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THE CELTIC ORIGIN OF PETER PAN AND TINKER BELL

by **Maegan Langer**

"The great attraction of Barrie was perhaps his real belief in fairies." –
Nina Boucicault, first actress to portray
Peter Pan onstage, from *Tinker Bell:
An Evolution* by Mindy Johnson.

The names Peter Pan and Tinker Bell are every bit as familiar as Harry Potter or Bilbo Baggins. Ever since Scottish author J.M. Barrie first premiered his play *Peter Pan* in 1904, numerous writers, artists and filmmakers have reimagined the story. More than a century later, we're still captivated by the boy who wouldn't grow up and his fairy sidekick.

For many, Walt Disney's 1953 movie was our first introduction to Never Land. In her new book, *Tinker Bell: An Evolution*, Mindy Johnson traces the inspiration for Never Land and Tinker Bell's journey, from a twinkling light on the London stage to the animated sprite we know today.

CFM: What interested you in writing about J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan and Tinker Bell in the first place?

MJ: I've always been a fan of this legendary play and story, but a number of years ago I was researching the early development of Walt Disney's production of *Peter Pan*. A staff member at the Studio's Animation Research Library handed me a binder which contained about twenty to thirty drawings of very different fairies - brunettes, red-heads, dainty power-puffed fairies. I was astounded to learn that these were all apparently ideas for Tinker Bell, but they had no further information as to why all of these designs were created. I was hooked! That was the beginning of a nearly seven-year journey to find the answers which you can now discover in the book!

CFM: Barrie was partially inspired to write his own "fairy play" based on the public's renewed interest in fairy lore at the turn of the century. What do you think sparked this interest?



Author Mindy Johnson at the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens, London, England. © Mindy Johnson

MJ: There's something timeless and "other-worldly" about fairies. Throughout history there have been various times when fairy fascination flourished. The Grimm Brothers' collection of various fairy tales brought the world of the wee folk into cultural prominence in the early 1800's. In the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, as the world transitioned from agricultural to industrial systems, fairies were featured in fine art, literature, fashion and on the stage. Fairy Pantomimes were a strong presence in London theatre, particularly around the holidays. Today, over 100 years later, this fascination thrives once again as we move to a computer-driven, digital age. The enchantment and mystique of tiny, winged-creatures speaks to the wonders of nature, harkens back to a simpler approach to living, and offers a measure of magic to life.

CFM: Barrie had a different name for his little fairy when he first started writing the play, *Peter Pan*. Can you tell the story of how Tinker Bell got her name?

MJ: Tinker Bell's name was originally Tippy Toe! Young Michael, the fourth of the five Llewelyn-Davies boys, who was just a year old when Barrie was writing *Peter Pan*, had a funny habit of waving his foot when he was excited about something. On a twilight hike with his older brothers, Michael was sure that he saw a little fairy, though Barrie later recalled that it was likely a spot of lantern light dancing on a leaf. Throughout writing the earliest drafts of *Peter Pan*, his fairy was named Tippy or Tippy Toe, but during the course of rehearsals, a tin tinker's bell was used to provide the "voice" of his fairy. With the constant call to "cue the tinker's bell" she quickly became known as Tinker Bell!

CFM: What was the inspiration for how Tinker Bell was ultimately portrayed onstage?

MJ: Barrie considered and experimented with a number of visual effects in which to portray his fairy onstage. With many production problems occurring during rehearsals, he had to adjust and find a simpler solution to portraying his magical fairy. Barrie built a home outside of London for his sister and her husband. James would often write in the upper office they added to their home. There was a particular stained glass oil lamp that hung in the foyer which caused the light to dance around the walls when the lamp was lit. The dancing light from this particular lamp was the inspiration to portray Peter's Never Land companion as a dancing ball of light on stage.



