

# ON A PROLETARIAN SOIL

## PART II: TREE

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Leave the Sculpture Workshops by the front entrance or main gate. Cross the road. Turn right and walk to the first turning on your left. Go down this road. Keep going. Past the small houses and on to where the trees begin. On your right is a wood, largely coniferous. It is a dark wood with acidic soil, Fly Agaric grow there. On your left is a wood of mainly birch, thickly coated in a light green lichen giving them a shaggy appearance, *Usnea subfloridana*, beard-moss. At the start of this wood, as you pass on the road there is a small hut and old caravan that seem semi-derelict, possibly used as storage. Within the woods are a various small pathways and a trail of painted stones and cairns created by local school-children. Keep to the road and go through the gates of the Clova Estate.

Keep going. The wood on the left will become thicker, greener. On the right will be harvested woodland and recently erected high fences. You will pass a green wooden park bench, placed at an angle, on a small slope higher than the road where a path passes by it. Do not turn down this path, continue down the road. Another 20 yards or so on you will come to point where the main road continues and another curves off to the right. Opposite this curving road, in the woods on the left you will see a track that has become heavily grown over. Leave the road, enter the woods and follow this track.

Walking down this track it is noticeable that on the right there are many mature beech trees and some oaks whilst on the left are mostly younger birch. The Ordnance Survey from 1901 shows that the track previously marked a boundary between the developed grasslands of the Clova Estate to the right and the undeveloped boggy heath of Cushnie Moss to the left.<sup>1</sup> Not far down this track we came across the remains of a pheasant that had been got by a fox. Today, as in 1901, the Clova Estate breeds game birds for sport.<sup>2</sup>

Just beyond the birch trees the ground is covered in thick mosses which form small hillocks topped by bright green usnea moss. Tiny flies with long

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<sup>1</sup>The 1901 map can be viewed online at <http://maps.nls.uk/view/82859874>

<sup>2</sup>A "Pheasantry" is marked on the 1901 map.

wings hover over them. Meaty bracket fungi and beefsteak mushrooms grow upon fallen branches. Patches of cup lichen surround them. A number of path-ways run through the moss, each scattered with deer droppings and notable for the plants that grow within them. The fragile mosses being trampled down under-hoof whilst more succulent liverworts thrive upon the added nutrients of the excrement. The paths turn to rivulets of bracken water running between a second area of trees tangential to the road, interspersed with large hillocks of moss sprouting heavy over-hanging fringes. As the trees thin out again, the land abruptly drops a foot or so along the sharp geometric edge of old peat cuttings.

Back on the track running alongside Cushnie Moss, we pass a thicket of Rhododendron. Here also accompanied by a Small White butterfly, *Pieris rapae*. Not long after this we encountered a tree that had fallen across the path. Enough roots remained in the ground to keep the tree alive, the thickness of these suggesting that it had adapted to its current position. We clambered underneath the trunk near its base.

Some yards on from the fallen tree, the birch trees give way to mostly beech and rowan and the land to the left changes from bog-heath to firmer meadow. This marks the end of the Cushnie Moss. Pheasants can be heard amongst the trees. Duck calls in the distance. This stretch of land ends where the track meets a more substantial road coming down from the estate. We will follow this road later but first cross over and continue the route of the track. This will take you into an area of high grass surrounding a small reservoir with an island just off-centre. This does not appear on the 1901 map. It is home to ducks, moorhen, swans and water vole. A local small-holder dumps his excess barley and potatoes in the water here as food for them. This is a human-made and maintained 'wildness' in the midst of an agriculturally determined 'nature'. The reservoir is part of the water engineering that restrains the bog and has enabled fields to be raised upon its flushes. The water that springs from Coreen Woods ends up here.

On the far side of the reservoir are trees. Behind you an area of farm fields. There are some buildings not far from where the path comes from the road. You will have passed these on your right as you came towards the reservoir. The 1901 map shows far more than there are today. Whereas the fields of today are large and open, the map shows a series of small strips labelled the *Cloak Crofts*.<sup>3</sup> Built for workers on the estate, their fires would have burned the peats cut from Cushnie Moss, a practice that only stopped in Lumsden some time in the 1990s.

Go back down to the crossroads, turn right and follow the road. Both sides of this are lined with beech and sycamore. Whereas the path along Cushnie Moss had the feel of a liminal journey, along the border between

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<sup>3</sup>On other maps these are labelled Clova Crofts.

two realms, here we are given a sense of procession. This was once the main entrance to the Clova Estate. Here too there are trees fallen across the road, some with enough roots still in the ground to live. Here there are pot holes and puddles all across the road, some black with rotten leaves. The road leads past Birkbower, a farm with buildings and fields to the right of the route.

Birkbower Mill was established as a permanent mill for the Clova Estate, powered by the constant water supply of a small river. Other smaller, seasonal mills existed across the various crofts and small-holdings, interposed along drainage systems that helped dry-off the land for cultivation. When the rains came, water coursed through their channels, powering the grinding wheels for an hour or two. As the mills have fallen out of use the drainage systems have also declined and the reservoir has taken their place.

