



# MUSHROOMS IN WONDERLAND



Was VICTORIAN FAIRY ART AND LORE INSPIRED BY ACTUAL  
EXPERIENCES WITH MIND-ALTERING FUNGI?

by *Mike Jay*

**T**he first well-documented hallucinogenic mushroom experience in Britain took place in London's Green Park on 3 October 1799. Like many such experiences before and since, it was accidental. A man subsequently identified only as 'J.S.' was in the habit of gathering small field mushrooms from the park on autumn mornings, and cooking them up into a breakfast broth for his wife and young family. But this particular morning, an hour after they had finished eating, the world began to turn very strange. J.S. found black spots and odd flashes of colour bursting across his vision; he became disorientated, and had difficulty in standing and moving around. His family were complaining of stomach cramps and cold, numb extremities. The

notion of poisonous toadstools leapt to his mind, and he staggered out into the streets to seek help. but within a hundred yards he had forgotten where he was going, or why, and was found wandering about in a confused state.

By chance, a doctor named Everard Brande happened to be passing through this insalubrious part of town, and he was summoned to treat J.S. and his family. The scene that he discovered was so bizarre and unfamiliar that he would write it up at length and publish it in *The Medical and Physical Journal* later that year. The family's symptoms were rising and falling in giddy waves, their pupils dilated, their pulses and breathing becoming fluttering and laboured, then returning to normal before accelerating into another crisis. They were all fixated on the fear that they were dying, except for the youngest, the eight-year-old Edward S., whose symptoms were the strangest of all. He had eaten a large portion of the mushrooms and was "attacked with fits of immoderate laughter" which his parents' threats could not subdue. He seemed to have been transported into another world, from which he would only return under duress to speak nonsense: "when roused and interrogated as to it, he answered indifferently, yes or no, as he did to every other question, evidently without any relation to what was asked".

Dr. Everard Brande would diagnose the family's condition as the "deleterious effects of a very common species of agaric [mushroom], not hitherto suspected to be poisonous". Today, we can be more specific: this was clearly intoxication by Liberty Caps (*Psilocybe semilanceata*), the 'magic mushrooms' which grow plentifully across the hills, moors, commons, golf courses and playing fields of Britain every autumn. But though Dr. Brande's account of the J.S. family's trip would not be forgotten, and would continue to be cited in Victorian drug literature for decades, the nineteenth century would come and go without any conclusive identification of the Liberty Cap as the species in question. In fact, it would not be until Albert Hoffman, the discoverer of LSD, turned his attention

to hallucinogenic mushrooms in the 1950s that the botanical identity of these and other mushrooms containing psilocybin, LSD's chemical cousin, would be confirmed.

But if they were obscure to Victorian science, there was another tradition which would appear to explore the ability of certain mushrooms to whisk humans off to another world: Victorian fairy lore. Over the nineteenth century, a vast body of art and literature would connect mushrooms and toadstools with elves, pixies, hollow hills and the unwitting transport of subjects to fairyland, a world of shifting perspectives and dimensions seething with elemental spirits. Is it possible that the Victorian fairy tradition, underneath its twee and bourgeois exterior, operated as a conduit for a hidden world of homegrown psychedelia, parallel perhaps to the ancient shamanic and ritual uses of similar mushrooms in the New World? Were the authors of such otherworld narratives – *Alice in Wonderland*, for example – aware of the powers of certain mushrooms to lead unsuspecting visitors to enchanted lands? Were they, perhaps, even writing from personal experience?



## REDISCOVERING LOST MAGIC

The J.S. family's trip in 1799 is a useful jumping-off point for such enquiries, because it establishes several basic facts. First – and contrary to the opinion of some recent American scholars – British (and European) magic mushrooms are not a recent arrival from the New World, but were part of our indigenous flora at least two hundred years ago. Second, the species in question was unknown at the time, at least to science. Third, its hallucinogenic effects were unfamiliar, perhaps even unheard of – certainly unprecedented enough for a London doctor to feel the need to draw them to the attention of his medical colleagues.

