

Bread, Berries, and Fish: Food and Fairy Encounters in Newfoundland

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Abstract:

This article investigates fairy lore in Newfoundland through the identity marker of food. I consider perceptions of the environment as rigorous or bountiful in stories of fairy encounters, particularly in regard to scarcity and staple foods. Taking particular note of geographical variations in the narratives surrounding fairies and food, the article will explore contrasting environments and investigate the concepts of locality, scarcity, and abundance that may influence the way fairy stories are told. From supernatural solutions, to dangerous illusions, this article will view the ambiguities present in fairy lore through the lens of Newfoundland foodways. I will compare the folklore of other regions, particularly the British Isles, with the traditions of Newfoundland, and examine which influences are particularly evident, and how they have been changed to fit the local beliefs, culinary culture, and geography.

Keywords: fairies, food, folklore, landscape, Newfoundland

Introduction

In ballad, belief, and folktale, food and the supernatural have a complex relationship, and this is frequently visible in instances where fairy food plays a part. This article investigates fairy lore in Newfoundland¹ by exploring food as an identity marker. In asking whether fairy narratives speak of remedying lack of food, or of causing harm by food, I consider perceptions of the environment as rigorous or bountiful in stories of fairy encounters, particularly in regard to scarcity and staple foods. The focus on contrasting environments—wild and tame, forest and garden—that Barbara Rieti notes in *Strange Terrain* (1991) is central to exploring the themes of need, locality, and abundance that influence fairy encounters. This paper will draw heavily on Rieti's work, which describes several types of encounter narrative, the explanations that have been posited for fairy sightings, and the geographical and environmental connections within this body of lore.

In fairy tales, food often takes on a supernatural connotation in times of desperation. For instance, berries prompt magical conception in the Newfoundland version of "Peg Bearskin," (Tye and Greenhill 2020). Consequences ensue when instructions are not properly followed, but the giving of the food itself does not imply treachery.² This story does not explicitly involve fairies in the sense of a type of otherworldly being, but it does fit with Rieti's definition of fairy as adjective, that is, an otherworldly quality (1991: 54). Such an example highlights the connection between fairy food and need, and involves elements of both help and danger.

In this article, I compare folklore of Newfoundland with that of other. The body of fairy folklore of the British Isles, an area that has had significant influence in the province's history, also frequently presents food from mysterious sources in an ambiguous light, with "fairy butter," for example, appearing occasionally as a gift and occasionally a danger.³ Eating fairy butter that is freely offered can be positive, while refusing it is fatal. Fairies can also prevent humans from churning butter of their own (Westwood and Simpson 2005: 242, 774). It is worth noting that tales of fairy butter do not seem to have appeared in Newfoundland. Then there are downright interdictions against it, as found in ballad as well as belief, in which food eaten in the fairy realm gives fairies power over a person, and means that they remain under enchantment.⁴

Human food may also be kept as a talisman, eaten as sustenance, or become enchanted by the fairies. In Newfoundland, there is a story about a man going into the woods with a sandwich, being lost and taken by fairies, and then coming back out but having his sandwich burned for safety's sake; food was tainted by association (Rieti 1991: 202). Food can be transformative or it can be transgressive. Etiquette and social mores coincide with ventures into unknown environments, desperate attempts to regain control over one's destiny, or exchanges of objects and services between worlds. Where fairy food is concerned, in folklore from the British Isles as well as Newfoundland, it is often outdoors in wild places that may be familiar but seem strange; it is not purely nourishing but also bears spiritual significance. Fairies and food overlap in domestic settings as well, often as an intrusion beyond boundaries. In this paper, I examine the contrast between these stories, alongside the contextual information presented by those recalling the stories.

Due to the difficulty of conducting fieldwork in the circumstances imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to rely on published literature and archival materials available online. Drawing primarily on the published work of Barbara Rieti (1991), Peter Narváez (1991), and archival sources in the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), I explore recurring themes in the folklore on fairy food in the Newfoundland context, and the interactions of fairies and humans in this regard. This study attempts to build on those existing analyses by focusing on the connections between environment and staple foods in the Newfoundland fairy tradition. It relies primarily on accounts of firsthand encounters with the fairies, accounts of encounters said to have transpired in previous generations, as well as sayings or proverbs, and less on folktales or legends, though I make some comparison to these genres in Newfoundland and to a lesser extent the British Isles. The role of scarcity and necessity in shaping fairy lore around the subject of food—particularly contradictory accounts—is examined closely to determine if there is a link between them. Finally, I discuss fairy food as it features in individual narratives, and community dynamics or foodways. I will focus on bread, fish, and berries, not only because they are significant to the idea of fairy stories, but because they are foods that hold an important place in Newfoundland foodways.

