

## **Junior Skeptic 36: The Cottingley Fairies** **Supplemental Material**

Discussion by Jason Loxton (2010)



Editor's Note: Junior Skeptic's in-depth research always uncovers more information than can be squeezed into the pages of the main story. In this case, guest contributor Jason Loxton has provided some detailed further discussion for readers who have already read the issue and who would like to dig deeper.

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### **Photography Expert Harold Snelling's Puzzling Endorsement**

The endorsement of world-famous author Arthur Conan Doyle was enough to get a hearing for the Cottingley fairy photographs, but convincing a skeptical public would require more than just Doyle's fame and reputation. Even in the years before Photoshop, it was easy to fake a photo, and Doyle knew that accusations of trick photography would be the first line of attack from his critics. To defend himself (and the fairies), Doyle turned to Harold Snelling.

Harold Snelling was a British specialist in altered photos, with over thirty years experience in the photographic industry. He was apparently pretty good at his job. In a glowing reference, one of Snelling's former employers told Edward Gardner that "what Snelling doesn't know about faked photography isn't worth knowing."

That's a pretty good reference... and one that Gardner and Doyle apparently took literally. Even though Snelling was the only expert who examined the photos that would go on record endorsing them as the real thing, Gardner and Doyle went ahead and promoted them

anyway. (Gardner does refer to another, mysterious, anonymous expert who endorsed the photos, but who knows who this was, or whether they were qualified to say anything at all.)

In his own words, here's what Snelling thought of the photos:

“These two negatives are entirely genuine and unfaked photographs of single exposure, open air work, show movement in all fairy figures, and there is no trace whatever of studio work involving card or paper models, dark background, painted figures, etc. In my opinion they are both straight, untouched figures.”

What should we make of this?

Snelling certainly was qualified to vouch for the photos. But the fact that he did, when no other expert would endorse them, and when even a non-expert can see there is something suspicious about them, is a puzzle. (More puzzling still, Snelling worded his endorsement to specifically rebut technical criticism from other qualified experts. So, he was aware of existing skeptical arguments.)

Why did he do it?

Snelling made a fair bit of money producing reprints for Doyle and Gardner over the years, but he staked his reputation on their genuineness before any real money was on the table. So, a financial motive doesn't feel right.

One possible explanation, offered recently by the Editor of the *British Journal of Photography*, is that, in their eagerness to gain hard evidence, Doyle and Gardner misread Snelling's endorsement. In this interpretation, they read Snelling's testimonial as saying that the photos showed actual fairies, when all he was really saying was that they weren't faked in a particular set of ways (leaving the door open for them to have been faked in other ways).

But this doesn't make sense either. When Gardner brought up criticism he'd received about the photos from other experts, Snelling took him through a step-by-step explanation, with reference to other faked photos, of the technical reasons why he was convinced they were genuine.

A quote from Gardner's son, a fairy believer who assisted his father in the investigation, adds another layer of complexity to his mystery:

“Almost certainly poor Snelling would have been considered mad. He was an untidy little man with unruly hair and large staring eyes, and his fingers were habitually stained with photographic chemicals.”

Harold Snelling remains an unresolved mystery in this story. We know almost nothing about him—other than what Doyle, and Gardner and his son have told us—and modern historians have reached a dead-end trying to learn more. He was apparently a private man who spent most of his life in his darkroom. With no other evidence, the truth about his character and motivation could remain there forever: in the dark.

Mad, gullible, or secretly motivated to lie? The truth was buried with Snelling.

## Evidence for Photographic Trickery

The original two Cottingley fairy negatives that Edward Gardner received from Elsie’s mother were nowhere near good enough for publication or projection. The limitations of the Wright’s cheap camera (and of Elsie’s and Frances’ photographic skills) were obvious. Frances and the fairies looked fuzzy, and the photo of Elsie and the gnome was badly underexposed.

Gardner asked photographic expert Harold Snelling to do whatever he could to improve their sharpness and contrast, so long as he didn’t unnecessarily alter the photos in any way.

In no time at all, Snelling returned a set of new negatives and beautiful prints... perhaps a little too beautiful.

In the improved photo of Frances and the fairies (the only version ever released to the public until recently), the fairies were crisp and vivid, and even the subtlest details of their wings were visible. They looked great, but there was a problem: there is simply no way that the Wright’s camera could have picked up so much detail. (Some critics at the time pointed this out, but it wasn’t until recently, when test photographs were taken with the Wright’s actual camera, that this was confirmed.)

In 1920, before computers and Photoshop, there was only one possible source for the extra detail: a paint brush wielded by an expert in trick photography!

(In fairness, all of the details Snelling added probably had been present in the original scene that Elsie photographed, but he certainly ignored Gardner's instructions—and cheated!—when he added in by hand what the camera failed to capture.)

Snelling's also made a number of other improvements to the negatives, lightening some areas and darkening others, cleaning up minor blemishes, etc. These changes left behind a record that can clearly be seen in the negatives today, and there was nothing wrong with them (photographers make these sort of minor cosmetic changes to photos all the time today, even in newspapers).

