

Hobbit Tales Today: Stories of Small People from Flores (Indonesia)

Robert James Smith and Concilianus Laos Mbato

ABSTRACT: There are many stories of little people worldwide. Recent archaeological discoveries in Flores have been combined with story to give tantalizing suggestions of pre-historic survival into modern times. A range of Western accounts is considered, from press releases to creative online response. The human need for story, and particularly for it to be local, is affirmed. Finally, local story is given voice and considered afresh.

The world of archaeology experienced much excitement with the discovery in 2003, by a team of Australian archaeologists on the island of Flores in Indonesia, of a dwarf form species of early human. Intriguingly this species would have overlapped with much of the time period of modern humans. This discovery suggested changes to the generally-accepted overview of there being one migration ‘out-of-Africa’ and then a rapid sequence of species changeover. Even when assumed to be quite short in time, the nature of the contact between the different species has long stirred imaginations—and this has found expression in a range from novelists to press release writers.¹ How did the groups in contact perceive each other, how did they relate to each other, and what were their different use of resources? Now the recent finds suggested that the period of this contact was likely to be much longer than had been previously assumed. Added to this interest, the small stature of this new species prompted a name which would link it to the familiar associations of contemporary people. Upon the public announcement in 2004, the species was soon given the name ‘the Hobbit’²—at a time when *The Lord of the Rings* movie sequence (2001-2003) was vying with the *Harry Potter* sequence (2001-2011) for maximum popularity—this mix of archaeology and story quickly gained much publicity and wider interest.

¹ For an extended example, see William Golding, *The Inheritors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), praised at the time as ‘a great feat of sympathetic imagination’, John Carey, *William Golding* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 185. For more recent examples, see the numerous science reports, such as ‘Human-Neanderthal Coupling Rare: Study’, ABC Science <<http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2011/09/13/3316577.htm>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

² ‘My colleague [Archaeologist] Mike Morwood was insistent on Hobbit’. Richard Roberts, ‘Villagers Speak of the Small, Hairy Ebu Gogo’, *The Telegraph* [UK], 28 October 2004, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/indonesia/1475280/Villagers-speak-of-the-small-hairy-Ebu-Gogo.html>> [accessed 2 November 2011].

To some degree, hinting at confirmation of the ‘sub-creation’ of Tolkien³ (the roots of which are in northern European history and earlier events preserved in story), the naming also gave tantalizing suggestions of these archaeological finds being concrete evidence of beings who are known to moderns purely through story—the ‘little people’. The story aspect, relevant to the finds on Flores, looks to be just as interesting as the scientific ‘story’, and several of these aspects will now be traced for the light which they may shed on mankind’s need for story.

*

For those living within Western cultures, there is the long-time temptation to view the folk-beliefs of ‘little people’ or fairies as belonging to Celtic and Teutonic sources only. The authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1912) marks an attempt to broaden this view, by acknowledging—with the limited preconceptions and language of its own time—the similar stories from ‘Arabs, Hindus, Chinese, and savages of all regions’.⁴ After a century of broader acknowledgement, we may hope to be more inclusive and claim that stories of little people might be all-pervasive worldwide, and such was the climate which was ready for the Flores finds. Still, for the background of most Australians, these stories persist from their roots in the British Isles—and particularly from Ireland. While stories of leprechauns might be transmitted predominantly by their appearance in popular media (and thus distanced from the individual),⁵ most Australian children will have some immediate, although sleeping, encounter with the tooth fairy (payment for one’s body part and usually within one’s bedroom).⁶ At that larger scale, there is a persistent feeling of loss. Indeed, Katharine Briggs claimed that, in England, belief in fairies—

From Chaucer’s time onwards has been supposed to belong to the last generation and to be lost to the present one.⁷

³ Tolkien’s own term for his creative output.

⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings, 13 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), (V, p. 678b). As accessible early examples from elsewhere, see: John Witthoft and Wendell S. Hadlock, ‘Cherokee-Iroquois Little People’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 59 (Oct-Dec 1946), 413-422; and Katharine Luomala, *The Menehune of Polynesia and Other Mythical Little People of Oceania* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1951).

⁵ See *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. by D. Negra (Durham, NS: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁶ Rosemary, Wells, ‘The Making of an Icon: The Tooth Fairy in North American Folklore and Popular Culture’, in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narváez (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

⁷ Katharine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 3.

Despite the sense of loss, the continuity of tradition indicates the human need for such beliefs.