Moving past the farm buildings the route crosses a bridge that goes over a main road leading back into Lumsden. On my previous visits this bridge had been derelict and uncrossable. Now you can cross. You could continue on this route, walking between the two tall lines of beech towards a stone gateway that marks the original entrance to the estate. We are not going there. Leave the road and clamber down the slope to your right. Be careful as you go because the slope is full of holes. Further down, excavated tree roots have been stripped of their bark. A complex of warrens stretches beneath the trees from the road to the field on the far side.

Stand at the bottom of the slope with the road behind you, the bridge to your right and the farm fields in front. Over to your left is a burn running between the slope and the field. Ahead of you are mostly pine trees. Branches growing low to the ground. Crouch down to the ground and go under, bending low or on hands and knees. When you get through stand up again. You are in a kind of clearing with an oak tree not quite in centre. We are here.

This is not the grand oak of Druidical legend. There is no wide-girthed trunk rising stately from the earth. There is, instead, a chaotic splay of trunks and branches breaking off in different directions from the root.

Like the Cushnie Moss and the stones by Coreen Woods, the tree here is home to many different species of fungi, lichen, insect and plant. There are creatures that feed upon the leaves of the oak and others from the bark and from the wood. Patches of damp white fungi spew across its trunk. The ground is covered in a thick layer of leaves, twigs and pine cones, rotting, mulching and being broken down by worms into a rich vegetable mold. Sprouting from this are large oily black mushrooms. Smaller, brown caps sprouting over stalks trace the pattern of roots radiating out from the tree deep within the fabric of the soil. Woven with strands and knots of stringy rhizomes, patterned with dusty spores, and layered with thin, moist viscous films. The ground holds these trees into the air and feels solid beneath our feet yet it moves — constantly, imperceptibly, voraciously:

For most of its life, a myxomycete exists as a thin, free-living mass of protoplasm. Sometimes this mass is several centimetres across and, as the name slime mold suggests, viscous and slimy to the touch. The mass of protoplasm, which is called a plasmodium (plural: plasmodia), can change form and creep slowly over the substrate upon which it occurs, much like a giant amoeba. As it moves, it feeds by engulfing bacteria and tiny bits of organic matter, another animal-like feature.<sup>4</sup>

Slime molds, the myxomycetes, were first collected and identified by the Reverend William Cran, the same Reverend Cran who explored the Rhyne chert. Cran collected his mold samples from the barks of local trees.<sup>5</sup>

There are various reasons why an oak may grow in this splayed manner. This is commonly caused by fungal or insect colonies harboured in the roots or branches. Oak apples, or bud galls as they are also known, are created by the larvae of gall-wasps, *Biorhiza pallida*, who lay their eggs within the bark.<sup>6</sup>

One of the first recorded accounts of such parasitic species was that made by John Turbeville Needham (1713–1781) who, in 1743, observed crushed “smutty Wheat” under a microscope. He describes extracting a dry white fibrous substance from within a grain that he had moistened with water:

... to my great Surprise, these imaginary fibres, as it were, separated from each other, took Life, moved irregularly, not with a progressive, but twisting Motion, and continued to do so for the Space of Nine or Ten Hours ...<sup>7</sup>

Needham was exploring a world that had been opened up by the advances in modern microscopes produced by the cloth merchant and self-taught scientist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723). Van Leeuwenhoek was fascinated with the life that crawled among the dust and fibres of his wares and in the saliva of his own and other people’s mouths. The drawings van Leeuwenhoek made from this obsession were amongst our first visual records of microbial and single-cell lifeforms, and numerous species can be identified within them. The living, twisting fibres that Needham describes were a species of nematode, commonly known as roundworm. Needham’s work remained largely marginal, and was eventually discredited. The extent and significance of nematode lifeforms only became fully accounted for

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<sup>4</sup>Stephenson and Stempen 1994, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Stephenson and Stempen 1994, p. 55. Lister 1938 - Lister G., 1938 The Rev. William Cran and his scientific work. *Journal of Botany* 76:319-327). See: <http://www.mycologia.org/content/95/4/565.full>

<sup>6</sup>The whole life cycle of the of gall-wasp is explained and illustrated in Darlington 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Flegg 1985, p. 7.

by Nathan Cobb, a researcher with the United States Department of Agriculture in the 1910's studying causes of blight and pestilence. As a species, Cobb found the nematode spread across all ranges of life, from smutty wheat to animal and human intestines, adapting itself to any crevice or pocket of being:

... if all the matter in the universe except the nematodes were swept away, our world would still be dimly recognizable, and if, as disembodied spirits, we could then investigate it, we should find its mountains, hills, vales, rivers, lakes, and oceans represented by a film of nematodes. The location of towns would be decipherable, since for every massing of human beings there would be a corresponding massing of certain nematodes. Trees would still stand in ghostly rows representing our streets and highways. The location of the various plants and animals would still be decipherable, and, had we sufficient knowledge, in many cases even their species could be determined by an examination of their erstwhile nematode parasites.<sup>8</sup>

### Touching the Spring of the Air

Needham argued that the creatures he had seen were evidence of spontaneous generation, of life creating itself from nothing. His discoveries were controversial and, as a Catholic priest whose work challenged Christian teaching, he was forced to retract his findings by the Church.<sup>9</sup> In a certain sense, however, his work was also a challenge to established scientific orthodoxy. For, following from his Catholic teaching, his experiment sought to reassert the importance of Aristotle at a time when the new experimental systems of scientific method had supplanted this tradition. Spontaneous generation was a process that Aristotle attributed to the autochthonic creatures, such as worms, maggots and crabs, that he believed were born from mixtures of earth and water or from flesh decomposing back into these constituents.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Cobb 1914, p. 472.

