

23rd October 2021

Fairies

**“There are fairies at the bottom of our garden!
It's not so very, very far away;
You pass the gardener's shed, and you just keep straight ahead –
I do so hope they've really come to stay.”**

Rose Fyleman, Fairies and Chimneys, 1918

My father was born in the village of Strontian, before his family moved from a crofting lifestyle to the “big town” of Fort William. Strontian is the main village in Sunart in western Lochaber, and gives its name to the chemical element “Strontium”, discovered there in 1790 by Adair Crawford and William Cruikshank. Past generations of my father’s family rest in Strontian’s cemetery. My great, great, grandfather was Beadle in the Parish Church of Strontian in the 19th century, “Sandy, the minister’s man.”

Strontian ... But I’m intrigued by the name itself. In Scots Gaelic it’s *Sròn an t-Sithein*, which, I’m informed, means “The Nose (as in ‘point’) of the Fairy Hill”, referring to a knoll inhabited by the mythological *Sidhe*, a race of supernatural beings familiar in all Celtic cultures. Do local people, visiting tourists, church folk or scientists know that a belief in fairies gives this village its name? I suspect not, for if they did, there might be a back-lash against it, and pressure to have the name changed to something more pragmatic and non-controversial – like “Sunartstown”, or the like.

And me? I don’t believe in fairies – on a Fairy Hill or anywhere else. But I *do* like the reference to a different culture, a time of storytelling and mythology, an age of legend and wonder. Might a people in touch with mystery – fairies and all of that – not have a deeper sense of the spiritual, the unknown, the “otherness”, than we might allow ourselves in our more pragmatic, and dare I say cynical, age? Might “fairies” be a symbol that it’s OK *not* to know it all, and to recognise that there are things that are simply strange, and which cannot be dispelled by certainty or explanation?

I still don’t believe in fairies – in Strontian or anywhere else. But I might just take myself to *Sròn an t-Sithein* and wait for a while on a Fairy Hill to give myself time and space to recognise my “not knowing”, and to be embraced again by something approaching the mystery of the divine.

A prayer for today

God, speak to me in the mystery of a love I'll never fully understand. Amen

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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