



The Coming of the Fairies - The Cottingley Incident

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

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The Cottingley Fairies appear in a series of five photographs taken by Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, two young cousins who lived in Cottingley, near Bradford in England. In 1917, when the first two photographs were taken, Elsie was 16 years old and Frances was 9. The pictures came to the attention of writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who used them to illustrate an article on fairies he had been commissioned to write for the Christmas 1920 edition of *The Strand Magazine*. Conan Doyle, as a spiritualist, was enthusiastic about the photographs, and interpreted them as clear and visible evidence of psychic phenomena. Public reaction was mixed; some accepted the images as genuine, but others believed they had been faked. Doyle championed the photographs, and in the process destroyed his reputation; which is probably why this book, out of all of the Doyle corpus, has rarely been put into print until now. *The Coming of the Fairies* was possibly a bigger disappointment for Doyle fans than when he killed off Sherlock Holmes. Interest in the Cottingley Fairies gradually declined after 1921. Both girls married and lived abroad for a time after they grew up, yet the photographs continued to hold the public imagination; in 1966 a reporter from the *Daily Express* newspaper traced Elsie, who had by then returned to the UK. Elsie left open the possibility that she believed she had photographed her thoughts, and the media once again became interested in the story. In the early 1980s Elsie and Frances admitted that the photographs were faked, using cardboard cutouts of fairies copied from a popular children's book of the time, but Frances maintained that the fifth and final photograph was genuine. The photographs and two of the cameras used are on display in the National Media Museum in Bradford.

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