<sup>9</sup>Flegg 1985, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>"Animals and plants come into being in earth and in liquid because there is water in earth, and air in water, and in all air is vital heat so that in a sense all things are full of soul. Therefore living things form quickly whenever this air and vital heat are enclosed in anything. When they are so enclosed, the corporeal liquids being heated, there arises as it were a frothy bubble." — Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, Book III, Part 11. It was ultimately the work of Louis Pasteur in the 19th century that disproved the theory of spontaneous generation. Pasteur demonstrated that such lifeforms grew from spores carried in the air and whose growth could be stopped through the treatment of heat.

Aristotelian method largely based its findings on observation and comparison, deriving knowledge in terms of how ideal processes and forms are represented within the material world as it is found. In the 17th century a new approach initiated by Francis Bacon and consolidated by Robert Boyle began to replace this. Boyle, who described Aristotle as “a dark and dubious writer,”<sup>11</sup> sought to derive knowledge through intervening in that material world.<sup>12</sup> Devices such as the air pump, designed by Boyle’s assistant Richard Hooke, enabled someone to control a small physical environment and change its material conditions at will. By adding or removing specific elements from the environment, we can understand these in ways that are not possible from ordinary observation. In removing air from a glass bulb, and thereby attempting to create a vacuum, the air pump could be used to determine the constitution of the air itself.

Nature abhors a vacuum in the Aristotelian account, which argued that as the vacuum was created in the glass bulb, other elements would move in to fill it, either through an innate sensitivity within these elements, that they ‘knew’ there was a vacuum to fill, or due to external sentient forces ordering them, a theory known as hylozoism. Boyle was satisfied with neither theory. From his experiments with the air pump, Boyle came to develop what we now call the Boyle’s Law, that the pressure and volume of a gas are inversely proportional to one another, the greater the pressure the smaller the area a gas will occupy. For Boyle, air was not a vital substance, possessing its own animate sensibility nor were the elements guided by some occult force. The air was rather a material, composed of what Boyle called “corpuscles” that responded mechanically to their surrounding conditions, air under pressure being like a “heap of little bodies, lying upon one another, as may be resembled to a fleece of wool.”<sup>13</sup>

Boyle’s method sought to establish knowledge through an objective, impartial process. The air pump was central to his method because it enabled a practical demonstration to be repeated in front of different people who may witness and thereby verify his findings. Yet, despite, or perhaps indeed directly because of this, the new experimental method was highly political. Boyle was a founding member of The Royal Society established in 1660, the same year in which he published his account of the new method: *New Experiments Physico-Mechanicall, Touching the Spring of the Air, and its Effects, (Made, for the Most Part, in a New Pneumatical Engine)*. The Society was one of the first new institutions appointed by the restored monarchy under Charles II in the wake of the Civil War and Interregnum.

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Shapin and Schaffer 2011, p. 322.

<sup>12</sup>For a comparison of the two approaches – observation versus intervention – and the deeper philosophical issues they raise see Hacking 1983.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Potter 2001, p. 30.

Following the Civil War the established order of Church and Crown had been overthrown. A multiplicity of radical religious movements had arisen advocating free religion, the commonality of all humankind under God, and direct communion with the divine as a World Spirit imminent in all Creation. Referred to variously as Anabaptists, enthusiasts and sectaries by their detractors, these groups included the Quakers, Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Muggletonians, and Fifth Monarchists.<sup>14</sup> These gained influence through the appointment of commoners as officers in the New Model Army shaping an egalitarian republicanism more radical than that of Cromwell and the Rump Parliament. Levellers and Diggers claimed land for the people and challenged existing notions of property.<sup>15</sup> Women, who found greater equality with men in groups such as the Quakers, rose up to demand a political voice, petitioning and rioting on parliament.<sup>16</sup> A new “Free State and Commonwealth” was proclaimed in broadsheet sermons and the constitutional articles of the republican army.<sup>17</sup> Yet this promise of a New England did not last long. As dissatisfaction with Cromwell’s rule rose and the Commonwealth fell, monarchy was restored.

Whereas his father, Charles I, was beheaded by the republican government, Charles II had escaped the revolution and returned to the throne by hiding in an oak tree in Boscobel woods. The event is celebrated as Oak Apple Day on which supporters of the Restoration adorn themselves in oak apples. In the new parliamentary monarchy led by a king scraped from the bark of a tree it became essential that the state regain control over knowledge and nature.

Boyle’s method and its acceptance by the Crown was important in this context for it offered a new practice of knowledge in which, it could be claimed, authority lay within the consensus of men rather than tradition or institution. It promised a more democratic concept of knowledge. Just as the post-revolutionary Parliament claimed to keep the King to account and validate his rule, so too did the impartial observers of Boyle’s experiment account for and validate his findings. Yet, like the Restoration Parliament, Boyle’s method was only partly democratic. Women, children, and workers were all excluded as reliable witnesses for they had, in Boyle’s view, insufficient emotional modesty.<sup>18</sup>

Boyle’s new science integrated a complex set of conflicting perspectives and legacies. In positing a mechanical basis to the movement of air, Boyle’s

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<sup>14</sup>See Hutton 1990, pp. 30–44.

