

Trudy Last, *Remembering a Faery Tradition: A Case of Wicca in Nineteenth-Century America*. Boston: Golden Spindle Press. vii + 219 pp., \$14.95 (paperback).

In the 1890s, a book of Civil War stories told as narrative poems sold widely in America. The book, *The Veteran's Bride and Other Poems: Stories of the Late War*, was written by Alta Isadore Gould (b. 1851), a Michigan resident, and contains five long poems, including the melodramatic title piece, and eight shorter poems, with such titles as "Abraham Lincoln," "Our Flag," and "An Autumn Idyll."

Gould's favorite style was the rhyming couplet, as in these lines from "The Veteran's Bride": "The years of sixty-one and two / Were dreadful years for boys in blue. / Virginia's soil was damp and red / With blood contending armies shed." Her tribute to Abraham Lincoln begins, "High written on the scroll of fame / Stands Lincoln's loved and honored name." Gould's work is still in print, although, despite its commercial success, it has escaped becoming part of the American literary canon.

However, when Gould penned such lines as these about the Moon – "And I have been told that the soldiers oft read / their letters from home by the light which she said" – she was "self-consciously [creating] new texts by allegorizing ancient legends and teachings important to the memory of the Goddess" (5, emphasis added). This and other assertions inform Trudy Last's *Remembering a Fairy Tradition*, which attempts to turn Gould, her ancestor, into a one-woman self-conscious Pagan revival on the Michigan frontier. All that is lacking is substantive proof of Last's contention that "Wicca existed underground in the United States" prior to the 1950s, beyond the author's between-the-lines interpretation of Gould's texts.

By way of evidence Last writes, "Was Alta Gould a Witch, as well as a poet? Gould *was* part of a group of people who lived in western Michigan who together participated in the Underground Railroad" (17). (The "railroad" was an informal network of anti-slavery activists who helped runaway slaves from the pre-Civil War South flee to the Northern states and Canada.) Is there any meaningful connection between those two sentences? Does participation in an underground movement lead to participation in a clandestine Pagan religion? No, Last merely seeks to borrow the historical aura of the abolitionist, or anti-slavery, movement to burnish her gossamer thesis.

The use of "Faery Tradition" in the title is puzzling since Gould did not write about fairies, even in the sentimental Victorian sense. Perhaps it is meant to evoke W.Y. Evans-Wentz's *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*

(1911), a key text for those seeking “Pagan survivals” in British folklore. Several traditions of Pagan Witchcraft have adopted the term “Fairy” (or Faery or Faerie or Feri), such as one started by Mark Roberts of Dallas and Atlanta in the 1980, or the better-known, *huna*-influenced “Faerie Tradition” of Victor and Cora Anderson, strongest in the Bay Area of California. Last, however, makes no effort to connect her Fairy Tradition to any such as these. In fact, her own evidence that Gould, an apparent Protestant Christian who sets one of her key narrative moments in a Protestant church, is in actual fact conveying “a private matriarchal text” in order to “revitalize the Goddess” (24).

No further evidence is offered. No diaries, no letters, no memoirs. Needless to say, there are no fairies. Or Faeries. *Remembering a Fairy Tradition* simply projects the poetic theory of Robert Graves’ *White Goddess* onto Gould’s narrative poems. Had this book begun as a undergraduate paper in a course on literary criticism and theory, I could imagine the author approaching the professor with a question after class: “Instead of writing a paper using feminist criticism or Marxist criticism or ecocriticism, could I use a combination of Robert Graves’ Muse Goddess poetics and some archetypal psychology to discuss an obscure nineteenth-century author who happens to be one of my ancestors?” And the professor, who is merely trying to teach her students that “theory” is not a suspect term, as so many undergraduates seem to think, says, “Go ahead.”

Remembering a Fairy Tradition is truly a “grandmother story,” to use the common Wiccan shorthand for claims of Pagan family lineage. Although the type specimen of the “grandmother story” is English Witch Alex Sanders’ (1926–1988) claim of having been initiated at age thirteen by his grandmother, such claims have been commonplace in American Wicca as well. Grandmother stories play well in North America too. Although Last claims that “everything I know about Wicca I have learned from books” (v), she nevertheless ransacks family history for evidence of cultic activity. For example, “My father named his first daughter Gerry (pronounced Gary) ... it seemed strange to have a sister with a boy’s name I now believe this naming was in keeping with the Wiccan tradition that women (like the Goddess) are both male and female” (iii).

This book may, however, speak to one kind of Pagan reader – the one who truculently asserts that scholars of Paganism are out to destroy it. Most often it is Ronald Hutton who is their target, since he has the most impressive list of publications. Hutton has been accused of having a secret agenda to destroy Paganism, as being an “apologist for spiritual totalitarianism [Christianity],” of being a sophist and debunker, “densely equivocal, mis-sourced, and self-contradictory,” in the words of one Pagan blogger.

Most recently, Ben Whitmore, a New Zealander, has been promoting his book *Trials of the Moon: Reopening the Case for Historical Witchcraft*, with such challenging rhetorical questions as these: "Did paganism really die out centuries ago? Was witchcraft really no more than a fantasy? Were the Gods of Wicca really born out of the Romantic movement? Did Gerald Gardner lie about his initiation into witchcraft?" (See Ronald Hutton's essay, page 238, and Peg Aloi's review, page 262, this issue.) Anyone willing to answer, "No! No! Of course not!" to these questions might well be willing to grasp the slender straw offered by *Remembering a Fairy Tradition* and rephrase its subtitle as "Wicca existed in nineteenth-century America," thus gratifying the very human need for religious authenticity.

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