In other scholarly contexts, though, the mind-altering effects of certain plants were already familiar. Through classical sources like *The Golden Ass*, the idea of witches' potions which transformed their subjects was an inheritance from antiquity. The pharmacopeia and *materia medica* of doctors and herbalists had long included the drug effects of common plants like belladonna and opium poppies, though mushrooms had featured in them rarely. The eighteenth century had turned up several more exotic examples from distant cultures: Russian explorers describing the use of fly agaric mushrooms in Siberia, Captain Cook observing the *kava-kava* ritual in Polynesia. In 1762 Carl Linnaeus, the great taxonomist and father of modern botany, had compiled the first ever list of intoxicating plants: his monograph, entitled *Inebriantia*, had included opium, cannabis, datura, henbane and tobacco. Slowly, the study of such plants was emerging from the margins and tall tales of classical studies, ethnography, folklore and medicine and becoming a subject in its own right.

It was as part of this same interest that European fairy lore was also being assembled by a new generation of amateur folklore collectors such as the Brothers Grimm, who realised that the inexorable drift of peasant populations from country to city was beginning



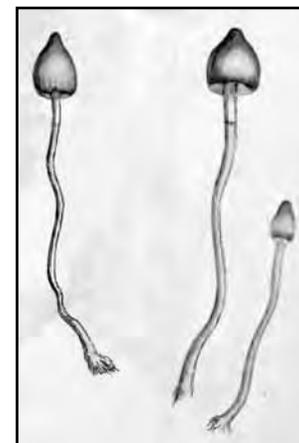
*Amanita muscaria*, the 'Fly Agaric'

to dismantle centuries of folk stories, songs and oral histories. The Victorian fairy tradition, as it emerged, would be imbued with this new sensibility which rendered rustic traditions no longer coarse, backward and primitive but picturesque and semi-sacred, an escape from the austerity of industrial living into an ancient, often pagan otherworld. Under the guise of ‘innocence’, sensual and erotic themes could be explored with a boldness not permitted in more realistic genres, and the muddy and impoverished countryside could be re-enchanted with imagery drawn from the classical and arabesque. Within this process, the lore of plants and flowers was carefully curated and woven into supernatural tapestries of flower-fairies and enchanted woods; and within this imaginal world of plants, mushrooms and toadstools began popping up all over. Fairy rings and toadstool-dwelling elves were recycled through a pictorial culture of motif and decoration until they became emblematic of fairyland itself.

This was a quiet but substantial image makeover for Britain’s fungi. Previously, in herbals and medical texts, they had been largely shunned, associated with dung-heaps and poison; in Romantic poetry the smell of death had still clung to them (“fungous brood/coloured like a corpse’s cheek”, as Keats put it). Now, a new generation of folklorists began to wax lyrical about them, including Thomas Keightley, whose *The Fairy Mythology* (1850) was perhaps the most influential text on the fictional fairy tradition. Keightley gives Welsh and Gaelic examples of traditional names for fungi which invoke elves and Puck, and at one point wonders if such names refer to “those pretty small delicate fungi, with their conical heads, which are named Fairy-mushrooms in Ireland, where they grow so plentifully”. This description is a very good match for the Liberty Cap, though Keightley seems unaware of its hallucinogenic properties; he was struck simply by the pixie-cap shape of its head. In Ireland, the Gaelic slang for mushrooms is ‘pookies’, which Keightley associated with the elemental nature spirit Pooka (hence Puck); it’s a slang term

which persists in Irish drug culture today, although evidence for a pre-modern Gaelic magic mushroom culture remains elusive.

But despite the presence of Liberty Caps in Britain, and their occasional tentative identification with nature spirits, it was a different mushroom which would become the immediately recognisable symbol for fairyland: the unmistakable red-and-white fly agaric (*Amanita muscaria*), which remains the classic ‘fairy fungus’ to this day in modern survivals of the Victorian fairy cult such as garden gnomes. The fly agaric is the most spectacular of the generally spectacular agaric family, which also includes the tawny Panther Cap (*Amanita pantherina*) and the prodigiously poisonous Death Cap (*Amanita phalloides*). The other salient fact about it is that it, too, is psychoactive.



‘Liberty Cap’

Unlike the Liberty Cap, which delivers psilocybin in fairly standard doses, the fly agaric contains an unpredictable mixture of alkaloids – muscarine, muscimol, ibotenic acid – which produce a cocktail of effects including general wooziness and disorientation, drooling, sweats, numbness in the lips and extremities, nausea, muscle twitches, sleep and a vague, often retrospective sense of liminal consciousness and waking dreams.