Fairy Landscapes

There is great emphasis placed on environment in fairy narratives and it is one of the conditions that creates the possibility for fairy belief (Narváez 1991: 340). Rieti's *Strange Terrain* is the main source on the role of the Newfoundland landscape in fairy narratives

and for examining, for instance, fairy interference with farming (Rieti 1991: 70-71). The fairies did not seem to have an aversion to farming so much as an enjoyment of making humans' lives difficult. Their presence in several farming-centric narratives is often a mildly antagonistic one, and sometimes a more serious threat. The "fairy blast," a sudden gust of wind, could be a nuisance that required cleaning up strewn hay, or something that caused physical harm or death (Rieti 1991: 72). One of the stories recounted illustrates both the short- and long-term effects of the blast. A woman in Colliers (unless otherwise noted, all place names mentioned will be in Newfoundland) was taken up by the fairy blast while raking up hay, and both she and the haystacks went missing for a day before being found safe. She was so shaken that she never spoke afterward (Rieti 1991: 71). It seems that fairies in Newfoundland did not actively engage in farming, and occasionally caused problems for the farmers themselves, appearing mostly as visitors to the farm, but sometimes driven in their resentment by a desire to return regularly to the same place. For instance, a piece of ground known as "the fairy patch" on one farm near Avondale was the site of a "fairy squall," where the hay was suddenly lifted onto the nearby hill (Rieti 1991: 68). Bride Power's memoir notes that in her youth in Marysvale, the fairies were "in on the farms" and led people astray (Power 2018: 24).

The landscapes they inhabited were, as Narváez describes, liminal spaces that belonged neither to the familiar nor to the unknown (1991: 338). Landscape is central to the perceived identities of fairies, and as such, there is a tie between the foods associated with fairies, the places where they dwell, and the way they are viewed. How they came to inhabit these landscapes may also be important, as the origins of the fairies and their presence in particular locations are explained differently throughout Newfoundland, with variations caused by religious belief, individual storytelling style, and location of the storyteller. One account mentions the fairies being banished to the woods, after having made too much trouble when they lived near the human community (Rieti 1991: 62). Those accounts of fairy origins that refer to them as fallen angels occasionally make a distinction between those that fell in the sea, becoming mermaids, and those that fell on the land, becoming fairies (Rieti 1991: 22). Rieti elaborates on the contrasting relationships between the fairies and the human world in terms of landscapes that they inhabit. Wild and tame are indeed contrasted in imagery and influence, but the food lore of fairies complicates the picture by including both wild and manufactured foods, in roles that never quite settle into one thing or the other.

My interest is in the effect of these landscapes on the food interactions with fairies and how their food is perceived. This ties into how fairies are viewed more broadly, whether as threatening or potentially providing unexpected help. It is also crucial to look to the emotional responses to fairy narratives and fairy encounters (both stories that are not personal experiences, in which the tellers do not have personal connections to the events, and those in which they do). The emotional response to stories of fairies is as important a consideration as that of the physical landscape. Recurring references to fairies as being part of the past may indicate a separation from these stories, or a nostalgic attitude that does not always accord with the actual degree of belief expressed, either in the past or the present, but rather a general interest in the stories for their narrative and historic value (Rieti 1991: 2).

While Rieti's interviewees do not tell stories of looking for an encounter with fairies, she notes that in some cases they "like to think" that they had a brush with the Good People, preferring that interpretation over any other, and telling it accordingly (1991: 97). Therefore, it is possible that the emphasis will be less on shortage or scarcity, at least in the community context, and more on nostalgia. The sense of need may be present in stories concerning fairies and food, but it may not be the need brought on by a hard winter. Rather, a need to frame the past in a certain way is expressed in the narratives. Holly Everett's study on berries reframes a food associated in many accounts with fairies and danger as a food of tradition, bounty, and connection, hard-won by gathering the wild fruits in the barrens or the woods, but worth the effort and made more significant by it (Everett 2007: 35). Stating that the fairies were a part of the past rather than a current danger may belong to the same process of mediation, placing the more difficult parts of the past at a further remove, a safe enough distance to tell stories about them and feel that they are a valuable tradition, and allow them to satisfy "the desire for a good story" (Rieti 1991: 97).

Some accounts involved the significance of a drink of water (Rieti 1991: 103). Water, as will be explored later, has a complex role in stories about fairies. A mug is offered in one account described by Narváez, and not accepted by the human recipient, an encounter that took place by a pond, implying that the drink would have allowed the fairy to obtain influence over the person (1991: 350). This is worth mentioning as it contradicts Rieti's similar accounts, in which a person drinking from a stream with a dipper avoids falling under fairy influence by way of the dipper, an object made by human hands, acting as an intermediary between fairy and human realms (Rieti 1991: 202). Both of these would be classed as fairy encounters, as they took place within the communities in which they were told. These accounts feature fairies near fresh water, and an exchange between humans and fairies that has an ambiguous meaning. The role of salt water will also be examined below.