Taken together, however, the changes Snelling made gave the images a weird artificial quality that led other experts (who only had a chance to look at the altered photos, not the original negatives) to wrongly conclude that everything in the photos, from the waterfall to the toadstools, had been faked.

Since Gardner had personally been to Cottingley and stood in the exact spot where the photos were taken, he and Doyle laughed off these criticisms as ridiculous, and the experts that made them as out to lunch. Unfortunately, this just left them with Snelling's opinion. And Snelling had already made up his mind: the photos were real.

## **Did a Psychic Crack the Case in 1920?**

Arthur Conan Doyle believed in fairies, but he was smart enough to know that photos could be (and often were) faked. So, when Gardner showed him Elsie and France's first two photos, he wisely decided to check out the authenticity of the photos for himself. To back up Snelling's expert opinion, Doyle took prints and negatives to photographic experts at Kodak (who were skeptical, but couldn't prove the photos were fakes), and then, for a second opinion, he sent some prints to... a psychic!

By this point in his life, Doyle was a deep believer in the paranormal, so going to a psychic for advice wasn't a strange thing for him to do. What was strange is the response he received.

According to Doyle, the psychic reported that there was reason to fear the photos were a fraud. The psychic reported that he saw the negatives being tampered with by "a fair man,

short, with his hair all brushed back, in a room filled with all sorts of cameras and other queer machines and devices.”

Does this scene sound familiar?

It did to Doyle!

He knew that Gardner had commissioned Snelling to fix up the original negatives, so Doyle reasoned that the psychic had tapped into that scene, mistaking Snelling’s innocent alterations for fraud. Not only did this scenario explain away the psychic’s warning, it provided evidence for additional paranormal powers. For Doyle this was a two-for-one deal: he now had evidence for fairies and psychic ability!

Since we now know that Snelling did even more to “fix” the photos than he was supposed to, adding details to the fairies’ wings, for example, the psychic’s reading sounds even more remarkable today. Could the psychic actually have had paranormal abilities?

This is where a little skeptical investigation helps!

Like most reports of psychic readings, Doyle’s account left out a lot of details. It’s true that the psychic did say the stuff about a man tampering with the photo (which was sort of right, but not amazing, since most photographers at the time were men), but he also said a lot of stuff that was completely wrong. For example, he reported that the man took the photo himself (wrong), wasn’t English (wrong), didn’t live in London (wrong), and was probably from Los Angeles or Denmark (wrong, and more wrong!).

So, taken as a whole, the psychic’s reading wasn’t very accurate at all. At least it wasn’t until Doyle edited out all the incorrect information. (Doyle isn’t alone in doing this. Selective recall is the main reason psychics often seem so convincing: people naturally remember the exciting correct stuff, the “hits”, and forget the boring wrong stuff, the “misses”, leading them to think a reading was much more accurate than it really was.)

As for the part the psychic did get right... Well, this is where the story takes a hilarious turn.

After recounting his (mostly wrong) “vision”, the psychic ended his letter to Doyle with a couple of quick, but damning observations: first, the photos were impossibly high resolution for a non-professional camera; and second (and more importantly), the fairies’ weren’t

blurry, unlike the waterfall in the background, which would be impossible, unless the fairies were standing still and posing, or fake.

That's a slam dunk debunk.

So, the psychic did crack the case, but it didn't take special powers—just an unbiased eye.

## The Mystery of the Changing Ages

In TV detective shows, it is often the little errors that give the bad guy away. This true in real-life investigation too. When you make up a story, it's usually easy to remember the general outline of events, but small details, like ages, dates, or numbers, can easily get mixed up when you retell the story later. This lack of consistency can be a very important clue that something is fishy with a tale... but not always.

Right after the Cottingley fairy story broke, critics noted an odd thing: Frances' and Elsie's ages suspiciously kept changing. (And they have continued changing in books and articles ever since!)

Of course, between the time the first and second set of fairy photos were taken, the girls' ages really did change—after all, three years had passed. But this doesn't explain all the inconsistency. Depending on whom you read, Frances' age is given as 8, 9, or 10, and Elsie's as 13, 15, 16, or 17, when the first photo was taken.

Is this a gotcha clue that reveals the truth of the Cottingley mystery? Nope. The answer is far less exciting than that: birthdays, poor memories, and sloppy research.

Between taking their first and second fairy photographs, both of the girls celebrated birthdays. So, Frances and Elsie were 9 and 15 when they took the first photos, and 10 and 16 years old when they took the second. Because both photos were published together, reporters have tended to simplify things by giving a single age for each girl when discussing both photos, arbitrarily choosing either their pre- or post-birthday ages (or sometimes giving a mixed-up combination of both!).

This explains a lot of the mystery. The rest of the variation in ages seems to just be the result of innocent error. (Even Elsie and Frances sometimes got their ages wrong in later interviews. But by this point over sixty years had passed, so this is understandable.)

There's a lesson here for skeptical investigators: it's true that liars will often vary their stories slightly, but so do people telling the truth! Sometimes people just forget or make mistakes.