<sup>15</sup>The classic work on this is Hill 1975.

<sup>16</sup>See accounts in Potter 2001, pp. 54–60 and Hutton 1990, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup>Examples of the new constitutional articles included the *Heads of Proposals and Instrument of Government*. See Hutton 1990, p. 62 and Bostridge 1997, p. 273.

<sup>18</sup>The role that attitudes towards class and gender had in shaping Boyle’s scientific practice is examined in Potter 2001. For its relation to the political context see Shapin and Schaffer 2011.

hypothesis was, for its time, dangerously materialistic. Boyle, who was both a Royalist and devout Christian, had to ensure that his theory did not confirm the atheistic views that were gaining ground amongst younger intellectual circles. In rejecting Aristotelian physics, which at that time had the support of the Church, Boyle had looked to the methods of the alchemists and the work of Paracelsus, Campanella and Helmost. The philosophical and spiritual framework within which these figures worked, however, shared much common ground with the animistic and vitalist tendencies within the religious sects that had led the populist revolt against the Crown.<sup>19</sup>

The strongest political challenge to Boyle did not, however, come from the insurgent populist movements but from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Just as Hobbes rejected both an independent clergy and the various populist sects who held authority separate from the head of state, so too did he reject the notion of an independent scientific community that could establish its own authority over knowledge. Furthermore, for the new experimental science, knowledge of nature was built not on absolute facts but on probable inferences that only held authority through the common beliefs of a body of people who shared common practices.<sup>20</sup> Under Hobbes' political theory, society could only be kept in order if there was one, absolute ruler to hold authority over all – the Leviathan. If society was to be prevented from falling into the chaos of nature that, for Hobbes, characterised the Civil War and Republic, it must be based on rule-following rather than belief.

In response to these tensions, Boyle developed a form of practical philosophy that sought to be rigorously factual and materially-based in its account of the world yet which derived coherence through God's divine providence. His findings on the behaviour of air under pressure were presented within the framework of his corpuscular theory of matter. This drew on the atomism of Epicurean philosophy, arguing that all matter was composed of small 'bodies' that moved together. The character of that motion derived from the physical form of these bodies and how they interacted in a purely mechanical manner rather than through an inherent spirit or soul within matter, such as animists and proponents of hylozoism argued. The composition of these mechanisms was, however, determined by God who put them into motion yet left them to pursue their own course except where providence required intervention. This excluded a notion of animistic vitalism within

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<sup>19</sup>In an unpublished manuscript written in the form of a dialogue, Boyle discusses using the philosopher's stone to conjure spirits, arguing that they can be found in air and water. See Potter 2001, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup>"Boyle proposed that matters of fact be established by the aggregation of individuals' beliefs. Members of an intellectual collective had mutually to assure themselves and others that belief in an empirical experience was warranted. Matters of fact were the outcome of the process of having an empirical experience, warranting it to oneself, and assuring others that grounds for their belief were adequate." – Shapin and Schaffer 2011, p. 25.



matter whilst at the same time rejecting the pure randomness of existence proposed by sceptics and atheists, for Boyle only providence from God gave meaning to the contingency of life's experiences.<sup>21</sup>

What gave Boyle's concept of providence particular significance was that he gave it an empirical basis. Just as the apparatus of the air pump let us examine the workings of the air, Boyle believed that phenomena from folk culture and superstition, such as second sight, gave us evidence of the spiritual acting in the world as material presence rather than occult force and from which proof of God's intervention could be shown. Placing such phenomena within his own philosophical framework would both challenge the atheists whilst also denying the authority of mystic groups in determining their meaning.

### Of the Lychnobius People

Boyle was the seventh son of the Earl of Cork who acquired estates in Ireland as part of the Tudor plantations under which land was confiscated by the English Crown. Boyle was a supporter of Gaelic education, and it was through his funding of an Irish Gaelic Bible that his story would cross with that of another seventh son, a minister from Aberfoyle named Robert Kirk. Kirk produced the first translation of the psalms into Scots Gaelic and contributed to the *Dictionariolum Trilingue* of John Ray. Ray was both a parson and naturalist who in 1667 was elected a fellow of the Royal Society. In 1689–90 Kirk came to London to oversee the printing of Boyle's Bible and whilst there began work on a collection of supernatural beliefs and experiences he had gathered from his parishioners in Balquhider and Aberfoyle. He completed the collection after returning to Aberfoyle but died shortly afterwards in 1692, his body found on Doon Hill, Aberfoyle, dressed in his night shirt.<sup>22</sup> The work lay unpublished until Walter Scott brought out an edition in 1815 under the title: *The Secret Commonwealth or an Essay on the Nature and Actions of the Subterranean (and for the most part) Invisible People heretofore going under the names of Fauns and Fairies, or the like, among the Low Country Scots as described by those who have second sight, 1691*. This was one of the first and most extensive collections of such material and in it Kirk coined a new term: the 'fairy tale'.