Unlike the Liberty Cap, the fly agaric was hard to ignore or misidentify; its effects had long been known, though they had been classed simply as poisonous. Its name was derived from its ability to kill flies, and it was otherwise generally avoided. It was the aura of livid beauty and danger which it carried, rather than its chemistry, which made it such a popular fairy motif. Yet at the same time its psychic effects were coming to be understood, not from any tradition of its use in Britain, but from the recent discovery of its visionary role among the remote peoples of Siberia.



Victorian era New Years greeting card showing *Amanita muscaria* and a gnome

Sporadically through the eighteenth century, Swedish colonels and Russian explorers had returned from Siberia with tall tales of shamans, spirit possession and self-poisoning with brightly-coloured toadstools, but it was a Polish traveller named Joseph Kopék who, in 1837, was the first to write an account of his own experience with the fly agaric. Kopék had been living in Kamchatka for two years when he was taken ill with a fever and was told by a local of a ‘miraculous’ mushroom which would cure him. He ate half a fly agaric, and fell into a vivid fever dream. “As though magnetised”, he was drawn through “the most attractive gardens where only pleasure and beauty seemed to rule”; beautiful women dressed in white fed him with fruits, berries and flowers.

He woke after a long and healing sleep and took a second, stronger dose, which precipitated him back into sleep and the sense of an epic voyage into other worlds, teeming with “things which I would never imagine even in my thoughts”. He relived swathes of his childhood, re-encountered friends from throughout his life,

and even predicted the future at length with such confidence that a priest was summoned to witness. He concluded with a challenge to science: “If someone can prove that both the effect and the influence of the mushroom are non-existent, then I shall stop being defender of the miraculous mushroom of Kamchatka”.

Kopék’s toadstool epiphany was widely reported, and it began a fashion for re-examining elements of European folklore and culture and interpolating fly agaric intoxication into odd corners of myth and tradition. Perhaps the best example of this is the notion that the berserkers, the Viking shock troops of the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, drank a fly agaric potion before going into battle and fighting like men possessed. This is regularly asserted as fact not only among mushroom and Viking aficionados but also in text-books and encyclopaedias; nevertheless, it’s almost certainly a creation of the nineteenth century. There’s no reference to fly agaric, or indeed to any exotic plant stimulants, in the sagas or eddas: the notion of mushroom-intoxicated berserker warriors was first suggested by the Swedish professor Samuel Ödman in his *Attempt to Explain the Berserk-Raging of Ancient Nordic Warriors through Natural History* (1784), which was simply speculation based on eighteenth-century Siberian accounts. By the end of the nineteenth century scholars like the Norwegian botanist Frederik Christian Schübeler had taken Ödman’s suggestion as proof. The rest is history – or, more likely, urban myth.

Thus, by the mid nineteenth century, the fly agaric had not only become an instantly recognisable fairyland motif but had also, and separately, been established as a portal to the land of dreams, and written into European folklore from exotic sources. This doesn’t invalidate the claim that mushrooms in fairy literature represent the concealed or half-forgotten knowledge of their hallucinogenic properties – it’s impossible to disprove such a negative – but it does show how fairy art and literature could have evolved without any such knowledge. Some may well have been directly drug-inspired –

an obvious candidate would be John Anster Fitzgerald's phantasmic paintings of dreaming subjects surrounded by distended, other-dimensional goblin creatures – but the drug in question is far more likely to have been opium, the omnipresent Victorian panacea.

### ONE SIDE WILL MAKE YOU TALLER

But there is a case where we can be more specific. The most famous and frequently-debated conjunction of fungi, psychedelia and fairy-lore is the array of mushrooms and hallucinatory potions, mindbending and shapeshifting motifs in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Do Alice's adventures represent first-hand knowledge of the hallucinogenic effects of mushrooms? And, if not, how were they assembled without it?