In addition to the varied inherited fairy beliefs of a settler society such as Australia, some Australians may also be familiar with a range of Indigenous stories of 'little people'. These variously appear in early ethnographic works and in children's literature. Most often the belief-stories are not identified for the specific location of their telling, and in the face of the diversity of the many Indigenous language and cultural groups, as well as the general importance of landscape to these stories, the published accounts often seem unconvincing. Only from a local perspective can stories be seen to support each other, such as the *Stories of the Bundjalung: As Told to Rhoda Roberts*.⁸ While a national collection might present stories which seemingly contradict each other (e.g. on which is the key totem), a non-Indigenous author who gives close attention to one 'little people' aspect of one locality can do so with power. A work such as Patricia Wrightson's *A Little Fear* (1984),⁹ set in the Broadwater area of northern New South Wales, presents an account with one small spirit being, and in doing so evokes an image of the vastness of all beliefs for that place. Bill Scott had a similar achievement in his *Shadows Among the Leaves* (1984)¹⁰ with a slightly generalized coastal river-valley setting.

Across the range of fairy stories there are recurring elements of: mystical powers; vestiges of the past; an unknown presence in the land; and of an experience intensified by childhood. The smallness of these story-beings seems to counterbalance their ominous powers. Thus, while there is no sense of control over those smaller than one, there is a sense that one can live almost alongside such beings.

Archaeologists and Other Scientists Telling Their Story

Just as the borrowing of the word 'Hobbit' made the archaeological find more 'knowable' to a Western audience, the archaeologists and other scientists can be seen to be using local story to help make their finds more 'knowable' for themselves. Some of this discussion has been recorded in print, and it is useful to trace three of these through their sequence.

An article on 'Language Origins' in the journal *Cognitive Science Online* would seem an unlikely place to find longer discussion of the

⁸ Rhoda Roberts, *Stories of the Bundjalung: As Told by Rhoda Roberts* (Artarmon NSW: ABC Audio Tape, 1993).

⁹ Patricia Wrightson, *A Little Fear* (Ringwood, Vic: Puffin, 1983). See also her *The Haunted Rivers* (Macleay, NSW: Eight State Press, 1983); and *The Nargun and the Stars* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1973).

¹⁰ Bill Scott, *Shadows Among the Leaves* (Richmond, Vic.: Heinemann, 1984).

very local Flores story as evidence of ‘Hobbit’ creatures surviving into our times. The thesis on language origins links with the local story of small creatures repeating human speech, and this is cause for three solid paragraphs on the ‘Hobbit’ finds, local story, and on remnant survival. The article ends with this prospect—‘The remote but exciting possibility that the ebu gogo still exist might somehow make it possible to test these ideas directly.’¹¹ The source for the local story is Gert van den Berg, ‘a paleontologist working on the faunal remains’, but the information comes indirectly via Richard Roberts in an article in the UK popular press.¹²