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<sup>21</sup>The importance of divine providence as a concept in 16th century English life is explored in Bostridge 1997. Boyle believed that his recovery from childhood illness had been guided by providence, Bostridge 1997, p. 38.

<sup>22</sup>There are accounts of Kirk's life in Kirk 2007, Henderson and Cowan 2001, Henderson 2016 and Hunter 2001.

The descriptions that Kirk gives of fairies are notable in that they foreground the physical, material qualities of fairies, as though he were a naturalist describing a newly found species whom he calls the *lychnobius* (night dwelling) people.<sup>23</sup> For Kirk, fairies do not occupy a magical or spiritual realm, but one congruent with own. Whilst separate in a material sense, like that of fish in water, they are able to move between their domain and ours, just as otters and seals move between the sea and the land. In this sense, Kirk's fairies were no less fanciful than Needham's "imaginary fibres" which took life and moved. Just as van Leeuwenhoek's microscope had revealed a hitherto unknown domain of life, Kirk had argued that such new optical devices would reveal the world of the Invisible People not as ancient superstition but as contemporary, empirical fact.<sup>24</sup> Prior to Needham and Pasteur's discoveries, it was the fairy who was blamed for blighting crops<sup>25</sup> and, prefiguring Cobb's description of the nematode, the fairy occupies every crevice of being:

Their bodies of congealed air are sometimes carried aloft, otherwhiles grovel in different shapes, and enter in any canny or cleft of the earth (where air enters) to their ordinary dwellings, the earth being full of cavities and cells and there being no place or creature but is supposed to have other animals (greater or lesser) living in or upon it as inhabitants and no such thing as a pure wilderness in the whole universe.<sup>26</sup>

In a sermon from 1672, he speculates that fairies are a species of the air who can operate on, what Boyle might call, the corpuscular properties of matter:

They are Creatures, that have not so much of a body as *flesh* is, as *froth* is, as a *vapor* is, as a *sigh* is, and yet with a touch they shall molder a rocke into lesse Atomes, then the sand that it stands upon ...<sup>27</sup>

Boyle's interest in second sight drew directly from Scottish folk sources like those of Kirk. This was a living phenomena through which current events were experienced. In 1678 Boyle met with Lord Tarbat of Cromarty. Tarbat provided the account of a Highlander out cutting peat who experienced a vision of English cavalry riding down on him from the hills. Several

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<sup>23</sup>Kirk 2007, p. 62.

<sup>24</sup>Kirk 2007, p. xix, 50.

<sup>25</sup>... they oftimes occasion great ricks of corn not to bleed so well (as they call it) or prove so copious by very far as was expected by the owner." — Kirk 2007, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup>Kirk 2007, p. 6–7.

<sup>27</sup>Kirk 2007, p. xvii.

months later the English did indeed appear as Cromwell's army entered into Scotland.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Kirk's collection includes episodes in which people met or spoke directly with relatives who had been taken to the new colonies and of a "Scottish seer banished to America."<sup>29</sup>

The theme of colonial expansion and conquest shapes accounts of the fairies who, in a number of texts, are described as an ancient people driven underground by a newer race – mirroring the process of plantation through which Ireland and the Americas were colonised.<sup>30</sup> Kirk describes how the landscape shows signs of "tillage" where the fairy folk had once ploughed the land that we now inhabit. Whilst displaced the fairies nevertheless find ways to benefit from the work that humans do.<sup>31</sup> The new colonial order is not so absolute.

It is in this sense that one of the most unique aspects of Kirk's text gains significance. For whereas fairies are normally described as inhabiting a kingdom and possessing a form of aristocracy, as in Shakespeare and Spenser, Kirk describes the fairy folk as "having a Commonwealth, Laws and Oeconomy,"<sup>32</sup> and of having "no discernable religion, love or devotion towards God."<sup>33</sup> To an extent, the *Secret Commonwealth* can be read as both a natural history and political text or, like the *Athenaion Politeia*, a natural history of a particular political species, the fairy as *zōon politikon*. For Aristotle, ants and bees were *zōon politikon* as were humans. Whilst the term commonwealth did not exclusively denote a republic, under Cromwell's rule the term replaced that of Kingdom and, as attested by Lord Tarbat's Highlander, Scotland and Ireland became, by way of Cromwell's army, part of the Commonwealth of England. In the era of the Restoration, the notion of a fairy commonwealth might therefore suggest a conflation of a colonised people, the Gael, with a 'failed' political order, republicanism.

Such a relation between the supernatural and insurgent politics was common in the 16th century. Meric Casaubon in *Of Credulity and Incredulity in things Natural, Civil, and Divine* (1668) and Joseph Glanvill in *Sadacusimus*

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<sup>28</sup>Hunter 2001, p. 51–53.

<sup>29</sup>Kirk 2007, p. 42

<sup>30</sup>Examples include Bishop Corbet in the 17th century and Archibald Maclaren *The Fairy Family, a series of Ballads and Metrical tales illustrating The Fairy Faith of Europe* (1856), Folklore society: David MacRitchie *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890) and *Fians, Fairies and Picts* (1893). See Gere 1997, p. 68.