Bread: Hearth and Communion

The most frequently cited food item in regards to fairy folklore in Newfoundland is bread (see Rieti 1991). This is not surprising as bread was central to food culture in the province throughout much of its recent history. Diane Tye argues that bread is even more of a staple than cod in Newfoundland (2011: 1). As a staple, bread makes its way into every aspect of society, both physically, as something present at every meal and baked within the home, and symbolically, as part of the Eucharist (2011: 1). It was used medicinally, but also had a more supernatural connotation as a form of divination (2011: 28-30). It was, as well, present in proverbs related to pathfinding and avoiding getting lost, perhaps countering the fairies' predilection for misleading people: "You're eating your path" was an often-heard admonition to those consuming bread in the woods, implying that the bread is less for sustenance than for symbolism (2011: 32).

Rieti attributes the pivotal role of bread in relation to fairy folklore to several possible sources (1991: 75). The view of bread as a deterrent was present in Marysvale and Long Pond in the latter half of the 20th century, with the rationale, "the fairies must have been afraid of bread, because they couldn't touch you then or couldn't take you" (Power 2018:

25). It could be that the religious implications of bread are behind its key role in protection from the fairies. However, it could also be viewed as a symbol of that which is made by humans rather than gathered from the wild, something that allowed it to serve as a tie to the familiar world (Rieti 1991: 76). A story collected by Narváez uses both bread and berries as sustaining foods for someone led astray, though the individual ate only a crumb of bread per day and picked berries as well, perhaps implying that the role of the bread was more spiritual than physical (Narváez 1991: 345). A personal communication of mine via a Facebook post confirmed that the interpretation of bread as a food used to distract the fairies is still known in Newfoundland; the idea is that it prevents them from taking one captive: “I was told it was so that you had something to offer them rather than take you or take your child. Bread or silver in your pocket.” (21 January 2021). Another participant in the conversation volunteered the advice that one should never eat fairy food, as it gave the fairies power over one’s person, stating “I was always told if you kept a piece of bread in your pocket it would help keep the fairies away?” (21 January 2021). The former is a belief frequently found and referenced in Rieti’s fieldwork, as in the account of individuals being taken because they could not pay “the bread ransom,” while the latter is widespread in literature, and occasionally also in folklore, as Rieti notes (1991: 81,130).

Aligning with the idea of bread as escape, but using a motif that is not explicitly present in the Newfoundland tales I consulted, British folklorist Wirt Sikes makes reference to a story in which water nymphs taunt a man. They tell him that by eating bread (presumably specifically baked by humans), he has made it harder for him to catch them (1880: 40). It is a statement that, like many of the accounts from Newfoundland, does not explain exactly why bread is held in such high esteem, though in both of these cases it seems to act as a barrier between fairy and human, whether the human is pursuing the fairies or vice versa. An indication that bread was similarly viewed more as a deterrent than a distraction to fairies in Newfoundland comes from some of the storytellers interviewed by Rieti, who specified that to banish spirits, salt was preferred, but to banish fairies, people could use bread (1991: 78). Often the role of bread was more as a general protective measure than a way of speeding or slowing the steps of the person who carried it, but these examples illustrate its role in preventing fairy encounters.

The relationship was rarely simple and straightforward, however. Fairies had bread of their own, both in Newfoundland and elsewhere, with its own effects on humans who ate it (Rieti 1991: 81). In a British account compiled in the late 19th century, bread offered by the fairies could also be a clever impostor: “Wirt Sikes in *British Goblins* relates a Breconshire belief that gifts of fairy bread by the Tylwyth Teg, if not eaten immediately in darkness, will prove to be toadstools in the daylight” (*British Fairies* blog; Sikes 1880: 120). That fairy food, if it is not outright dangerous, is at least not what it may seem, is a belief also reflected in a Breton tale on the dangers of fairy food for humans (Spence 1917). Mushrooms are associated with fairies in Newfoundland as well, though without the mention of their being turned into bread, nor reference to their edibility (Rieti 1991: 208). There is perhaps an implication in Sikes’s reference that the true power of human bread is its non-illusory nature, and such stories might have influenced Newfoundland belief (Sikes 1880: 120).

In Newfoundland, the fairies' relationship to bread can sometimes stand in contrast to the wild-cultivated divide noted by Rieti, as occasionally it serves as a place in which the fairies are profoundly involved in cultivated or domestic foods. Tye notes that the practice among Catholic women was to cross their bread before letting it rise (2011: 19). In Ireland, likewise, crossing the bread to let fairies out is still a custom practiced when baking soda bread, and mentioned in multiple recipes and articles about the food (personal experience August 2017, McDonnell and Prendergast 2018, Mangan 2016). The continuation of this tradition may have taken on different meanings over the years, but the idea of a fairy intrusion into the bread, especially as something to be warded off within the domestic setting, differs from the interpretation of bread as a deterrent to fairy attacks.

Gender also influences the division of domestic and wild and may affect the meanings of both bread and berries, as will be explored in more detail below. Women were in charge of baking bread throughout much of Newfoundland's settler history, and the knowledge of baking travelled with them as they married and moved to new communities. This stands in direct contrast to the unfamiliarity of berry grounds that a woman might find herself in after marriage, and makes bread, perhaps, a comfort food in its production. The emotional associations of bread could be profound, and rooted in early childhood because for many Newfoundlanders, "it was also closely tied to memories of mothers and grandmothers" (Tye 2011: 24). On the other hand, women who could not bake were sometimes judged harshly, especially after they married, and were under pressure to learn (Tye 2011: 24-25). If home baked bread in Newfoundland cuisine was a confirmed staple, perhaps concerns over perceived "cheats" such as quick breads also played into beliefs surrounding the deceptive bread of the fairy folk.

