

Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania by Joseph Noel Paton  
courtesy of National Gallery of Scotland/Bridgeman Art Library.





# THE FAIRY FAITH

IN THE REALM OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE

By Maurie Alioff

*The old fable—existences are no more  
The fascinating race has emigrated  
The fair humanities of old religions  
That had their haunt in dale or piny mountain  
Or chasms and watery depths —  
all these have vanished  
They live no longer in the age of reason*

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge's translation of lines by Friedrich Schiller



There is a moment of fairy faith to which millions of people have succumbed. The showbiz moment when Peter Pan, revealing fear for the first time, asks us if we believe in fairies.



**T**inker Bell has been badly hurt, and like a dying firefly, her light is ebbing away. Desperate to save her, Peter grabs at a long shot. He tells us that if we believe in fairies, we should clap our hands. And the long shot pays off when everyone claps so hard, Tinker Bell shines brighter than ever, strength and fairy glamour restored by the miracle of belief in her impossible existence.

Of course, there's a lot more to magic creatures and parallel worlds than their theatrical value, as John Walker makes clear in *The Fairy Faith*, the feature-length documentary he co-produced with the NFB. Walker's picture delves into subtle, ambiguous and thought-provoking manifestations of the uncanny. It stirs up feelings and expectations as when something strange quivers past a tree and disappears into the summer air.

This fascination with the supernatural might seem unlikely for those familiar with Walker's documentaries about Stalinist horrors (*The Hand of Stalin* [1990], two films for BBC-TV), war

victims (*Orphans of Manchuria* [1993]) and the traumas of native people (*Utshimassis: Place of the Boss* [1997]). He also co-directed and photographed the collective, aciduous *A Winter Tan* (1988), which unflinchingly portrayed a sexual adventurer's exhalations and humiliations, charting experiences *Sex and the City's* neurotic cuties wouldn't want to know about. As for Walker's approaches and aesthetics, his Genie-winning *Strand: Under the Dark Cloth* (1990), says a lot about who he is. The movie offers a reverent appreciation of Paul Strand, the 20th-century master photographer whose meticulously formal city images and landscape shots convey, along with their social consciousness and humanistic values, a hint of mystery.

Walker uses *The Fairy Faith's* airy subject matter to dig into substantial issues. One of the points the film makes is that otherworldly creatures, whether real or not, fire up the imagination, arousing a sense of wonder and beauty in a world driven by the gadget marketplace and passionless rationalism. Writing at the beginning of the Industrial Age, Charles Dickens insisted, "It is a matter of great importance that fairy tales should be respected. A nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will, hold a great place under the sun." For Walker, who chose to zero in on the rich Celtic traditions of Shein, and other varieties of little people, his film "is a digging into the ground of my indigenous roots of Ireland and Scotland. In that culture, there's also another language, Gaelic, which my ancestors spoke. And within that language resides a different world view, a less materialistic view than the English language, which has been influenced by the Enlightenment over the last few hundred years."

As for the fairies themselves, in addition to an outpouring of books, art, and some movies (Peter Jackson's three-part *Lord of the Rings* adaptation will be a major movie event in 2001), there are at least 3,000 Web sites devoted to the little creatures. "The Otherkin" ([www.otherwonders.com/otherkin](http://www.otherwonders.com/otherkin)) is a growing movement of people who believe that they are really different types of fairies or other fantastical beings. They claim they heal faster than regular people, had wings in previous incarnations, and so on. You might wonder about the true nature of *The Fairy Faith's* cast of characters as the film moves rapidly and without signposts from Cape Breton to England, Scotland and Ireland, eventually circling back to where it started. The picture is almost always meeting people in nature, which gives off vibes that are alluring, secretive and sometimes forbidding. Watching the movie, you tend to forget which country you're in. They all blend into a transnational realm where those we encounter either believe that humans co-exist with supernatural beings or refuse to see them as pure fantasy.

Walker's documentary quietly sidles up and cajoles you into believing the little people are checking you out when you trundle past their secret bushes. But *The Fairy Faith* never insists. Its only special effect is Walker's impeccable cinematography enhanced by supple editing rhythms that either toss fairy dust in your eyes, or hold an image just long enough to give you time to pick up on the magic. "Documenting a subject you can't see," says Walker, "was a challenge." At the outset, he decided that he would "use no tricks. It was so tempting. I could have added digital effects, but I took a very



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straight approach. It's a counterpoint; it's like a foil. Documentary is playing straight man to a subject that is not straight at all. I didn't want to superficially enhance it."

Shot in Super 16, blown up to luminous 35mm, the feature-length documentary's widescreen aspect ratio gives full coverage to many striking panoramas. Once a large-format landscape photographer, Walker has a gift for capturing enigmatic junctures of terrain, light and shadow. Throughout the film, he follows true believers to fairy rings or the sites of close encounters between human and spirit. In its best moments, *The Fairy Faith* gives the impression you're about to see something maddeningly elusive, as in *The Innocents* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Gnomes profiles materialize in rippling pools; tiny figures seem to be standing in dense greenery. Near the end of the picture, a distant, vaguely mysterious silhouette makes its way along the crest of a hill. There's no reason to cut to the shot, other than to make you wonder if you would see fairies in such a landscape. Likewise, suggestive intercuts to paintings of nude sylphs and grinning goblins arouse your not-so-buried longing to believe in a wild, free world that never heard of the Nasdaq.

