



Away with the fairies



One hundred years ago, two girls convinced the world they had photographed fairies at the bottom of their garden. However did they get away with it, asks Richard Sugg

FROM where I was, I could see the hatpins holding up the figures. I've always marvelled that anybody ever took it seriously,' admitted Frances Griffiths in 1981, more than 60 years into the greatest hoax of the century. However did they get away with it for so long? Luck and accident were certainly part of this amazing British myth, but, more than that, the 'fairy photographs' taken by Frances and her cousin Elsie Wright offered a world of mystery and childish innocence to a nation traumatised by the horrors of war.

After the girls took the first two photographs, in July and September 1917, they came to the attention of Edward Gardner, a prominent member of the Theosophical Society; Elsie's mother, Polly, was herself involved in Theosophy. Spiritualist movements were on the rise due to the mass bereavements suffered in the First World War and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who had himself lost a son and a brother, would come to be the fairies' most famous advocate. For all the forensic rigour of Sherlock Holmes, the author reacted against certain elements of late-Victorian science, which he feared 'would have left the world hard and clean and bare, like a landscape in the moon'.

In 1917, Conan Doyle still shared the doubts of those sceptical of the Cottingley fairies, 'captured on film' by the beck at the bottom of the garden in West Yorkshire, with their Parisian dress and fashionably bobbed hair. He wanted more evidence and, in the summer of 1920, sent Gardner back to Cottingley to get it. The girls produced three further



A fairy sunbath: could this last image be genuine, as Frances Griffiths always maintained?



photographs, which were studied by experts—with differing results—and Conan Doyle's mind was made up. One hundred years ago this December, the Yorkshire fairies—which were, of course, paper cut-outs mounted on twigs with hat pins—stared out at bemused Londoners from the Christmas edition of *The Strand Magazine*. By 1922, Conan Doyle had also published his pamphlet *The Coming of the Fairies*: almost messianic in tone, it likened the girls' photographs to the discovery of the Americas.

Without the further images taken in 1920, the Cottingley fairies and their creators

would probably have vanished from view and been forgotten. Folklore historian Simon Young is surely right in his opinion that 'in 1917 Frances and Elsie were out to trick their family, in 1920, the world'. A big part of their early success was undoubtedly the tendency of Conan Doyle and Gardner to romanticise the innocence of young girls. Conan Doyle believed that the girls saw and attracted fairies because of their youth and, in 1921, Elsie played up to this idea, claiming that the more recent fairies were growing transparent, in contrast to the solid figures of four years past: 'You see, we were young

then.' By August 1921, Elsie was 20 and an image from that period shows an assured young woman. The 1997 film *Fairytale* saw 12-year-old Florence Hoath cast in her role.

Frances, although barely 10 in September 1917, had previously lived in Johannesburg and France and yearned for that more cosmopolitan lifestyle. She would later contrast the servants and opera visits of her Johannesburg childhood with British wartime austerity ('black bread, and sleeping all crammed up with Elsie in the attic') and looked down on her cousin as 'young for her age—she used to play with my dolls'. Perhaps it was Frances's ache for glamour, combined with Elsie's naivety, that supplied the raw material for their escapade.

They offered a world of mystery and childish innocence to a nation traumatised by war

Conan Doyle evidently went to his grave in 1930 still believing in the photographs and the extraordinary world they had opened for him, but the illusions of another believer were to be shattered. Joe Cooper, a hero of the Second World War's Bomber Command, had been chasing fairies for a decade when Frances confessed to him, in a coffee shop in Canterbury, Kent, in 1981. 'My world shifted a little, and I had no words,' he revealed in his subsequent book, *The Case of the Cottingley Fairies*. The following year, he vanished from his family home and, on his return, his 23-year marriage came to an end. Speaking in 2017, his daughter Jane believed that Cooper suffered some kind of breakdown after Frances revealed the truth: 'They should have taken their secret to the grave so it could have been one of those great mysteries like the Loch Ness monster.'

The photographs had become a mystical treasure cherished around the world, surely exceeding anything the cousins originally dreamed of. Both seemed to relish the sense of power this gave them. Some years before her confession, Frances had told Cooper: 'I've heard it said that every hour, somewhere in the world, someone makes a reference to the Cottingley fairies.' If these young women had felt that, in 1920, they could not disappoint Conan Doyle, for the following 60 years, they may have felt that they couldn't disappoint the world. They may, indeed, have taken the secret to their graves, given the choice, but the girl who had tricked her parents decades before was eventually found out by her own child. In August 1981,



Sprinkled with Parisian-style fairy dust: Frances Griffiths in *Alice and the Fairies* (top) and *Alice and Leaping Fairy* (left) and her cousin Elsie Wright in *Iris and the Gnome* (right)

Elsie's son, Glenn Hill, confronted her with a 1914 fairy-book image he suspected she had used as a model. When Frances learned of this, her confession to Cooper followed, as did her remark: 'I am sorry someone has stabbed our fairies to death with a hatpin.'

Even after the deaths of both Frances and Elsie in the late 1980s, their creations danced on into the new millennium, a strange kind of national treasure. The film *Fairytale* was financed by American actor Mel Gibson who also attempted to buy the original cameras used by the girls. After a funding drive, the Midg and Cameo cameras were instead secured for Bradford's National Science and Media Museum, West Yorkshire

where, in June 1998, a 2,000-strong crowd chanted: 'Fairies coming home!'

Curiously, despite her great revelation, Frances always insisted the fifth, 'sunburst', photograph was genuine. She also told Cooper how, on one childhood trip to the beck alone, she had seen a willow branch quivering oddly when all else was still. As she watched, a fairy man materialised upon it: 'He looked straight at me and disappeared.'