(above) Maude Adams acted the title role in the 1905 New York play of *Peter Pan*

(right): Original Disney concept art of Tinker Bell. © Disney





J. M. Barrie playing the part of Captain Hook with his adopted son Michael Llewelyn-Davies acting as Peter Pan

CFM: What is the significance of the names "Jenny" and "Jane Wren"? Any relation to Celtic folklore?

MJ: With every play production of *Peter Pan*, it's tradition to credit Tinker Bell as performed by "Jane" or "Jenny Wren." Barrie started this from the opening night of the play. There are interesting historical references with this name which might have held influence on Barrie: within ornithological circles, "Jenny Wren" is a colloquial name for the common House Wren; Charles Dickens's tiny, sensitive but powerful character Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend* is one possible inspiration for Barrie's use of this particular name; there is also the early Nursery Rhyme *Little Jenny Wren* which speaks to the bird-like qualities that Barrie wove throughout *Peter Pan*. It's interesting that even Sir Paul McCartney has a beautiful ballad entitled *Jenny Wren* about a sweet, sensitive girl who must contend with the harshness of life.

Within the Celtic culture, the wren holds significance and a level of symbolism: small but powerful, the wren symbolizes the call of the unknown adventure that awaits us all; as a songbird, the wren symbolizes creativity, music, art and poetry; a sociable bird, she is a reminder of the importance of kindness, branching out and to look on the brighter side of life.

CFM: Barrie grew up listening to stories of the "wee faery folk" in Scotland. What traits does Tinker Bell share with the creatures in these stories and how does she differ from them?

MJ: The tales of the "wee faery folk" that Barrie often heard as a boy were generally cautionary tales. "Fae folk" were considered troublesome and even dangerous to encounter. Tinker Bell is really quite a troublemaker as she incites most of the conflict within the play. Her jealousy causes her to plot Wendy's

murder, and she betrays Peter and the Lost Boys to Hook. Barrie declares her to be "so small that she's capable of only one emotion at a time" and these flaring emotions often drive her instigating. What makes Tink so memorable is the power of her pixie dust and the fact that she redeems herself by ultimately saving the day, sacrificing her life for her love of Peter. But in Barrie's magical world, she quickly returns to life once we believe!

CFM: Magical lands where time moves differently and the inhabitants never age are a common theme in Celtic mythology. How much do you think this played into Barrie's creation of Never Land?

MJ: As a young boy, these themes were present in his life. Barrie lost a brother at a very young age, and to bring his mother out from her gripping depression, Barrie urged her to tell him stories of her youth. Later, as a playwright and storyteller, Barrie knew the power of imagination. Wouldn't you want to fly off to a magical place where you could swim with mermaids and fight pirates?

CFM: How and where did the character of Peter Pan first appear?

MJ: Born from Barrie's afternoon adventures with the Llewelyn-Davies boys, the character Peter Pan makes his first appearance in a chapter of Barrie's book *The Little White Bird* in 1902. An imaginary boy – half bird and half fairy – Peter lives in Kensington Gardens and moves freely among the fairies after hours in the park.

CFM: What were some of the authors who influenced Barrie?

MJ: As a young boy, Barrie was a frequent reader of Jules Verne, R.M. Ballantyne and many of the fantasy and adventures stories of the day. He also devoured popular serial magazines of the day, known as Penny Dreadfuls.

CFM: Tinker Bell continues to be a very popular character in our culture, thanks to her various iterations in Disney films and books like *Peter and the Starcatchers*. Why do you think our fascination with fairies endures?

MJ: There's something very mysterious, beguiling and even optimistic about the ability to fly – especially when it involves travel to magical places. Who wouldn't want the ability to do this?! I think there's also something to the fact that as we become more interconnected with technology, there's still a thirst for nature, mystery and wonder in our lives. We could all use a little magic now and then!

Tinker Bell: An Evolution is available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and disneystore.com. Grammy nominated harpist Mindy Johnson's music can be found on Amazon under Melinda Johnson.



Concept art for Tinker Bell by Bianca Majolle © Disney

