The Disruption Of Fairyland: Fairies Had Never Known How To Cry Until Then
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Abstract

This article considers the rise and fall of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite’s antipodean fairyland, her pictorial alternative to the masculinist vision of Australia at the nominal end of its colonial thrall dom to Britain. Unlike their mischievous and anachronistic antecedents from Victorian Britain, Outhwaite’s fairies were both virtuous and up-to-date, presenting an idealised picture of how post-federation Australia might have been, had it been left in girlish hands. Outhwaite not only gave Australian girls entrée to a modern and serene femocracy, but offered her contemporaries a practical alternative to the closed-shop of traditional landscape painting. However, the gendered integrity of Outhwaite’s fairyland was short-lived. Her images progressively show marauding boys disrupting its harmony, much as their colonising fore-fathers had callously disrupted Terra Australis. Just as these fanciful episodes may be considered visual metaphors for the social oppression of women and even for the bully-boy ruthlessness of colonisation itself, the same images may also figuratively describe the eventual appropriation by conservative male painters of this feminine art speciality and its subsequent erasure from the orthodox history of Australian visual culture.

Keywords

Ida Rentoul Outhwaite; fairies; fairyland

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The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. This pretty, fanciful, fairy story, with margins appropriately illuminated with tall poppies and butterflies and fairy-rings, is dedicated to a little girl who has not forgotten how to wonder.... We cling to our fairy tales until the price for believing them becomes too high – Then the cries ceased altogether, and the only sound the prince heard was the noise of his horse’s hoofs sounding in the hollow cave. Once more he endeavoured to check his career, but the reins broke in his hands, and in that instant the prince felt the horse had taken a plunge into a gulf, and was sinking down and down, as a stone cast from the summit of a cliff sinks down to the sea. “How it has come about I shall tell you as we go along,” said the herald. “The Princess Crede is the Queen of the Floating Island. And it chanced, once upon a day, when she was visiting her fairy kinsmen, who dwell in one of the pleasant hills that lie near Tara, she saw you with the high king and princes and nobles of Erin following the chase. One of those fairies was called Fairy Flight and the other one, Fairy Constance. Under the circumstances it was unanimously decided that whichever of the two fairies could show to the world the greatest wonder, that fairy should become Head of Fairyland. But it was to be a special kind of wonder, no moving of mountains or any such common fairy tricks would do. Fairy Flight decided that she would bring up a Prince who would charm one woman after another but would stay true to no woman. Fairy Constance decided to bring up a princess who was so enchanting that no man could meet her without fallin