

RIGHT, WRONG, STILL OPEN

What Keightley claimed and what became of it. The short version: the collection held and the argument did not.

The claims of this volume divide unusually sharply, because in one section the author himself tells us the evidence is unsound. That section is taken first.

1 · The Irish fairy material is a faithful record. WITHDRAWN BY THE AUTHOR.

Keightley states in this volume that some of the more poetic traits the Grimms called characteristic of the Irish fairies were invented by the collectors, himself among them, who wanted amusing tales more than faithful ones. He does not say which traits. Nothing in later scholarship has recovered the boundary. The Irish section is therefore evidence about how a fairy canon was assembled in the 1820s — which is genuinely valuable — and only partly evidence about Irish belief. See *The Confession*.

2 · Robin Goodfellow, the brownie, the nis and the kobold are one figure. SUSTAINED.

The English house-spirit who works for cream and leaves for clothes is the same being as the Danish nis of Volume I, the Swedish tomte, the German kobold and the French lutin. The identification holds across the whole family, and the clothes-motif holds with it. It is the securest comparative result in either volume.

3 · The banshee, the gwrach y rhibyn and the caoineag are the same death-warner. LARGELY SUSTAINED.

The Irish, Welsh and Scottish death-warriors share function and, in the Irish and Welsh cases, form. Later collection in all three countries confirmed the belief independently of Keightley.

4 · The mine-spirits of Wales, Cornwall and Germany are one belief. SUSTAINED — BUT NOT FOR HIS REASON.

The coblynau, the knockers and the Wichtlein are the same figure, and the reason is not descent from a common ancestor. It is that men who work underground in the dark, in danger, listening for the sound of rock, produce the same belief wherever they do it. The distribution follows the work, not the people — which is precisely the third explanation Keightley's method does not weigh.

5 · The modern Greek Nereid descends from the ancient. THE NAME DOES.

The word is documented at both ends and the descent of the word is not in doubt. What the being does has changed, and a name surviving is not a belief surviving. Keightley treats this as his strongest case for survival and it is his most instructive one, because it shows the method mistaking philology for ethnography.

6 · Shakespeare's and Spenser's fairies are literary rather than popular. SUSTAINED.

Keightley argues it in both volumes and later criticism agrees. He is willing to make the case against the two poets his readers would most want him to cite, which is a mark of the scholar rather than the enthusiast.

7 · English fairy belief is recoverable from the printed record. TRUE ONLY WITH A LARGE QUALIFICATION.

The largest source for the English section is Hone's *Every-Day Book*, a miscellany of readers' letters. For much English custom of the 1820s it is the only record there is, which is an argument for using it and not an argument for trusting it as a collection.

8 · Celtic fairy belief is one thing. NOT ESTABLISHED.

Irish, Manx, Highland and Welsh traditions are gathered under one heading and reached through English intermediaries by a man who read none of the four languages. The Isle of Man, where Norse and Gaelic tradition demonstrably meet, is reported rather than used — the one place the thesis could have been tested.

9 · This book describes European fairy belief. NO — IT DESCRIBES A LIBRARY.

Everything east of Germany gets a paragraph. Spain is nearly empty. The African pages carry no African source. Brittany, which is well represented, is well represented because French collectors had published. The proportions of this book record what had been printed in French, German or English by 1850, and nothing else — and that is the qualification a reader must carry into every use of it.

10 · Resemblance implies descent or borrowing. ABANDONED.

The method, not a claim. It survived into solar mythology and was demolished by Andrew Lang in the 1890s for explaining everything and therefore nothing. What replaced it keeps Keightley's instinct to compare and drops his confidence about what a comparison proves.

What this adds up to

Ten claims. Four sustained — the house-spirit family, the death-warners, the mine-spirits (for a reason he did not give) and the literary fairies. One withdrawn by the author himself, which is the Irish material. One half-true, the Greek Nereid, where the word descends and the belief is not shown to. Two not established — Celtic unity and the recoverability of English belief from the printed record. One abandoned, the method. And one that is a fact about the book rather than about Europe: its proportions are the proportions of a nineteenth-century London library.

Which is to say: a careful man working with what he could reach, who told you where he got it, and who once told you that some of it was made up. Read him for the material, for the names of the collectors, and for the confession — which is worth more to the history of the subject than any of his conclusions.

From The Fairy Mythology by Thomas Keightley, Volume II — Britain, Ireland and the West, Valice Classics 18. Free at valicepress.com/companion/fairy-mythology-vol-2