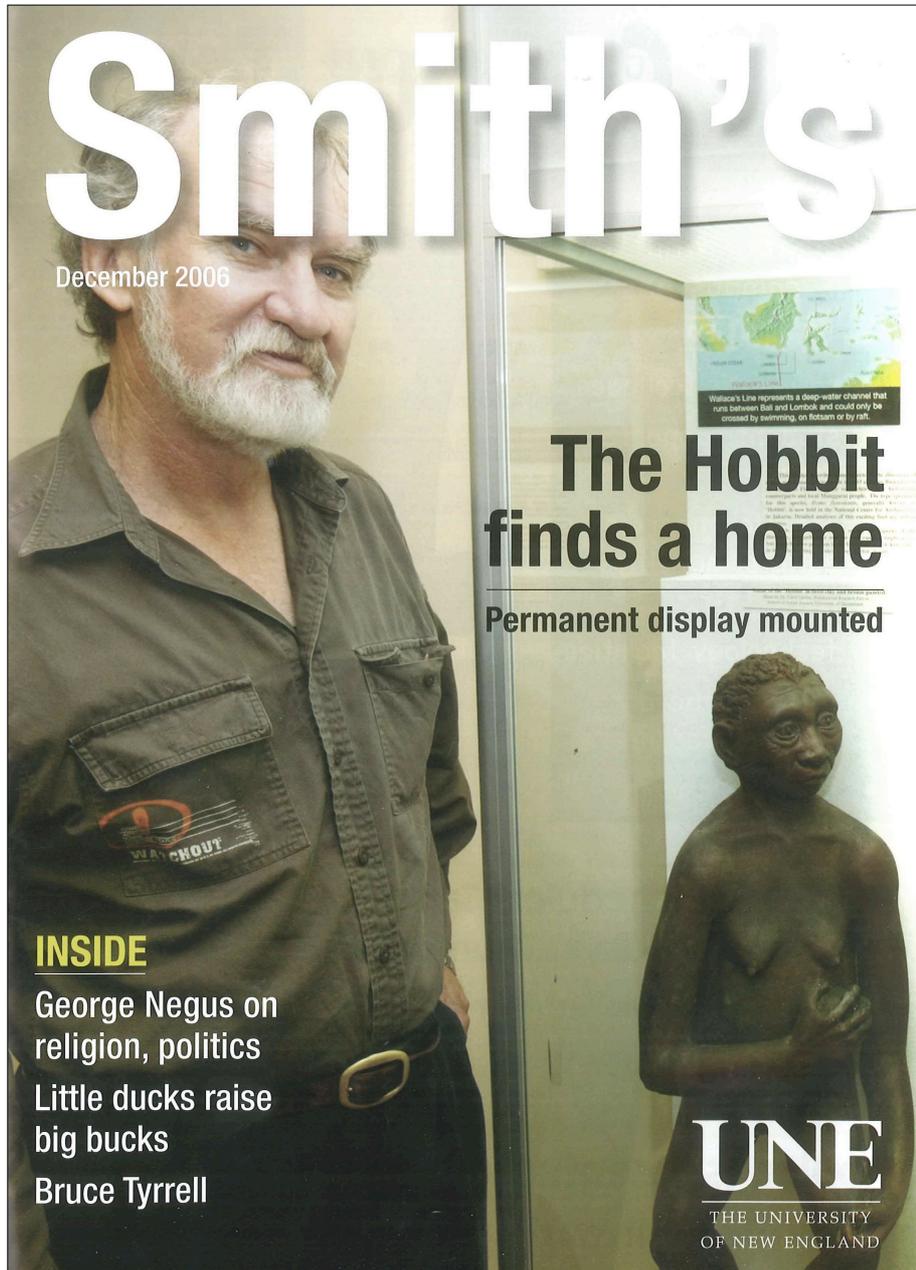
Roberts himself was part of the team which made the archaeological finds, and his popular article addresses in full the tantalizing possibility of the survival of this group from pre-history—‘Richard Roberts, discoverer of the Hobbit, says local tales suggest the species could still exist’. In this article there is more specific detail on the stories, some of which is presented as evidence for the survival: their home being a cave; they being about a metre tall, with long arms and fingers, and having a slightly awkward gait. Other story detail is given as if to ‘flesh out’ the archaeological finds, such as: they had long hair, pot bellies, ears that stick out, and the women had extremely pendulous breasts; that *Gogo* means ‘eats anything’, including raw food or human flesh; that they raided crops, stole babies, and could climb trees. One element of contradictory detail is presented: ‘[they] were never seen holding stone tools or anything similar, whereas we have lots of sophisticated artifacts in the *H. floresiensis* levels at Liang Bua’. This is all stirring the imaginations of the scientists. Gert van den Burgh ‘first heard these stories a decade ago’, noted that they were unvaried in the area, but ‘thought them no better than leprechaun tales until we unearthed the Hobbit’. Unfortunately, emphasis is placed upon the close connection between the contemporary stories in Liang Bua and the archaeological finds in Liang Bua, despite them being vastly separated in time, and this combined with the acknowledgement that:

A local eruption at Liang Bua (in western Flores) may have wiped out local hobbits around 12,000 years ago, but they could well have persisted much later in other parts of the island.¹³

¹¹ Martin I., Sereno, ‘Language Origins Without the Semantic Urge’, *Cognitive Science Online*, 3.1 (2005), 1-12, (p. 9).

¹² Richard Roberts, ‘Villagers Speak of the Small, Hairy Ebu Gogo’, *The Telegraph* [UK], 28 October 2004.

¹³ *Op. cit.* Also note here the lower-case use of *hobbit*, instead of the usual capitalized version. Here the story is moving ever closer to appropriating Tolkien’s (sub-)creation, as if to gain its elements of historical authenticity.



INSIDE

George Negus on religion, politics

Little ducks raise big bucks

Bruce Tyrrell

University magazine cover, showing: Mike Morwood (the archaeologist), the find in imagined form, and comfortable use of the appropriated name.