<sup>31</sup>"We then (the more terrestrial kind), having now so numerously planted all countries, do labour for that abstruse people as well as for ourselves. Albeit when several countries were uninhabited by us, these had their easy tillage above ground as we now, the print of whose furrows do yet remain to be seen on the shoulders of very high hills, which was done when the champaign ground was wood and forest." – Kirk 2007, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup>From Kirk's diary, Kirk 2007, p. xv.

<sup>33</sup>A similar argument would be made by a later folklorist, Donald A MacKenzie in his *Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk-Life* (1935), claiming that in Scottish tradition the fairies had no king or queen. See Henderson and Cowan 2001, pp. 65–66.

*Triumphatus* (1681) both made direct comparison between the people's religious movements and witchcraft.<sup>34</sup> For them, the demand that society be reconstituted through a new social contract, as made by groups such as the Levellers, was directly related to the contract with the Devil through which one became a witch.<sup>35</sup> Within the witch trials, under both Puritan and Royalist rule, it was the evidence of a contract, of a voluntary pact with the Devil, that was the key condemning factor.

Kirk himself supported the witchcraft laws and in the *Secret Commonwealth* he does not seek to elicit either direct sympathy nor condemnation of the fairy whose moral or political character was at best ambiguous. What the text does do, however, is to suggest that there can be both good and bad forms of supernatural power. Those abilities that one could be born with, such as second sight, were 'good' whereas those that were acquired through artifice, such as witchcraft or those deliberately sought from the fairies, were 'bad'.<sup>36</sup>

Like the dispute between Royalists and Republicans, the decisive point was that between a body empowered by nature versus a body empowered by contract.

In this regard, however, the *Secret Commonwealth* does not resolve into a simple political reading. The needs and concerns of those who were Kirk's sources, which may well have conflicted with his own aims, filter through. On the one hand, Kirk's account of the lychnobius people reinforced a reactionary political system within the human realm, yet within that account the fairies, and those who witnessed and interacted with them, especially those who were women, children and workers, constituted a contrary *politeia* that transversed species and matter.

## Mutual Affinities of Organic and Inorganic Beings

In 1451 a group declaring themselves as "servants of the Queen of the Fairies" raided the Duke of Buckingham's deer park at Penshurst. Their faces blackened with coal dust, they carried off deer to feed their families.<sup>37</sup> This was one act in a long history of such protests in which impoverished peasantry and workers claimed land and resources taking back what had once been theirs and demanding a just distribution of nature's welfare.<sup>38</sup> Often

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<sup>34</sup>For Casaubon see Bostridge 1997, pp. 55, 59 and for Glanvill see Bostridge 1997, p. 74–75.

<sup>35</sup>Potter 2001, p. 67.

<sup>36</sup>Henderson 2016, pp. 232, 243.

<sup>37</sup>Purkiss 2000, pp. 66–7.

<sup>38</sup>Hobsbawm 1998.

these were highly theatrical events, accompanied with banners and music and in later years deliberately publicised to the media.<sup>39</sup>

By aligning themselves with the Queen of the Fairies the protesters invoked an authority contrary to that of the Duke. Such protests were not the only context in which the fairy might be invoked as a form of counter-authority. Women charged with witchcraft might include tales of their encounters with fairies as part of their testimonies. This may have been done in order to satisfy the demands of those who forced confessions from the women. Having no option other than to give some account of supernatural occurrences, fragments of local folktales may have been woven into accounts of actual incidents.<sup>40</sup> Diane Purkiss proposes that this may also have been a way in which a woman might use the court as a means of making public that which could not normally be said, in which narratives other than those of the case in hand might be given a hearing.<sup>41</sup> Placed within a fairy tale these could be given a hypothetical quality that might protect the teller whilst, at the same time, the controlled environment of the court gave a procedural legitimacy to its telling. The tale became a hypothesis demonstrated to a public who could witness its evidence but which, unlike one of Boyle's experiments, would necessarily seek validation elsewhere. We might say that, like the air pump in Boyle's experiment, within this tale the fairy operates as an *apparatus* that gives authority to its performance.

Within Foucault's conception the apparatus is a formation that arises within a specific situation between different elements that can be physical – as in particular kinds of building structure such as the prison – performative – as in particular behaviours or legal enactments – and discursive – such as statements within scientific texts. As a mechanical instrument the air pump is an apparatus in the conventional sense but it also operates as part of a formation linking debates about the physical characteristics of the air to the changing relationship between science, the church and the state. This formation became manifest through the establishment of the Royal Society and through the public demonstration of experiments in which the ability to validate knowledge was related to privileges of gender and class. Within the texts and discourses of Boyle, Kirk, Casaubon and Glanvill, it is the fairy that operates within similar debates about science, nature and the existence of the spiritual, and how these inform the moral and political structure of society. In the Penshurst raid, the fairy operates within a formation that

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<sup>39</sup>The crofters who organised the deer raid on the Paicr estate on Lewis in 1887, for example, sent journalists alongside their raiders, see Buchanan 1996, pp. 48–53.

<sup>40</sup>Purkiss 2001.

<sup>41</sup>"I want to argue here that Scottish witches told stories about fairies not out of any straightforward belief in fairies ... but because the court settings allowed these women to talk about feelings, experiences, and desires that could never normally be given a hearing within their cultures." – Purkiss 2001, p. 81.

relates competing forms of authority — the folk, supernatural authority of the Queen of the Fairies versus the feudal authority of the Duke of Buckingham — to the ownership of land, class structures, and food. Within a court case, the fairy might operate between the institutional procedures of judgement under the law, the performance of ‘truth’ within a testimony and the unspoken knowledge of a community.

