-bolts extraterrestrial hypothesis would often like to admit (cf. Vallee, 2014 [1969]; Cutchin, 2015). Might Pat Evans have witnessed a meeting of Gwyn ap Nudd and his court on the top of the windswept mountain range? Was it all a manifestation of the Wild Hunt?



Pistyll Rhaeadr Waterfall

Fairies Today?

Even though I have lived in the Tanat Valley my whole life, have had a life-long interest in folklore, and have spent countless hours clambering around on Craig Rhiwarth in my youth, it is only very recently that I have become aware of the explicit association of fairies with our area. I was aware of other legends associated with the valley and its features – the giants who dropped massive boulders in Cwm Blowty by Pistyll Rhaeadr, and the dragon story to explain the presence of a large standing stone near Llanrhaeadr (Richards, 1934) - but knew very little about the fairy folklore of the valley until I started the research presented here. In spite of my own ignorance of this fairy folklore, I wonder whether any element of these beliefs and traditions continues to exist in the present day amongst other members of the community. As Robin Gwyndaf noted in 1997, however, direct links to local fairy traditions in Wales are becoming increasingly rare. It is likely that any folklore relating to the fairies that does continue to be perpetuated will be second-hand knowledge – at best – stories about stories, passed on from Grandparents and other elders of the community:

Today these passive tradition-bearers who have inherited fairy lore are decreasing in number and when they die their legends may die with them. There are and there will be other, more contemporary narratives [...] but these men and women must be recorded now, for their like will not be heard again (Gwyndaf, 1997, p. 158).

These kinds of stories once made up an important part of the traditions and heritage of the valleys and villages that we live in today, and it would be a great shame for them to be completely lost to the ravages of time (as many of our local traditions relating to the fairies likely already have). My initial inquiries – including the publication of a shorter version of this article in *The Tanat Valley Chronicle*, the community newspaper for the valley and surrounding area – have, however, revealed a few interesting leads that I intend to follow up on, to see if any more detail can be added. For example:

Nanny always said she saw fairies in Golfa Isaf, playing at the top of the garden.

John's grandmother always swore she saw fairies in the garden when she lived in Cae Maes [...] it would have been in the very late 40s early 50s. It's always been a [...] done story [...] who knows?

Those fairies still exist! Especially between Hirnant and Llanwddyn.

By the lime kilns Porthywaen the little people live.

Wherever there are mushrooms there are fairies.

I also received the following slightly longer narrative, which seems suitable for inclusion here:

Where the two roads to Pennant from Llangynog meet is a field and my taid, John Lloyd, Brynawel, was walking passed it in the evening 80 or 90 years ago and he

saw something which he described as ‘Evil’. He warned his family never to go there at night! He was the gamekeeper at The Hall at the time and was well acquainted with the wildlife of the area. I think that Pennant has a long history of strange stories! [...] My mother pointed out the exact location to me over 60 years ago. It was actually in the hedge of the top road to Pennant, on the left side about 15 feet from where it meets the bottom road [...] My father [...] saw a ghost in Penygeulan back in the 1960s. He was going up the stairs to the bedroom when he encountered a shadowy figure. He punched at it but his fist went through it and hit the wall behind. Later he contacted my uncle [...] who was a clergyman and a rite of exorcism was performed and as holy water was sprinkled on the spot, a blast of cold air blew past them causing them to jump!

Further hints of ancestral traditions of belief also occasionally pop up during conversations with older members of the community. In my own experience of working with Welsh labourers in their mid-70s to 80s – who have lived and worked in the Tanat Valley their whole lives – building stone walls, I have frequently noticed that stones were being referred to as ‘him.’ They would say things like ‘he’s not quite right,’ while weighing up a particular stone, or ‘pass him over here’ when a good stone had been identified. In his survey of Welsh folklore in the nineteenth century, the American journalist Wirt Sikes noted that:

In the tradition concerning Welsh stones, abundant personal attributes are accorded them, such as in nature only belong to animals. They were endowed with volition and with voice; they could travel from place to place without mortal aid; they would move uneasily when disturbed by human contact; they expanded and contracted at will; they clung to people who touched them with profane or guilty purpose; they possessed divers qualities which made them valuable to their possessors, such as the power of rendering them invisible, or of filling their pockets with gold (Sikes, 2020, p. 384).