Different interpretations of the connections between fairies and bread—aversion, religion, distraction—give dimension to the different interpretations of fairy origins, particularly their different religious implications and the place of the fairies in a Christian schematic. There are several stories on the origins of fairies, and those attributing them to fallen angels may explain the bread problem as an aversion rooted in their fraught relationship with Christianity (Rieti 1991: 22-23). However, other interpretations, such as fairies as ghosts or as indefinable spirits, leave room for the possibility that bread was a bribe, a means of distracting the fairies, or a form of sustenance that protected against fairy food, particularly if the latter was an illusion.

Today, bread continues to hold meaning in Newfoundland folklife, and while most people no longer bake bread at home every day, it remains a staple (Tye 2011: 34). Of course, eating bread rarely takes place on its own, and a delicious jam is usually wanted—made with local berries.

Berries: The Dangers of the Wild

Because, as Rieti (1991) and Narváez (1991) note, many fairy encounters take place when people involved are picking berries, the customs and perceptions surrounding berry-picking must be examined in relation to food security. The social role of wild food from the forest and bog in a society that was otherwise agrarian and also dependent on the fishery is foundational to understanding the encounters that took place on berry picking grounds.

The disorientation expressed in the stories could well have reflected the challenge of getting one's bearings in an unfamiliar landscape, as was the case for many women when they married (Rieti 1991: 94-95).

It is perhaps berries that best reflect the idea of a liminal landscape in the fairy context. It is also berries that, in the sources consulted, are most explicitly tied to hard times. Narváez refers to the way that "material inducement during hard times often drove berry pickers into realms of danger" and suggests that this contributed to the social role of berry-picking (1991: 342). Berry-picking supplemented a family's diet, and the products resulting from it aided their income (Narváez 1991: 342; Everett 2007: 19). Yet the stories of berry-pickers and fairies focus on the initial stage of this process, the gathering of food in the wild, rather than the preparation of berry preserves or the sale of berries within or outside the community. Fairies do not seem to have interfered in these activities. Perishable and seasonal foods may also take on significance in the landscape of supernatural narrative. Fairies can be seen as filling absences, "always going but never gone," as Rieti notes, quoting W.B. Yeats, taking the role of the ephemeral and temporary but not extratemporal (1991: 1). Fairies do seem to be perennially — pun intended — associated with seasonal food, likely as a side effect of their being similarly tied to wild food. Fairies are associated with berries, yes, but not necessarily with jam or preserves.

The role of fairy landscapes as liminal places is significant to berry-picking on both the individual and community levels. Perhaps the contrast between fairy and human places is matched in significance by the contrast between a wilderness seen as barren and one that is seen as bountiful. A liminal landscape may still fulfill the role of a landscape as provider. Tye and Greenhill's study of berries in "Peg Bearskin" as a connection between familiar and fantastical, as well as a fulfiller of wishes, reflects this theme (2020: 103).

The meanings of foods and the stories associated with them can change. As with many foods whose histories are related to scarcity or need, the Newfoundland berry has now become associated with bounty (Everett 2007: 9). It is worth interrogating the meanings of berries today, and the change in their constructed meanings both to Newfoundlanders and to outsiders. The associations of the Newfoundland berry are not uncomplicated. As a tradition that is still practiced, but that is no longer a necessity for most families, berry-picking occupies a space similar to bread, in that it is now used to entice visitors and to make products of a certain level of luxury, but belongs to a different physical space than what is baked on the hearth.

Narváez sketches out the relationship between berries and economic hardship. The importance of berries in the commercial sense rose in the 1930s due to the availability of freezer facilities, allowing them to be sold on a grander scale (1991: 342). While Rieti's (1991) participants often do not explicitly connect the practice of berry-picking with shortage or scarcity, it is interesting to contrast the view of berries as a staple necessity with that of berries as a draw for tourists. For one thing, the practice of gathering them in the wild is directly contrasted, by tourism guides, with that of processing them and turning them into delicacies like jam. Both are seen as age-old traditional arts (Everett 2007). The attraction of the local jam, to the tourist, is the knowledge that the ingredients are directly

gathered from the land, which is framed as challenging but generous, and that they did not have to do this themselves.

Dale Jarvis records the story of a woman, well-liked in her community, who was lost in the woods and missing for several days. She returned with an unusual story of being sustained by fairies (2005: 47). Rather than wild food, as one might expect, the fairies had brought her the oranges that the searchers set out for her to find. What makes this story distinct is the fact that the missing woman was sustained by human food, provided by the searchers but attributed to the fairies, who were more often associated with wild foods grown in Newfoundland than with exotic fruits. While ambiguous, the story could be understood as the fairies finding the signs of possible help, and bringing them to her, although their motivations remain unknown. It does not seem that she interpreted their gifts as signs of human help, nor that she believed their actions to have been motivated by wishing her to stay with them.