The facts in the case could hardly be better known. Alice, down the rabbit hole, meets a blue caterpillar sitting on a mushroom, which tells her in a "languid, sleepy voice" that the mushroom is the key to navigating through her strange journey: "one side will make you grow taller, the other side will make you grow shorter". Alice takes a chunk from each side of the mushroom, and begins a series of vertiginous transformations of size, shooting up into the clouds before learning to maintain her normal size by eating alternate bites. Throughout the rest of the book she continues to take the mushroom: entering the house of the duchess, approaching the domain of the march hare and, climactically, before entering the hidden garden with the golden key.

Since the 1960s all this has frequently been read as an initiatic work of drug literature, an esoteric guide to the other worlds opened up by mushrooms and other psychedelics – most memorably, perhaps, in Jefferson Airplane's psychedelic anthem *White Rabbit* (1967), which conjures Alice's journey as a path of self-discovery where the stale advice of parents is transcended by the guidance



received from within by ‘feeding your head’. By and large, this reading has provoked outrage and disgust among Lewis Carroll scholars, who seem to regard his critics’ accusations of paedophilia as inoffensive by comparison.

But there’s plenty of evidence that medication and unusual states of consciousness exercised a profound fascination for Carroll, and he read about them voraciously. His interest was spurred by his own delicate health – insomnia and frequent migraines – which he treated with homeopathic remedies, including many derived from psychoactive plants like aconite and belladonna. His library included several books on homeopathy as well as standard texts on mind-altering drugs like W.B.Carpenter’s *Mental Physiology* (1874) and F.E.Anstie’s influential compendium *Stimulants and Narcotics* (1864). He was greatly intrigued by the epileptic seizure of an Oxford student at which he was present, and visited St.Bartholemew’s Hospital in London in order to witness chloroform anaesthesia.

Nevertheless, it seems that Alice’s mind-expanding journeys owed little to the actual drug experiences of their author. Although Carroll – in everyday life, of course, the Reverend Charles Dodgson – was a moderate drinker and, to judge by his library, opposed to alcohol prohibition, he had a strong dislike of tobacco smoking and wrote sceptically in his letters about the pervasive presence in syrups and soothing tonics of powerful narcotics like opium – the “medicine so dexterously, but ineffectually, concealed in the jam of our early childhood”. In an era where few embarked on personal drug exploration without both robust health and a compelling reason, he remains a very unlikely self-experimenter.

But it seems we can offer a more precise account. The scholar Michael Carmichael has demonstrated that, a few days before writing Alice, Carroll made his only ever visit to the Bodleian library, where a copy of Mordecai Cooke’s recently-published drug survey *The Seven Sisters of Sleep* (1860) had been deposited. The Bodleian copy of this book still has most of its pages uncut, with the notable exception of

the contents page and the chapter on the fly agaric, entitled ‘The Exile of Siberia’. Carroll was particularly interested in all things Russian: in fact, Russia was the only country he ever visited outside Britain. And, as Carmichael puts it, “Dodgson would have been immediately attracted to Cooke’s *Seven Sisters of Sleep* for two more obvious reasons: he had seven sisters and he was a lifelong insomniac”.

Cooke’s chapter on fly agaric is, like the rest of *Seven Sisters*, a useful compendium of the drug lore and anecdotes which were familiar to the Victorians. It recalls Dr.Everard Brande’s account of the J.S. family; it rounds up the various Siberian accounts of fly agaric; it also focuses on precisely the effects of mushroom intoxication which Carroll wove into Alice’s adventures. “Erroneous impressions of size and distance are common occurrences”, Cooke records of the fly agaric. “A straw lying in the road becomes a formidable object, to overcome which, a leap is taken sufficient to clear a barrel of ale, or the prostrate trunk of a British oak”.

Whether or not Carroll read this actual copy, it seems very likely that the properties of the mushroom in Alice were based on his encounter with Siberian fly agaric reportage rather than any hidden British tradition of its use, let alone the author’s own. If so, he was neither the secret drug initiate that has been claimed, nor the Victorian gentleman entirely innocent of the arcane knowledge of drugs subsequently imputed to him. In this sense, Alice’s otherworld experiences seem to hover, like much of Victorian fairy literature and fantasy, in a borderland between naïve innocence of such drugs and knowing references to them.

**Mike Jay’s** *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century* was republished last year in a fully revised edition. A revised edition of *The Influencing Machine: James Tilly Matthews and the Air Loom* appeared this year from Strange Attractor Press.