Similarly, while working with the same two men cutting down small trees for fence posts one afternoon, I heard them saying things like: ‘Him over there, he’s a good one.’ Or, while sitting having a cup of tea after unloading a truck-full of firewood, and the wind suddenly picks up, one of the workers said: ‘Oh, it’s Morus y Gwynt!’ (‘Morris the wind’). I asked what he meant when he said that, and he said ‘I’m surprised you haven’t heard that before, growing up in Llangynog.’ Morus y Gwynt, it turns out, is a mischievous character from a Welsh nursery rhyme who, along with Ifan y Glaw (‘Ifan the rain’), is said to knock the cap from your head when the weather turns bad:

Morus y Gwynt ac Ifan y Glaw / Daflodd fy nghap i ganol y baw!

Morris the Wind and Ifan the Rain / Threw my cap into the middle of the mud!

My own twenty-first century exchanges with life-long residents of the Tanat Valley are reminiscent of similar conversations recorded by the folklorist T. Gwyn Jones with elderly Welsh labourers in the 1930s. He describes a similarly ‘personal’ understanding of the elements:

In Welsh we speak of the weather as *Hi*, ‘She’ [...] In regard to weather, should a person say ‘It is clearing up,’ another will remark ‘*Ust! Gnylia rhag iddi Hi dy ghywed ti!*’ ‘Hush, take care lest She hear you!’ (Jones, 1979, p. 173).

Such sayings are likely still prevalent in the Tanat Valley and surrounding areas, as suggested by my conversations with local workers, but have likely become idioms – figures of speech – rather than indicators of an underlying animist worldview.

Pistyll Rhaeadr, near the village of Llanrhacadr-ym-Mochnant, is the tallest waterfall in Wales, and is considered to be one of the seven wonders of the country. Nestled at the end of Cwm Blowty, where the giant Cawr Berwyn (see below) is said to have dropped immense rocks in the primeval past, the waterfall is one of the most popular tourist destinations in North Wales. The waterfall itself is a natural wonder, and has often been mentioned in travelogues describing the region. In spite of its beauty, however, there is very little that I have been able to find in the way of specific folkloric associations with the waterfall. That said, however, there does appear to be a growing contemporary association of the site with the fairies. A fantastic natural stone arch, carved out over thousands of years by the rushing water, is widely referred to as the ‘Fairy Bridge,’ for example, and tourists have on occasion claimed to see and photograph fairies on the bridge. Stories have also begun to circulate of the so-called ‘Lady of the Waterfall,’ the ‘Guardian of the Waterfall’ and their fairy consort, who several tourists claim to have encountered, though there is no explicit folkloric precedent for them that I have been able to find. This may be an example of a newly emerging tradition, perhaps spurred by (or created for) tourism.

Another interesting recent manifestation that resonates with some of what I have been able to uncover of the local fairy folklore has been the emergence of a walking trail on Craig Rhiwarth, the path for which is lined with hundreds of small painted stones, many of which feature depictions of fairies and other mythical entities. This is similar to other traditions that have emerged during the Covid-19 lockdown period, such as the growth in popularity of fairy gardens and woodland fairy door trails. It is not clear whether the painted fairy stones have been placed on the mountain because of a continuing folk association of the mountain with the *tylwyth teg*, whether it is ‘just a coincidence,’ or whether it might be an example of what Simon Young calls ‘unknowing tradition’:

What I mean by ‘unknowing tradition’ is that the individuals in question had a fairy experience that echoes experiences in traditional fairylore, but where they had no apparent knowledge of this aspect of fairylore. Usually there is knowledge [...] (Young, 2018).

What is clear from all of this is that further research will be needed to disentangle some of these threads and paint a more detailed picture of contemporary fairy beliefs and experiences in the Tanat Valley.

A Fairy Topography and Forgotten Ecological Knowledge

What is particularly interesting about the brief leads I have come across over the course of the research for this paper is that they are very specific in terms of their location – the first two refer directly to particular houses (which I have been able to identify), the third refers to a very rugged and sparsely populated area of land between Hirnant and Llanwddyn, and the fourth refers to lime kilns attached to Llanymynech Hill, a notorious haunt of the fairies (as already noted). One of my informants was also able to give exact

details of the location where is father encountered an evil entity in Cwm Pennant. Combined with the folklore surrounding Craig Rhiwarth, these leads suggest that it might be possible to put together a 'fairy topography' of the Tanat Valley. This association of fairies with particular locations or features of the landscape is not, of course, unique to the Tanat Valley. The first chapter of Evans-Wentz's *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1990), for example, begins by explaining:

As a preliminary to our study it is important [...] to give some attention to the influences and purely natural environment under which the Fairy-Faith has grown up [...] though from the first our interpretation of Environment is fundamentally psychical (Evans-Wentz, 1990, p. 1).