That stories from other parts of the island might be even more relevant in their detail of any near-contemporary survivals is not considered. It is suggested that distant findings of hair and DNA material may be found—but distant stories are not considered. Rather, and unconsciously, the ever-recurring primacy of *location* and *story* is again underscored.

Newspaper reception of these modern ‘Hobbit’ stories reveals another aspect of the patterning of interest in and the impact of the tale. On this topic, the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia, with over one hundred items, carried nearly twice as many stories as did the leading Indonesian daily *Kompas*, with fifty two items, and much more again than the less-frequent but more reflective *Tempo* which had only four items. Clearly there is a stronger Western interest in these tales than there is in the local community which might be seen to more closely own them. Another interesting sidelight is to compare the Australian response with that of the USA. The *New York Times* carrying only thirty one items is well short of the Australian tally.¹⁴ In addition to the archaeological team being Australian, one might speculate that geographical closeness to Indonesia added to this interest, or that the overlap of these ‘Hobbits’ with Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants—in that far distant past—provided another level of intriguing interest. Regardless, the actual archaeological finds can be seen to be overlaid with many levels of story, mixing history with wonder.

Archaeology and Creative Story Online

Pre-history and wonder are also in evidence in a newer medium, and this from the USA. An eBook has been made available online with the title of *Flores Girl*, given a publication date of 2008,¹⁵ and with and now with a cover image seemingly inspired by the movie *Avatar* (2009). The webpage synopsis tells us:

Two scientists, Sarah and Richard, unwittingly introduce a small tribe of prehistoric people living in isolation for a million years to the ultimate modern predator: humanity. This is their adventure, combining a clash of cultures, religious ardor with the oldest stories of all: the meaning of friendship and true love. This is the first of a trilogy of Flores Girl Adventure Novels!

¹⁴ These totals are based on a Boolean search for: ‘Flores’ AND ‘hobbit’.

¹⁵ Erik John Bertel, *Flores Girl: The Children God Forgot*, [eBook] (Centereach, NY: Millennium Writing, 2008), <<http://www.floresgirl.org/>> [accessed 10 November 2011]. The page of publication information also gives two years of copyright (2005 and 2010), and identifies the (2008) publication as ‘Version 1.b’. This is the first volume in a trilogy, and is currently available as a free download.



Cover of online novel Flores Girl: The Children God Forgot. Downloadable from http://www.floresgirl.org/floresdownloads/Flores_Girl_The_Children_God_Forgot.pdf

The two scientists, Sarah and Richard discover the existence of a living human ancestor, *Homo floresiensis* on an isolated tropical island near Flores. These small hobbit-like creatures are not the hobbits of JRR Tolkien's stories but a small tribe of prehistoric people called the Ebu

Gogo living in seeming isolation for nearly a half million years on the Indonesian island of Irmã Flores. In their unrelenting quest for knowledge, Sarah and Richard unintentionally expose these innocents to the onslaught of the modern world including corporate raiders, Indonesian pirates (sorry, no Johnny Depp types!) and religious zealots. Moreover, while struggling with the magnitude of their find, Sarah and Richard are forced to reconcile their own, very different personalities. In the process of discovery and befriending these ancient people, Sarah and Richard rediscover their own humanity and the opportunity to find true romantic love.

Further Warning! This Flores Girl Adventure Novel contains contemporary language, numerous naked Ebu Gogo, some sexuality, depictions of drug use and humor that some might find to be objectionable. In other words, this is an raw adult theme eBook with ample violence, cussing and some overall acts of horniness. After all, this is a story about human evolution and human behavior and *it is not a recommended eBook for children.*

This may seem like an opportunistic appropriation of the theme of pre-historic contact as it had already gained some currency in the community. However, the links between archaeology and creative story-making go much further than such an approach would need. The *Flores Girl* homepage, exhorting readers to ‘Join the Adventure’, has a full-page left-hand column of hyperlinks, and these are explicitly grounded in the archaeology and local traditional story. The first four are

Homo Floresiensis
The Ebu Gogo Legend
What Did the Hobbits or Ebu Gogo Look Like?
Flores Island,

And these are followed by several hyperlinks specific to the *Flores Girl* work and to its more recent sequel. Then the lower half of the column of links announces itself as ‘Latest News from Flores’ and returns to the finds, with several links to relevant press releases from the archaeological community. As a third volume of *Flores Girl* is promised, this webpage demonstrates the ongoing story-response to emerging archaeological finds and debates—all put within a hybrid framework whereby the newly emerging ‘story’, based on science, is made accessible to a broadly-based Western readership.

