



*Glen Uig by Alastair MacDonald Jackson*

# Fairy Tales from Skye and the Isles

*by* Meadhb Bruce

Dunvegan Castle is said to be the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Scotland. Built high on a rock sometime in the early 13th century, it looks out over Loch Dunvegan, in the north-west of the Isle of Skye. For over 800 years it has been the ancestral seat of the Chiefs of clan MacLeod. There's a lot of history contained in these walls.

The castle houses some splendid family heirlooms - a wooden ceremonial cup decorated in silver and dating to the end of the 15th century; a drinking horn also tipped in silver and possibly dating to the 10th century - but it is a more modest artefact hanging in the drawing room, that is arguably the MacLeods' greatest treasure.

It doesn't look like much; a tattered piece of faded brown silk, framed behind glass on the wall. But that scrap of silk is the MacLeod Fairy Flag or Am Bratach Sith - the tattered remnants of an embroidered banner at least 1,500 years old and apparently imbued with miraculous powers. It is a potent symbol of the enduring Celtic belief in fairies or the sithichean, as they are known in Gaelic.





*Dunvegan Castle by Alastair MacDonald Jackson*

Legend has it that back in time, a MacLeod chief married a fairy princess. However, their union could only last a year and a day before she had to return to her realm. When the time came for her to leave, she gave her husband a magical banner as a parting gift. She told him that when the odds were stacked against them, the chief of the MacLeods should wave the flag and the clan would be saved.

There are numerous stories associated with the flag. One says the fairy princess warned that the magic could only be used three times. Other tales suggest the flag has rescued the MacLeods on many occasions through history, bringing victory in battle and protection at times of crisis.

The origins of the flag are shrouded in mystery. The early 19th century Bannantyne manuscript of the history of the MacLeods suggests the flag may have been brought back from the Holy Land by a Crusading MacLeod who encountered and defeated an evil spirit. Another school of thought is that it is a remnant of a Viking raven banner or even belonged to the Norseman Harald Hardrada – a MacLeod ancestor. The MacLeod estate asserts that the flag has been expertly dated to a period sometime between the 4th and the 7th centuries - at least a few hundred years before the Crusades.

Whatever the truth, its significance to the MacLeod clan and their belief in its totemic powers is very real. During the Battle of Britain, MacLeod airmen carried a picture of the flag in their pocket for protection, and apparently not one of them was lost. Dame Flora MacLeod, the 28th Chief of the clan, even offered to brandish the flag at the enemy from the white cliffs of Dover.

The Fairy Flag is not the only focus of fairylure on the island. The Fairy Bridge, about 3 miles from Dunvegan just off the road to Waternish, is thought to be the place where the fairy princess said her last goodbye to her husband, and in some stories, where she left their son, wrapped in the silken banner. Occasionally, one comes across little offerings of flowers or trinkets left there by devotees of the fairy faith, or perhaps just by those enchanted by the magic of Skye.

And then there's the Fairy Glen, to the west of the Trotternish peninsula in the north of Skye. The landscape here is otherworldly; ancient landslips caused by volcanic activity have created strange rock formations, streams and lochans and conical hills. Although there are no fairy legends directly connected to this beautiful place, it is not hard to see why it got its name - it does feel as if you've stepped into the fairy realm. Visitors have left offerings here too, and arranged loose stones into circles and spirals.

Further south, on the northern slopes of the Black Cuillins in Glen Brittle, are the Fairy Pools or Allt Coir a 'Mhadaidh. Here, a burn flows down the hillside of Coire na Creiche into a series of crystal-clear turquoise rock pools fed by waterfalls. It is a spectacular place and attracts crowds of walkers and Instagrammers eager for the perfect picture. People in wetsuits brave the icy cold waters. No-one is sure how it got its name, but the fairy pools do have an association with the MacLeods. In 1601, it was the site of a bloody battle between the MacLeods of Dunvegan and the MacDonalds of Sleat and it was said that the fairy pools ran red with the blood of the slain.



*Dunvegan castle in evening spring light by Alastair MacDonald Jackson*

Although Skye has become synonymous with stories of the wee folk, it is certainly not the only island to have fairy legends. In her book *The Inner Hebrides and their Legends*, the author and folklorist Otta Swire recounts the story of a fairy queen who lived under Cnoc Rhaonastil, a hill on the isle of Islay. Troubled by the ignorance of humankind, she sent an invitation to all the women of the world to visit her great hall on a certain day as she wished to impart some wisdom. From all over the isles, the women came to the hall under the hill, where the tables were set for a banquet.

"The queen walked slowly by, pouring into the cup of each of those who, in her heart truly desired wisdom, a few drops of the precious fluid from her flagon, which held the distilled wisdom of the world throughout the ages. And as each woman drank those few drops, she suddenly grew wise and saw and understood much she had never known before."

When all the women who had come seeking wisdom had received it and the queen's flagon was empty, there came a loud hammering on the door of the hall. Looking out, the wee folk saw their hill covered with women who had arrived too late.

Fairylore has left its imprint right across the Gàidhealtachd. In Celtic mythology, the little people were believed to dwell beneath a knoll or a conical hill, and derivatives of the Gaelic word for fairy - sith or sidh - are common in place names all over Scotland and the Isles. For example: Sithean Mòr which means 'big fairy hill' on the island of Handa; Sidhean Dubh which means 'black fairy hill' on the isle of Skye; Sidhean an

Airgid or 'fairy hill of the silver' on Lewis; Dun an t-Sitheanon on Tiree; and Meall nan Sithean on Lewis.

Many of these places have fairy stories attached to them, like Sithean Mòr on the Isla of Iona. The hill, also known as Cnoc Nan Aingeal or the Hill of the Angels, lies just to the south of the road leading to the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. In *Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands*, published in 1923, the author and ethnographer Mary Ethel Muir Donaldson recorded a story of two young fishermen who had an encounter there with fairies. Finding the hill open, they entered and joined the fairies in their dancing. One of the men had an iron fish hook with him and took the precaution - as iron was believed to protect against fairy magic - to use it to leave when he wished. The other man was not so prepared:

"After a year had passed, the free fisherman returned, to find his companion still dancing with the string of fish in his hand."

I am in a land where fairies remained a very real presence to people until relatively recently. And as evidenced in many places I visited on Skye, the fairy faith is still strong for some.

Looking up at Dunvegan Castle from a boat on the loch, the home of the MacLeod clan is magnificent. Rising on its rocky outcrop from dense woodland, it is the stuff of fairy tales. It is easy to imagine how the wee folk might have cast their spell on the inhabitants of Dunvegan, and why the Fairy Flag still takes pride of place in the MacLeods' ancestral seat.