Walker met the fairy faithful who appear in his movie through a network of researchers and "people in the field, who would lead me to other people." An ex-police chief with the appropriate name, Alex Goldie, has no doubt that fairies once braided the tail of a neighbour's new mare. A fairy sighter called

Peter Aziz tells Walker there's one over there, right near that tree, and the camera pauses to see what he does. Steve Oldale, a construction worker who almost got his shadow stolen by an elf couple, is dying to have another close encounter.

Eighteenth-century playwright Friedrich Schiller might have worried that the "old fable-existences are no more," but for many 21st-century rural people, they're a daily fact of life. One of Walker's subjects talks about a man who got himself acquitted of killing his wife by claiming the so-called person he murdered was really a changeling left in his house by fairies who abducted the real woman. Some little people wish humans well, but others brutally punish them for the tiniest violations. Storyteller Dolina Wallace, who reminds Walker of his believing maternal grandmother, tells the story of a guy who annoyed some naked sprites frolicking in a pool and ended up blind. Brian Froud, a fairy artist who thinks his intricately rendered subjects are real, seems haunted by the "dark and difficult ones." Fairies spark fantasy, and as Walker points out "the imagination comes from the dark side of consciousness." Maybe that's why the creatures should "always be a playful thing." If you get too earnest about them, you could suffer the fate of Victorian painter Richard Dadd, whose obsessively detailed paintings of fairy scenes may have been his ticket to the madhouse.

One of the oddities of *The Fairy Faith* is that many of its on-camera witnesses and specialists display the kind of



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wide-eyed, elfin physiognomies you associate with the magical beings they're talking about. Are they "otherkin" or what? "That's very true," laughs Walker. "It's like going into Stalin's Russia and you think you're making an independent documentary, but really you're talking exclusively to the KGB." Walker adds, "There is a belief that at birth the fairies can jump in and inhabit people's spirits." When this possession takes hold, certain idiosyncratic characteristics emerge, features he observed in some of the people he encountered. One day during post-production, Walker was talking to a phenomenally knowledgeable professional and suddenly he noticed one of the characteristic tell-tale signs: a wandering eye. "That was," he says, "the eeriest experience I ever had."

Although Walker says he never expected to make a movie about the little people, and he hopes it will kick off "a new chapter" for him, the project has been brewing in his unconscious for years. Walker's grandmother, a perfectly rational history teacher, had such a "strong belief in the fairy realm" she made a point of immersing her grandson in its lore and literary traditions, which, for her, "included Chaucer, Shakespeare and Blake." Walker recalls his grandmother's attempts to instill the fairy faith in him "at the very cynical age

of 13. It's easy to believe in fairies when you're eight or nine or 10. You have a child's imagination. But something destroys it.

"Eventually," Walker continues, "she was able to convince me in a very profound way by taking me into the landscape of Scotland, and by giving me not only a sense of the mythology, but a sense of history connected to the land, to place and the landscape. And that was a very potent experience for me because it provided me with a world view that gave me a respect for land, a sense that our spirits, our ancestors, whatever you want to call them, reside in the landscape. And that has influenced my work ever since. I get great strength from it."

For the moviemaker, locales "that have a really strong sense of spirit are the places where the fairies dwell. In Ireland, you find them in ancient, pre-Christian places." On one level, the little people are a point of contact with indigenous cultures, which always have, and continue to be, threatened by whoever holds the reins of power. Walker's grandmother made a point of introducing him to the poetry of W.B. Yeats, who "used the fairies to revive Irish nationalism."

Through the journey he took into the little's people domain, Walker came to realize that "all indigenous people have a belief in the other realm, and we're all indigenous to some place." One key sequence portrays Irish storyteller Eddie Lenihan trying to save a fairy tree from being demolished by highway engineers who don't give a damn about "desecrating sacred ground." Lenihan's quixotic, ultimately successful battle echoes the fights North American native's have had with developers out to turn their sacred sites into golf courses. To underline the universality of the fairy realm, Walker closes his pilgrimage in Eskasoni, a Cape Breton Mi'kmaq reserve. The fairy sightings there, both charming and scary, sound like the stories we heard in England, Scotland and Ireland. "They have the same belief system," says Walker, recalling a meeting he once had with a native kid in British Columbia. He told the boy, "The imperialism that destroyed your culture did the same to mine. The Gaelic language was outlawed in Canada" as part of the British attempt to dismantle Celtic civilization.



Now that John Walker has unearthed his roots, and considered the beliefs they nourish, is he someone who half-believes, wants to believe or believes in the realm of the little people? "I'll answer with an anecdote," says Walker. "When Yeats was doing his research on the fairies at the end of the 19th century, he asked an elderly woman, 'Do you believe in fairies?' And the response was, 'Of course I don't believe in fairies, but they're there.' I would say it comes close to my sentiment."