*

All this Western interest in the finds, the stories and the likely themes, touches only lightly on the nature of story within the broader Flores communities. The voices of the people who have sustained these stories,

and have found meaning in them, are strangely omitted from the record. Missing too is consideration of other major influences upon their worldview—that the island is almost completely Roman Catholic, reflecting its early Portuguese influence, and that comparison with other similarly colonially influenced lands might be illuminating. As an indication of such voices, the following is offered. This story relates living memory in one part of the island of Flores.

A Local Story from Flores

The village of Terong, Riung, in Ngada Regency, lies about fifteen kilometres inland from the north coast of the island of Flores. In this village of around 500 people there have long been tales of small people called *ngiung* in the local dialect. As with other villages in Riung District, transport was difficult and children had to walk barefoot quite a distance to get to school. No books or other modern luxuries were available. Normally children would not be met by their parents when they got home after school for the parents had to work all day on the farm. Thus, from being at home from fixing whatever was available for lunch, and throughout the afternoon, many had their grandparents attending to them. During this special time, stories from these grandparents became a powerful means to teach life lessons.

Stories of small people were amongst those told to children. Grandparents would usually tell these special stories after dinner and before bedtime. They were also told before dusk, particularly after rain, and when it was foggy, so that children would not wander around but would come into the house. By frightening the children, the tales were meant to teach them to obey their parents and elders. So the tales helped to keep the children indoors at night, to keep them obedient, and also to send them to bed. They were particularly frightening in the dark as bedtime stories.

The small people of the stories have distinctive physical features. They have hairy faces and bodies. These faces look like those of cats, i.e. not having a ‘chin’, while their bodies look like monkeys. They are about 50-70cm tall. Their feet are most peculiar with their toes pointing backwards rather than forwards. They were often described as dark, as though their skin was burnt by the sun, as skinny, and also as troublesome. They live in caves, but would sneak into people’s kitchens because they liked to eat ‘burnt woods’ in people’s huts—the cinders and charcoal which are produced from the wood people

use to cook. Their strange footprints were evidence of these visits to kitchens.

Small people were dangerous creatures, and clearly different from humans. They were to be feared because of their threatening behaviour. They would capture children, and were especially dangerous at times when the weather was cloudy or foggy. They were also reported as having a tendency to steal corn from people's crops, particularly after rain just subsided and when it was still foggy. They therefore had their own times of coming out from their hideouts, their caves or *lolong* which were far and deep inland.

There are three distinctive stories related to these small people which are still told to this very day. The first story is about the encounter between a village man and these small people. One day on the way home from fetching some traditional alcoholic drink (called *tuak* in the local language) from a palm tree in the forest, he was stopped by a number of these small people, who asked him to share his *tuak* as they were thirsty. He turned down the request saying that he had only very little drink to himself and other people in the village. *Tuak* is a very important traditional alcoholic drink, which is a must in all traditional festivities. However, upon their persistence, he shared it with them. They were so glad and therefore wanted to thank him for satisfying their thirst, but did not know what to give him in return. Eventually, they gave him a beautiful traditional song called 'Moreng'. This is a song belonging to the tribe of Rea in Terong Village which is still sung to this day. On that very day, it was also agreed that villagers of Terong and the *ngiung* should live in peace with each other and know their place of residing. It was agreed that *ngiung* would live in caves while villagers would live in the village and they should not cause trouble to each other. His descendents are still living in the village up till now and are regarded as the heirs of the 'Moreng'. One of these descendants recently again told me this story.

There is also a story of a known person who was taken. Uniquely this person was a young adult (evidence that these small people could pose a threat not just to children but also adults). He was probably about 18 or 19 years old. The man, whose name is widely known, was kidnapped by *ngiung* and this happened around 1940s. All the villagers searched for him but could not find him, and finally they decided to hit traditional gongs and drums and sung at the same time to beg *ngiung* to return the man to the village. He was eventually given back to

the people, but unfortunately he had lost his speaking ability (*kongor*) and could not speak till his death. The story is widely known throughout the village. The sister of this man had children who were my playmates when young.