If food indicates something about the moral alignment of those eating it, what implications does fairy food have? In the story recounted by Jarvis, the woman is a valued member of the community; in other stories such as one concerning a woman who kept to herself and wandered strangely due to the mental strain of having an illegitimate child, it seems that fairy explanations are given to behaviors that make people outsiders, and might be used as an excuse to alienate them (Rieti 1991: 114, 120). As Narváez, Rieti, and Tye and Greenhill all note, stories about berry-pickers' encounters with fairies could be used to cover much more unsavory stories of assaults on the part of community members (Narváez 1991: 355, Rieti 1991: 120, Tye and Greenhill 2020: 101). Yet the range of such stories demonstrates that they served multiple purposes, and those in which humans are unexpectedly kept alive by the unknown or liminal beings in an uncertain landscape would certainly bear comparison with those featuring more hostile encounters. The morality of the fairies is as ambiguous as the implications of eating their food, and whichever way one approaches the question, there is no simple answer.

Along with illustrating the fairy landscape, stories of people unexpectedly fed by fairies demonstrate the balance of power within that space. To feed others, especially those in pressing need, is to be the one in control of the situation. This fraught dynamic is also reflected in the Newfoundland folktale "Peg Bearskin," where the berries become the means of conception in desperate straits and great need (Tye and Greenhill 2020: 102). Those who returned from the forest after such experiences, even if they had been nourished temporarily, sometimes suffered lasting effects from the time spent among the fairies (Narváez 1991: 351).

If berries were the bounty of one liminal space, fish was the product of another. Yet within the body of folklore related to fairies in Newfoundland, they occupy much less space.

Fish: The Unspoken and Absent Food

The cod fishery was the mainstay of Newfoundland life for generations, so it is surprising to see how little it is reflected in stories of fairies, and how sparse the references to fairy belief are in the maritime context, as opposed to ghosts, for example. Some of Rieti's participants

referred to fairies being ghosts, and the shipwrecked dead are said to have “strong fairy affinities,” but many treated them as separate entities, even when describing similar phenomena (Rieti 1991: 26, 82). Reluctance to tell of sailing lore when telling narratives of fairies, as reported by Michael Fagan and cited by Rieti, may be one reason for this absence. Perhaps they are separate narrative events even if they share some traits. A more detailed comparison between the landscapes in which these stories took place would be necessary, however, in order to draw out precisely the ways in which ghost and fairy narratives differ or converge (Rieti 1991: 27). “The Hollies,” a name for voices heard in Adam’s Cove, is a term I first encountered while researching for the Ghost Ship Map of Newfoundland and Labrador, and is associated by one of Rieti’s interviewees as a fairy sound, though still associated with the dead (MUNFLA 68-022e 003 ms; see Murray-Bergquist 2020, Rieti 1991: 82). The story of the mysterious light near Greenspond, known as Paddy Poor’s Light,⁵ is attributed to a lost schooner rather than something non-human, and Billy the Wisp, a similar mystery light located near Partridge’s Cove Pond, is unexplained, but is similar to many ghost ship legends in that the mystery light is said to be a token of bad weather (Murray-Bergquist 2020). It is in the realm of mysterious lights that Rieti notes the most overlap between ghost and fairy accounts (1991: 26), though I would argue that those found near the coast are more likely to be attributed to lost ships.

Ghosts are not the sole supernatural beings that appear in Newfoundland sea lore. Other folkloric entities, such as mermaids and selkies⁶, are present as well and are related to fairy folk (Rieti 1991: 232). These are beings with rich bodies of lore often separate from other types of fairy stories, but it is worth mentioning their connection with food by way of the fishery and the seal hunt, as many of their stories, around the coasts of the British Isles, were told in fishing communities, which one might expect to influence the Newfoundland record (Thomson 2000). In particular, the balance between the worlds of land and sea was seen as important, and to offend or harm a magical creature within it could be dangerous (Westwood and Kingshill 2012: 284). Yet they are regarded as distinct for the most part from the context of fairies in the Newfoundland folkloric world (Rieti 1991: 81).

Rieti notes that the lack of narratives about fairies in or around the sea in her study is a significant absence (1991: 80). She does refer to a few stories, such as a stranger helping a short-handed crew take in fish, and crucially, disappearing once he comes to land (1991: 81). There are some examples of fishers being involved in tales of fairies that were set on land in Newfoundland legend (Jarvis 2005: 53). On the whole, fairies appear to be rooted in the landscape, an observation emphasized by Rieti as well as Narváez, and that would merit further contemporary fieldwork with a specific focus on geographic associations of such stories (Rieti 1991: 113, Narváez 1991: 340). Comparing the situation in Newfoundland with fairy folklore in the British Isles, which might have been expected to influence the former,⁷ fairy boats were not an unknown occurrence in Ireland. One of Lady Gregory’s interviewees in the late 19th-early 20th century notes that “they [the fairies] go out fishing like ourselves” in Ireland (Rieti 1991: 232). Likewise, stories of encounters with fairies could occur at sea (Chadbourne 2012). While fairy narratives are by no means a monolithic tradition in either location, their similarities in other ways raise the question of why this difference in environment should be present. Narváez notes that fairies and berries were linked in some European folklore and attributes the centrality of berries partially to a

carry-over from that context. It becomes all the more anomalous that fairy encounters at sea, and the stories of fairy boats, are so absent (1991: 340).