For Agamben, who expands and generalizes upon Foucault’s model, there is a constant, and often conflictual, relation between the living being (the organic) and the non-living apparatus (the inorganic) through which we mediate our relation to the world and perform processes of subjectivization and desubjectivization.<sup>42</sup> The air-pump creates the modern scientist as a privileged subject, but in doing so also desubjectivizes women, children and workers. The fairy could produce subjects that were transgressive, such as the deer raiders of Penshurst and the witch as enunciator of unspoken truths, but it may also operate to restore normative order, depending upon the particular formation it operated within. Indeed, in order to understand how the fairy may operate as a form of counter-authority, we need to understand this normative dimension, for the fairy was not purely a figure of transgressive freedoms, it also served a more restrictive, controlling role in human affairs. One area in which this applied was in control over reproduction, and the life and death of young children.

A child born out of wedlock was said to be a fairy child. A child who died soon after birth was said to have been stolen by the fairies. A child who was poorly, ‘abnormal’ or uncontrollable, was said to be a changeling who had been swapped in place of the mother’s true child. Such narratives might act as a form of consolation in the wake of an unavoidable loss or euphemistic ways of concealing illicit love or rape.<sup>43</sup> But these stories have consequences. In the case of fairy children and changelings, the mother may be advised to return the child to its people by leaving it on a hillside or at an incoming tide. By assigning the child to a non-human species the fairy tale provides a cultural framework in which to normalize infanticide. Here, the fairy is part of an apparatus through which the community (often the male elders of a community) decide which child shall live and which shall not, who shall be a mother and who shall not.<sup>44</sup> In this way women’s sex-

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<sup>42</sup>Agamben 2009.

<sup>43</sup>See accounts in Jones 1994, pp. 173–174, 181–182 and Purkiss 2000, pp. 73–6.

<sup>44</sup>In several of the tales Jones 1994 recounts, taken from Alexander Carmichael’s collections, it is an “old man” who, offering what is presented as kindly guidance, advises on what to do with the child. As Purkiss explains however the situation for unmarried mothers was often stark: “Infanticide was much more common than now, with no social security for unmarried mothers and plenty of social opprobrium. Forced to give birth in privies, and in out-of-the-way places, by the dung-heap, roadsides, woods, the mothers simply left their unwanted infants in them. Changelings too, though, similarly unwanted, were left in privies, on the dung-hill, by the side of the road.” — Purkiss 2000, p. 57.

uality and autonomy over sexual reproduction could be controlled and the fate of children who did not conform to physical or cognitive norms could be 'resolved'. The Down's Syndrome child, the intersex child, the autistic child might all be fairies and changelings.<sup>45</sup> This creates new supernatural subjects, the fairy and the changeling, through which the actual mother and child are desubjectivized.

Whereas the judgement of a court case, or the verification of experiment, operate as *formalized* functions, through which the outcome is, or appears to be, determined by socially agreed sets of rules and protocols, the fairy narrative appears to operate conversely as though part of *nature's way*. The child is 'returned' so as to restore the balance between humanity and nature that the encounter with a fairy has disturbed.

The restoration enabled by the fairy apparatus is that of the balance between the internal relations of sex and external relations of kinship structures, to which a new child is always potentially problematic as a new indeterminate component.<sup>46</sup> The fairy apparatus enables authority over life and death and it is from here that its power can be appropriated to challenge the authority of a duke or a court. For those who choose to keep affinity with the fairy, rather than withdrawing back into the 'balance' of nature, this formation draws power from its normative role whilst, at the same time, transgressing and breaking the normativization processes of the Foucauldian apparatus. Here a new territory is formed, a new commonwealth created.

Affinity with the fairy offers ontological alterity that is not so much outside of social norms but which resonates across them differently. This arises from the spatial and temporal dimensions of the fairy which are on the boundaries: between land and water, settlement and wilderness, during dawn and dusk and in the turning of the year at Yuletide.<sup>47</sup>

In one case Purkiss analyzes, that of Elspeth Reoch, a young Orkney woman tried for witchcraft in 1616, Elspeth recounts meeting two men at the lochside. One dressed in black who later transpires to be a dead kinsman who had been killed at dusk, and another dressed in plaids and green, the common garb of the fairy in Scottish culture as also described in Kirk's collection. The fairy offers Elspeth a gift through which she could learn of anything that her heart desires. To do this she must make an ointment from

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<sup>45</sup>Jody Norton traces the fairy changeling theme within the context of Trans experience and histories, Norton 2002. This has also been adopted by queer activist groups such as the Radical Fairies, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical\\_Faeries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical_Faeries) and <http://www.rfdmag.org>, and the Reclaiming movement initiated by Starhawk, see Salomonsen 2002.

<sup>46</sup>As Purkis explains this was particularly the case in Medieval Scottish society where the child might not be automatically accepted as kin until it was approved by the father, see Purkiss 2001, p. 86–87.