Landscapes, and the moods they emanate, play a central role in the fairy faith as Evans-Wentz conceived of it. Fairy habitats – as we saw at the beginning of this chapter – are usually identified as caves, mountains, forests, or wild, remote, and boggy areas.

Some of the fairy stories of the Tanat Valley (if we can consider Giants as a class of the fairy folk) also have a cosmogonic function – explaining the origins of key features of the landscape. There are, as in many other Celtic regions (cf. Gwynn Jones, 1979, pp. 77-82), several stories of Giants associated with the Tanat Valley, and in particular with certain hills and large, highly conspicuous boulders. Indeed, Robert Richards notes that there are three named Giants of the Tanat Valley - Cawr Myfyr, Cawr Rhuddwyn and Cawr Berwyn, each associated with their own prominent hills along the valley. He continues:

Of the three giants afore-mentioned Cawr Berwyn is the one that has left us most evidence of his former existence and exploits. Traditions concerning him seem to have centred chiefly around Cwm Blowty and Pennant Melangell (Richards, 1934, p. 170).

The story associated with Cwm Blowty, near Pistyll Rhaeadr Waterfall, suggests that one night Cawr Berwyn decided to surprise his brothers by building a bridge across the valley, near to Pistyll Rhaeadr, over which he would walk to greet them at daybreak. Eager to get the bridge finished before daybreak, so that his brothers would be both surprised and impressed by the effort he had put into his scheme, Cawr Berwyn set out to gather boulders to begin his work. It took so long for Berwyn to find boulders of the necessary size that, by the time he had reached the place where his bridge was to be built, a cockerel was heard announcing the start of the new day. Shocked that time had flown by so quickly, Cawr Berwyn dropped the enormous rocks he had collected all across the valley floor, and, so that his brothers did not know it was him, ran back to his home to hide, leaving the boulders behind. These same boulders still lie strewn across the valley floor in Cwm Blowty today, their enormous size a testament to the gigantic proportions of the giants Berwyn, Myfyr and Rhuddwyn (Hancock, 1873). There is also evidence to suggest that these cosmogonic giants formed part of a local tradition of veneration in the distant past. Robert Richards, for instance, describes a notice written by a Mr. William Maurice of Llansilin in 1678, who reported:

An unheard of morrice [sic] dance is to be celebrated on the grave mound of Rhuddwyn Gawr Mawr a Kymerian giant, of sixty feet in length, and nine in height above the ground by Marsli Hen, aged 140 (Richards, 1934, p. 170).

‘We Have Never Been Modern’ Experiences

In this final section I would like to discuss a couple of my own ‘fairy’ experiences. What is particularly interesting about these experiences is that they occurred long before any of the research presented in this paper was conducted. When I had these experiences I was unaware of the fairy folklore of the Tanat Valley. My first personal encounter with fairies was in a dream. I must have been about twelve or thirteen years old at the time. In the dream I climbed up the hill behind my parents’ house in Llangynog, at the entrance to the Pennant valley, to a place I often visited alongside an old quarry. There was (and still is) a large cliff face there, overgrown with brambles, hanging down over it like a fringe. In the dream I saw through the brambles and rock-face into a small cave or chamber, lined with dry, rust-coloured bracken. In the middle of the warm-looking chamber were two sleeping, troll-like creatures nestled-in as though hibernating. They were smooth-featured, slow-moving, and seemed to reflect the warm glow of the cavern, their home in the rock. They looked up and saw me with wizened faces, noting my intrusion on their slumber. Their eyes radiated a mysterious sense of knowing, and that is about all I can remember of the dream. I have visited the place since, but have not seen the creatures again. The dream has never repeated, but remains vivid in my memory.

Interestingly, I was not the only one in my family to have seen fairies during childhood. My sister once said she saw a ‘leprechaun’ in my bedroom when we were younger, for example. I asked her recently if she could write it up for me. The original experience was a long time ago, but the following can now serve as a definitive written version of the events as she remembers them:

OK, so. I remember sleeping on the floor in your room, and I had woken up and I saw the leprechaun standing on a shelf. It looked like it was looking at something on the shelf. I looked up at it to get a better look and he looked at me then disappeared. Then I put my head back down on the pillow and looked up again and he was back. He was sitting down on the shelf cross-legged looking at me smiling. He then jumped up really high, landed on the shelf and started dancing. I remember smiling at him and he smiled back, lifted his finger to his lips in a shhh way, then disappeared. That’s the last time I saw him. It was like he was putting on a show. He was really small maybe six inches. He had black pointy shoes on, green knee length trousers and a green jacket with a waist coat and white shirt. He didn’t have a beard but had red hair. He had a green hat on. Everything he was wearing looked well worn. Not bright green more forest green. That’s what I can remember [...] It looked like he was looking for something in your room when I first saw him. [He] was very happy [...] But didn’t speak or make any noise.