The first point to examine would be that of how the work cultures of fishing and berry-picking differ. A crucial difference in this case is the question of privacy. An individual experience is a less common phenomenon in fishing, and disappearing for multiple days is not possible. Most fairy encounters recounted by Rieti seem to involve a single person separated from a companion or companions, or a small group of people led astray (1991: 185). There is also a gender difference, in which fishing was generally a male activity, and berry-picking primarily a female one (Narváez 1991: 341). The social roles of berry-picking and fishing, while superficially connected and holding a few more profound similarities such as seasonality and the danger of the environment in which they took place, were perhaps sufficiently different so that to compare the two may not be fruitful in terms of occupational folklore. Fishing was not absolutely absent from fairy encounter accounts—there is a mention of trout fishing, via a story in which a girl in the woods was found after being fairy-led (Rieti 1991: 64). In one account recorded by Narváez, a girl taken by fairies is found on the other side of a wide river, without a memory of how she got there, adding to her sense of disorientation (1991: 350). Notably, this takes place in the woods, and in fresh river water rather than the salt ocean. The forested inland environment is, as mentioned earlier, associated with the fairies more than any other type of landscape. Based on this, it is important to examine the question of this apparent gap in the fairies' presence, and possible causes of it, from the point of view of the physical environment.

The role of fairies in regards to fishing may be related to salt water, or water in general. If salt was used to banish spirits, as in one account in which salt, water, and religious invocations were combined to banish fairies who had been troubling a man, perhaps salt water was regarded as an environment they would not inhabit (Rieti 1991: 78). While some accounts made the distinction between banishing fairies and banishing spirits, as separate entities affected by different forms of banishment, others specified salt as one of the items that would affect fairies adversely (Rieti 1991: 76). The presence of fairies near water in general is worth investigating for multiple reasons, and it is important to examine both fresh and salt water while making the distinction between the two. First, there is the belief about fairies and witches being unable to cross running water (see *British Fairies* blog; Westwood and Simpson 2005: 72). Second, there is the importance of water as a familiar environment in Newfoundland. As an island, Newfoundland is defined by water, bounded by it, and shaped in many ways by its residents' relationship to it. An aversion to water, fresh or salt, is not seen as a central part of coastal fairy lore in Scotland and Ireland, and the changeable, unpredictable nature of the environment is even seen as a reason for fairy narratives to take place near the sea, with the contrasts present in the seascape reflecting those of the fairies themselves (Narváez 1991: 340). The use of the word "fairy" as an adjective, rather than a noun, is occasionally present in interviews cited by Rieti; one participant is quoted as defining the adjective as "like seeing a ship on the ocean that wasn't really there" (1991: 54). This does not necessarily mean that fairies, as separate entities, were present, but that the word could refer to anything uncanny that one witnessed, that existed without a clear explanation in the rational world.

The lack of fairy folklore recounted in relation to cod might also be accounted for by the prevalence of other narratives related to the fishery, which have taken greater precedence. The cod moratorium of 1992⁸ drastically changed the relationship between Newfoundlanders and fishing. Yet this in itself could have served to draw out fairy narratives and beliefs, if any existed. The perception of the sea as bountiful despite its dangers, the “once plentiful cod fishery” remembered, might have intersected with fairy belief in its construction of the past (Thomson and Ahluwalia 2012). As with berries, contemporary narratives surrounding cod occasionally blend a sense of pride in a rugged environment with a view of its goods as potentially luxurious products. This is reflected, for example, in the name of the specialty food company Cod Sounds that evokes a time when cod “sounds” or swim bladders were one of the few extremely inexpensive parts of the fish (Long 2016). In searching for links between fairy lore, food lore, and scarcity, fishing represents an intriguing avenue, as it is perhaps the most obvious one when discussing shortages. Particularly, the discussion of fairies and cod alike as part of the landscape of the past, and the way in which this past is revisited through folklore, might be a fruitful direction for future research. Neither Rieti nor Narváz makes much mention of fairies in folksong, and while balladry is a major source for older forms of fairy belief including that of food (see Jacobs 1891), recent fairy narratives have taken the form of personal experience accounts or legends. In this aspect as well, the vanished past diverges: cod on the one hand, fairies on the other.