<sup>47</sup>Purkiss 2001, p. 83. A child born on Christmas Eve may have a particularly auspicious relationship to the fairy.

the sweat of a roast egg and rub it into her eyes with unwashed hands. She then becomes witness to knowledge of a young girl, aged 12, made pregnant by a married man who is also a relative. The girl asks Elspeth to help her get an abortion but is refused by the man who can do this. Two years later Elspeth herself, at age 14, becomes pregnant outside of marriage and, following the birth of her child, is visited at night by the man in black who forces her to lie with him.<sup>48</sup> After this she falls dumb and is unable to speak until interrogated for trial. As Purkiss explains, the story contains numerous liminal spaces, boundaries and transgressions: the lochside meeting, puberty, a death at sunset, the perspired water from inside an egg, touching food with unwashed hands. It is not that Elspeth finds freedom in these zones but rather that these are the space and time she must inhabit in order to make her truth known.

Boyle's apparatus of the air pump sought to stabilize competing theories in a definitive, empirical fact. Accused of witchcraft and, as an unmarried teenage mother, the epitome of an immodest and unreliable witness, Elspeth relies upon the fictive nature of the fairy in order to give presence to the evidence she wants her community to know but of which she could not speak:

... the essence of fairy beliefs is ambivalence, a play between belief and disbelief. The early modern populace did not 'believe' in fairies and they did not disbelief. This ontological instability or oscillation is not an accident, and it is not a reflection of the demise of fairy beliefs. ... The ontological dubiety of fairies is precisely what makes them natural and even inevitable symbols for other things that cannot be said, or cannot be acknowledged, or cannot be believed.<sup>49</sup>

Within the scientific demonstration and the court case, Boyle and Elspeth each seek an alignment between knowledge and nature that relies upon the mediation of an apparatus to bring that into being. Agamben outlines an etymological and conceptual chain of descent that traces the Foucauldian apparatus, back through Foucault's tutors Canguilhem and Hyppolite, to the distinction between natural and positive religion in Hegel. *Natural religion* being the immanent, experiential relation between human reason and the divine and *positive religion* being that based in rules and rituals — just as Hobbes proposed in regard to government. Agamben places the emergence of positive religion within the Christian tradition as arising from the debates in early Christianity over the being of God as either singular or as the Trinity. As a means to integrate and reconcile these competing ontologies, the

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<sup>48</sup>Purkiss 2001, pp. 84–7. I am following Purkiss in referring to Elspeth Reoch by her first name.

<sup>49</sup>Purkiss 2001, p. 83.



Church Fathers invoked the notion of *oikonomia*, that in substance God was one but in his management (*oikonomia*) over Creation, he was threefold: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, with his Son responsible for the *oikonomia* of man. The world, and affairs of man, are therefore ordered in terms of God's economy and providence.<sup>50</sup> In the 17th century, this notion is invoked in the defence of God's "Invisible Oeconomy" from the forces of the Devil, "a *Body Politick*" that encompassed witches, enthusiasts and insurrectionaries.<sup>51</sup> Those who claimed affinity with fairies were expelled from God's economy and thereby outside of society and nature. That, by the end of the 17th century, they should be conceived of as constituting a secret commonwealth may in a large part be due to the need to locate them in a distinct political realm separate from, and less legitimate than, the emerging sphere within which modern rational liberalism would evolve. The consequence of this however, perhaps conversely, has not been that we have stopped believing in fairies but rather that they are now here, amongst us.

Where once the fairy changeling child was left upon a hillside to die, now the fairy walk amongst us: the child born out of wedlock, the abnormal or uncontrollable child, the Down's Syndrome child, the intersex child, the autistic child, and many others. Contrary to what me might assume, this has itself been enabled by the materialist view of the body that developed in the wake of Boyle and Descartes and that enabled the separation of physical conditions and bodily capacities from moral values. Each step of this has been conflicted and contested and the forms it has taken have often been contradictory, seeking to eradicate that which it has made possible,<sup>52</sup> but this does not mean that the power of the fairy as political subject has diminished, consigned to the esoteric formulations that Victorian culture and New Age Gardnerian Wicca have bequeathed us or those of Walt Disney.<sup>53</sup> As the Penshurst raiders and Elspeth Reoch knew, to be fairy is to demand a life that others would deny. This is not the demand merely for representation and recognition within the limits of liberal identity politics. This is the demand for existence itself, a demand that reaches beyond the realms of human need and yet that we, of all species, may be the least able to realise.

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<sup>50</sup>Agamben 2009, pp. 8–12.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted from Matthew Hale and Joseph Glanvill in Bostridge 1997, p. 83 and p. 74.

<sup>52</sup>Eugenics can be seen as a return to the attribution of value to different kinds of bodies but this time measured in terms of nationalist aesthetics and capitalist productivity. See McRuer 2006 and Snyder and Mitchell 2006.

<sup>53</sup>Purkiss 1996 and Salomonsen 2002 both provide critiques of Gardnerian Wicca from a perspective which acknowledges the ways in which more recent Wicca-inspired feminist movements, such as those of Starhawk, have critically appropriated and re-constructed this. Similarly there are various configurations of the fairy as political subject in different Queer, Crip and neuro-atypical activisms which move beyond this. For an interesting counter-reading of Pixar and Disney animations in this regard see Halberstam 2011.

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