As if this wonderful experience is not strange enough, while researching for this paper I stumbled across a remarkably similar account of an experience that took place some 200 years before my sister’s experience, and just ten miles down the road, in a small hamlet called Bwlch-y-ddar:

A good while ago a forager lived in a small house in a place called Bwlch-y-ddar, a hamlet between Llangedwyn and Llanfyllin. His name was Robert Jones. He lived

alone...One night Robert Jones was aroused from refreshing sleep by a noise in his room. He had only a kitchen with a small tressel bed in a corner of his room. He sat up in his bed and saw a small man fiddling like mad, seated on the post of the bed, and small men and women dancing all about the room in great glee. For awhile he looked on with wonder, and at last he said... 'Who are you?' The little fiddler, with merriment in his twinkling eyes, said, 'We are spirits of the air' (Ysbrydion yr awyr). 'But what do you want here?' 'Only a dance, and we are going to come here tomorrow night too.' 'No, you won't,' said Robert Jones, and he added, with something more like an oath than any other kind of expression, 'I tell you, you won't. [The landlord] shall be told of this, and then come if you dare.' This threat was quite enough for the intruders, and Robert Jones was never disturbed afterwards. All this took place towards the early part of the present century (Owen, 1899, p. 1-2).



Bwlchyddar

My second personal experience of the faeries – like my first in a dream state, and my sister and Robert Jones's bedroom encounters in a hypnagogic state – was also in an altered state of consciousness, this time facilitated by psilocybin mushrooms. I first published an account of the experience in an essay in the debut issue of the *Psychedelic Press* (2012), which was later re-published in the book *Out of the Shadows* (2015), an anthology of essays from the journal. I also submitted what I consider to be the definitive account of the experience to Simon Young's *Fairy Census 2014-2017*; I am well aware of the capacity for such experiential narratives to shift and change over numerous retellings, so for the purposes of staying as close to the original narrative as possible I will quote the full version from the *Fairy Census* to set the scene. This time around I was sixteen to seventeen years old, at my friend's house in Pen-y-Bont Fawr, in the oldest seventeenth-century part of the building:

My experience occurred the very first time I took magic mushrooms. I noticed these small two-dimensional creatures walking in procession in the grain of wood on a chest of drawers. There was one larger member of the procession that appeared to be female and in charge. The entities had long pointed noses, appeared organic, like beautiful little goblins, and were sort of swirling along in their procession. The largest one turned to look at me, noticed I was looking, and then continued with its procession. I shouted out to the other two people in the room ‘I can see fairies,’ because I didn’t know what else to call them. The fairies just continued to move along the grain of the wood, and I stopped paying attention to them. It was a strange experience – they seemed to be different to the rest of the psychedelic experience because they were moving along with deliberate intent, and seemed to possess a consciousness of their own. They clearly noticed me, but were not concerned that I had spotted them. The memory is still very vivid in my mind [...] [They were] Like small, two-dimensional, beautiful goblins. They had long pointed noses (Hunter, in Young, 2018, pp. 142-143).

Where do these memorates fit into the wider folklore of the Tanat Valley (if at all)? They all, of course, took place in the Tanat Valley, so they share a similar environment, but are they a part of the same phenomenon?

Concluding Thoughts

There seems to be a forgotten folklore of the Tanat Valley – some elements of it have survived, but others have disappeared below the threshold of awareness, found only in the archives. The folklore reveals an image of the valleys, rocks and mountains of this area as ‘haunted places’ in the minds of our ancestors - inhabited by fairies and dragons, or created by giants in the mythical past. The Tanat Valley is a storied place. But there is also reason to consider the psychical component – the *experiences* that people have in the valley that seem to conform to the forgotten folklore. Could there be an experiential source for some of the folkloric traditions of the valley? Is this connected to the land itself in some way? This can be theorised in different ways – for scholars like Mircea Eliade and Rudolf Otto there might be an element of the sacred or numinous dwelling in the land – making the valley a ‘thin place’ ripe for extraordinary encounters. While from a more Durkheimian social-facts perspective it is all a purely social phenomenon – little more than beliefs and stories passed from one generation to the next. But contemporary experiences that seem to resonate with elements of folklore unknown at the time of the experience would seem to point in a different direction. Nevertheless, beliefs and stories can be powerful in and of themselves, and this hidden folklore may represent what Anthony Thorley calls an ‘animistic worldview relevant to Western Culture’ (Thorley, 2016, p. 8), and a rediscovery of this may be crucial in our current period of nature disconnection and ecological crisis.