It appears that fairies were, if not entirely absent, certainly not a major part of fisheries folklore. Of all areas in which further firsthand research on fairies could be illuminating, this is one that should perhaps be pursued, as an absence of published material may not indicate an absence of stories. Another avenue worth investigating would be in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. In my own experience with MUNFLA, researching ghost ships, I found very few accounts of fairy encounters in the maritime context. However, this does not necessarily mean that such stories do not exist; a more dedicated study of the topic might reveal more connections. Tangentially, fishbones were among the objects reported to have come out of mysterious injuries attributed to fairy darts (Rieti 1991: 141,144, 204). While perhaps one could not read too much into this, as the objects tend to be those found in and around people’s houses anyway, like straw and sticks, it is one of the few places in which fish or related products appear in this context. It also illustrates the perception of fairies turning the items of everyday life into dangers.

There is perhaps one parallel in the way stories of cod and fairies alike are told: they belong, in many tellers’ conception, to a previous time, though the former has this status for concrete and evident reasons, while the latter is more numinous.

Exchange and Gift

The story of the woman sustained by oranges, recounted by Jarvis, is an intriguing and unusual example of exchange (2005: 47).⁹ If not exactly reciprocal, it is certainly one that involved both humans and fairies taking an active part in the redistribution of food. Intriguing is the fact that the woman went out to go berry-picking, but it was not berries, as one might have expected, that sustained her during her absence. The fairies evidently were

not reluctant to interact with human food, or to help her without asking for anything in return. The oranges also had no ill effects, unlike stories in which humans sustained by fairies suffer upon their return. It would be interesting to pursue the question of whether eating human food could restore a person who had suffered from an encounter with the fairies, something touched upon with changelings. These last are fairy children, or sometimes adults, who change places with ordinary humans, often behaving in ways that marked them as unusual, and suffering ill health. Stories like these could explain sudden changes in the physical condition or behavior of individuals (1991: 44, 46).

It is here that I will raise another question relevant to the subject of scarcity and need. Do fairies ever eat human food? In the context of the British Isles, stories such as the medieval English legend of the green children, a boy and a girl found at Woolpit, Anglia, use their initial aversion to human food to highlight the otherness of the folk, and they begin to lose their distinctive green coloring after eating it. The boy died young, however, the girl survived to adulthood, eventually marrying. (Westwood and Simpson 2005: 707). The children could also prevent butter from forming. This theme found in English folklore is not, to my knowledge, present in Newfoundland (Westwood and Simpson 2005: 242, 262, 273). One interviewee in Rieti's study offers an answer to the question, saying "just as you never eat their saltless food, they never eat human food with salt in it" (1991: 76). The role of salt, therefore, could also be crucial in examining such overarching themes as exchange between worlds, and the preservation of food or its perishable status. Furthermore, if, as stated earlier, there is a significance to salt water being part of the reason for the fairies' absence from the fishery, salt-preserved cod would be far from their tastes. In the sources given by Rieti, fairies are occasionally interested in bread, though bread is more usually cited as a protection without mention of the fairies eating it.

The perils of fairy food are twofold, with the danger of accepting food from the fairies contrasted with the risk of offending them if the food freely offered is rejected. The traditions in this regard are widespread, but it is worth looking at ones that may have had an impact on Newfoundland. An account collected in Ireland in the early 20th century by Evans-Wentz notes the rule that if one is taken by the fairies and eats with them, one will never return (1911: 47). However, the story that tells of a man refusing a gift of fairy butter, causing the death of himself and his horses, indicates that this is a dangerous act in itself (Westwood and Simpson 2005: 242) Both of these are accounts from the British Isles, but they each have their echoes in Newfoundland. One woman who is taken by the fairies and refused to eat their food was returned to her world but left with a permanent speech defect (Rieti 1991: 70). In another account, three children who are taken to an island by a mysterious boat eat fairy bread; two die young while a third never recovers her wits (Rieti 1991: 81). The implication is that any encounter with the fairies is bound to leave one altered. In another account, a man refuses to eat fairy food, even when captured and offered several chances to take it. No definite retribution is noted, so the rule does not appear to have been constantly observed (Rieti 1991: 83). Hospitality, something I was frequently told was a reason to come to Newfoundland, is also relevant to fairies, though an explicit link between the two is generally absent from the stories cited by Rieti. Despite the view that the fairies represent wilderness environments, their views on etiquette appear to

be surprisingly strict. However, while some trends can be seen in culinary interactions with fairies, the variety of encounter and interaction is what stands out.

Conclusion: Fairy Food and Scarcity

Fairy food, as conceived of in Newfoundland folklore, is an intriguing and telling field of interest. In approaching this article as a study of food shortage and need, I found myself frequently surprised by the absence of this connection where I expected it to be, and its presence where I had not foreseen it. While I found other aspects of the intersection between fairies and food in Newfoundland to be indicative of other forms of hardship or crisis, a link between Newfoundland folklore of fairy encounters and community food crises will require more primary research to fully identify and understand. Stories in which the fairy folk played an antagonistic role generally did not focus on food as the primary factor in the encounter. On occasion, the fairy food could save a person from starving, but at a cost to the individual.