The third story associated with *ngiung* occurred to a boy, an only son, who was taken away by *ngiung* because his parents got mad at him. It was told that one day, the boy was asked by his parents to fetch water from a well away from the village. He was told to be careful when drawing water from the well as the pail which they used was made of silver and gold. It was called *mera*. Unfortunately, the poor boy accidentally broke it as he was drawing up water from the well. When he got home, his parents got really angry because of this, and he ran away. He sat by a river bank and sang this following song to invite *ngiung* to take him away:

Ngiung-ngiung lau lolong e
Mai titi daku mbaring
Le bike tiwu mera e,

which largely means:

Ngiung ngiung far away in the caves,
 Please come and take me away
 Because I broke the silver pail.

Answering this plea, the *ngiung* came and took him away. The boy's parents regretted their angry words and tried to search for the boy everywhere, but it was useless. The boy was gone, and although the whole village played their gongs and drums, the boy never came back. They realised that he had been taken away by *ngiung*.

In our area, these small people were also called *kurucaci* (an Indonesian term). Teachers usually label students who are naughty, skinny and dark-skinned, as *kurucaci*, clearly having negative connotations. In fact, the term *kurucaci* is still being used to this day by some adults, be it teachers or important elders, to refer to misbehaving children, particularly those who are small, skinny and having dark skin (but not necessarily so) as if burnt by the sun. This same term will never be associated with children who are better nourished, even if clearly having behaviour as bad as that of a skinny child.

My own children have not been told these stories because they were born in big cities, far from Flores—they are also growing up without their grandparents. To this day they have not been to Flores due to the difficulty of the transportation. But, when they are in my village someday, I believe stories such as these will be relevant to tell them in order for them to know their roots.

*

Conclusion

There are several elements in this local story which link with the stories recounted by Roberts¹⁶ from Gert van den Berg. However, the over-riding impression is of the links with worldwide stories of ‘little people’: skill in music, singing, and other powers;¹⁷ in encountering them, humans’ loss of sight or speech; a preference for darkness, mists or twilight; and stealing human children.¹⁸ It is reported that the ‘Hobbit’ finds have had little impact upon the Flores locals. The need for (Western) sub-creation to probe the nature of our past is slight there. For those who find explanations for the incredible within the terms of their own stories, and who transmit it to their children these stories are rich in living echoes of their own past.

None of this is intended to devalue those Western scientific minds who are stirred to wonder by local stories. Rather, a collection and study of ‘little people’ stories from across Flores might even provide enough commonality of detail, and this linked to the archaeological finds, to provide evidence of survival of ‘hobbits’ into recent centuries. And that would be a wonder indeed.

*

*

References

- Bertel, Erik John, *Flores Girl: The Children God Forgot*, [eBook] (Centreach, NY: Millennium Writing, 2008), <<http://www.floresgirl.org/>> [accessed 10 November 2011].
- Briggs, Katharine, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).
- Carey, John, *William Golding* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings, 13 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912).

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (V, p. 679a).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, (V, p. 679b).

- 'Fairy', Wikipedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faerie>> [accessed 3 November 2011]
- Golding, William, *The Inheritors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955).
- The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narvaez (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).
- The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture*, ed. by D. Negra (Durham, NS: Duke University Press, 2006).
- Luomala, Katharine, *The Menehune of Polynesia and Other Mythical Little People of Oceania* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1951).
- Roberts, Rhoda, *Stories of the Bundjalung: As Told by Rhoda Roberts* (Artarmon NSW: ABC Audio Tape, 1993).
- Roberts, Richard, 'Villagers speak of the small, hairy Ebu Gogo', *The Telegraph* [UK], 28 October 2004), <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/indonesia/1475280/Villagers-speak-of-the-small-hairy-Ebu-Gogo.html>> [accessed 2 November 2011].
- Scott, Bill, *Shadows Among the Leaves* (Richmond, Vic: Heinemann, 1984).
- Sereno, Martin I., 'Language Origins Without the Semantic Urge', *Cognitive Science Online*, 3.1 (2005), 1-12.
- Wells, Rosemary, 'The Making of an Icon: The Tooth Fairy in North American Folklore and Popular Culture', in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. by Peter Narvaez (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).
- Withoft, John, and Wendell S. Hadlock, 'Cherokee-Iroquois Little People', *Journal of American Folklore*, 59 (Oct-Dec 1946), 413-422.
- Wrightson, Patricia, *The Haunted Rivers* (Maclean, NSW: Eight State Press, 1983).
- Wrightson, Patricia, *A Little Fear* (Ringwood, Vic: Puffin, 1983).
- Wrightson, Patricia, *The Nargun and the Stars* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1973).
- Zipes, Jack, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2007).

*

*

*