Do you have a story to tell?

I would be very interested to hear of *any* folklore, stories or experiences related to fairies, UFOs and ghosts in and around the Tanat Valley. If you have something that you would

like to share, perhaps an old story told to you by a grandparent, or your own childhood (or adult) experience, please feel free to get in touch with me and perhaps we can begin to flesh out a more detailed picture of the fairy folklore of the Tanat valley. There is an anonymous form available here:

<https://forms.gle/fkkNftewbusWSSCQA>

Alternately, I can be contacted via: jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Eric Heath for gifting me a copy of Cledwyn Hughes' *A Wanderer in North Wales*. Thanks also to Andy Roberts and Simon Young for useful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. For those who may be interested, there is also a video presentation based on this paper available to view here: <https://youtu.be/6vnGP3fIXuw>

References

- Bingley, W. (1839). *Excursions in North Wales, Including Aberystwyth and the Devil's Bridge*. London: Longman, Orme and Co.
- Borrow, G. (1872). *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery*. London: John Murray.
- Cutchin, J. (2015). *A Trojan Feast: The Food and Drink Offerings of Aliens, Fairies, and Sasquatch*. Charlottesville: Anomalist Books.
- Ellis, T.P. (1929). 'Welsh Fairies.' *The Welsh Outlook*, Vol. 16, No. 10, pp. 297-300.
- Evans-Wentz, W.Y. (1990 [1911]). *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*. New York: Citadel Press.
- Gwyndaf, R. (1997). 'Fairylore: Memorates and Legends from Welsh Oral Traditions.' In P. Narvaez (ed.) *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Hancock, T.W. (1873). 'Llanrhaidr-yn-Mochnant: Its Parochial History and Antiquities.' *Collections Historical and Archaeological Relating to Montgomeryshire*, Vol. VI, pp. 325-326.
- Hughes, C. (1949). *A Wanderer in North Wales*. London: Phoenix House.
- Hunter, J. (2015). 'Three Legends of Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant: Re-Animating the Landscape.' *Tanat Valley Chronicle*, April 2015, pp. 24-25.
- Hunter, J. (2019). 'Rev. Elias Owen and the Folklore of the Tanat Valley.' *Tanat Valley Chronicle*, April 2019, p. 5.
- Hunter, J. (2020). 'Editorial: Folklore, Landscape and Ecology: Joining the Dots.' *Time and Mind: Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture*, Vol. 13. No. 3, pp. 221-225.
- Hunter, J. (2021). 'Deep Weird: High Strangeness, Boggle Thresholds and Damned Data in Academic Research on Extraordinary Experience.' *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 5-18.
- Jones, T. Gwynn (1979 [1930]). *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Llwyd, R. (1832). *The History of Wales, written originally by Caradoc of Llanarvan*. Shrewsbury: John Eddowes.
- Owen, E. (1887). *Welsh Folk-Lore: A Collection of the Folk-Tales and Legends of North Wales*.

- Owen, E. (1899). 'Fairy or Spirit Appearances.' *Bye-Gones for 1899-1900*, Vol VI, pp. 1-2.
- Rhys, J. (2015). *Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, R. (1934). 'Some Giant Stories of the Upper Tanat Valley.' *Montgomeryshire Collections*, Vol. 43, pp. 168-172.
- Richards, R. (1938). 'Craig Rhiwarth.' *Montgomeryshire Collections*, Vol. 45, pp. 196-200.
- Roberts, A. (2010). *UFO Down? The Bernyn Mountain UFO Crash*. Bideford: Fortean Words.
- Sikes, W. (2020 [1880]). *British Goblins: Welsh Folklore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*. Cockatrice Books.
- Simpson, J. (2003 [1976]). *Folklore of the Welsh Border*. Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited.
- Thorley, A. (2016). 'Sacred Geography: a conceptual work in progress.' *SPICA: Postgraduate Journal for Cosmology in Culture*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 4-8.
- Trevelyan, M. (1909). *Folk Lore and Folk Stories of Wales*. London: Elliot Stock.
- Vallee, J. (2014 [1969]). *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers*. Brisbane: Daily Grail.
- Young, S. (2018). 'Lived Folklore in the Fairy Census.' Available Online: <https://folklorethursday.com/folklife/lived-folklore-fairy-census/> [Accessed: 9th June 2021].