In the end, evidence of a link between scarcity and fairy food is tenuous based on the sources I consulted. What does stand out, however, is the lack of concern over scarcity or food shortage that is exhibited by the fairies themselves, who never seem to be on the verge of starvation. They may assist the lost by providing them with sustenance, or hinder those gathering berries, but their own status in relation to food is not explored. Perhaps the nearest hints as to the fairies' relationship with human food are in the changeling stories, where the changelings rarely eat or at least do not eat very well, one of the hints that they are not human (Rieti 1991: 127). In other cases, changelings eat too heartily, which along with their poor table manners gives them away, however, and so once again this is an unresolved matter and one that indicates a complex relationship (Rieti 1991: 130). Changeling lore in Newfoundland was often connected with or used to explain odd behavior, with one storyteller stating "they're always saying that about the odd ones," in reference to their being possible fairy changelings (Rieti 1991: 46).

There are many places in which knowledge of the dangers of the environment is important in stories of fairy encounters, yet some narratives do emphasize how well the people led astray know the area. This is another element that demands further attention, especially in contrast with the lack of stories pertaining to a maritime environment. Links with tension and social disruption are certainly clear and present. In addition, foods linked with danger are always interesting in the context of folklore, representing a tangled web of meanings that may illuminate the social frameworks from which they stem.

What is also evident is a sense of looking back on times when the landscape was seen as more dangerous. Even the emphasis on the threat posed by the fairies, as for instance in the CBC article describing the dangers of Newfoundland fairies, nonetheless confers a special status on the landscapes where fairy encounters could take place (Bulman 2019). The change in perception of wild foods such as berries is important to this study, as it also reflects major shifts in the perception of "wilderness." The descriptions of the past as a simpler time, when despite poverty, people were well provided for, does not necessarily indicate a desire to return to the previous way of life on the part of the storytellers. The ability to temporarily escape the present through stories is distinct from the desire to

return to another way of life. The popularity of a temporary escape to the wilderness in order to avoid the tyrannies of the urban or village environment is encapsulated in the view of berries, for instance, as symbolic of that goodness.

Perhaps the need for these stories is more complicated than we think. The connection between food and scarcity, as hinted at earlier in the ambiguities of “Peg Bearskin,” is not a straightforward contrast between abundance and lack. It can serve as a way of responding to anxieties about food security, as is seen in the role of bread as a finite shield between the fairy and human worlds. The symbolic role of a food item made within the home, and viewed as a staple for generations, is weightier when contrasted with the twisting paths of the wood. While fairy belief on the island is no longer as strong as it once was, fairy stories continue to be told, and in my own experience, told to outsiders as a point of pride in the beauty of Newfoundland. It is not a simple nostalgia that emerges from these narratives, nor a complete desire to break with the past. Rather, it is a reckoning with the difficulties and dangers of life in rural and remote parts of the island and a way of finding where mystery may have been fabricated to cover ugly truths, and where it might have existed on its own, possessing its own beauty which was perceived as being entwined in its wildness. Danger takes two different forms in views of the past as well as interpretations of fairy narratives. The first is of the perils of the environment, in which there is also a sense of fascination from our more sheltered and less dependent perspective. The second is that of human cruelty in which there is only sordid ugliness. The foods that this article explores, bread, berries, and fish, have a similarly multifaceted relationship with the past, representing by turns a sense of community and independence as well as isolation and repression. Neither fairies nor food ever represent a single thing, but together they form a picture of many contrasts that nonetheless coexist in a coherent and ever-unfolding body of lore

Notes:

¹ The name of the province is Newfoundland and Labrador; however, I will be investigating sources from the island of Newfoundland, and so will refer to it as such.

² In the story, the woman is shown three berries, two sweet, one bitter, and instructed not to eat the bitter one. This instruction goes unheeded. The sweet-tasting berries allow the birth of two conventionally beautiful girls, while the bitter-tasting one is the berry that produces Peg, who is big and hairy and considered unattractive (Tye and Greenhill 2020: 102).

³ This is a food made by the fairies and found in some English legends, and subsequently explained as various species of the fungus genus *Tremella*.

⁴ For an example of this, see *Childe Rowland*.

⁵ For exact locations, see Ghost Ships of Newfoundland and Labrador (MapHub).

⁶ In coastal Irish and Scottish lore in particular, selkies are seals who can shed their skins and appear as humans.

⁷ According to the 2016 census 259,460 individuals out of a population of 519,716 (49.9%) in Newfoundland and Labrador claim descent from the British Isles.

⁸ Changing fishing technologies led to overfishing, causing the Newfoundland and Labrador northern cod fishery to be shut down (Thomson and Ahluwalia: 2012).

⁹ The story tells of a woman who was popular in her community, and had gone berry-picking, but not returned. Searchers went out and left oranges in the woods in hopes that she would find them, and when she was located, quite well, a few days later, she said that it was the oranges that had helped her, but that it was fairies who had brought them (Jarvis 2005: 47).

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