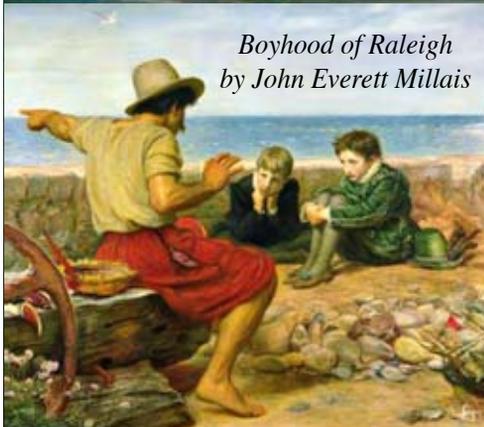


# FOLKLORE

by Carolyn Emerick



## AND THE FIN FOLK OF ORKNEY

*photo of Orkney by Wolfgang Schlick*

Folklore is an integral part of any cultural heritage. Sometimes written off as childish fairytale, folklore deserves to be recognized as a valuable treasure trove of information about our own past. The tales and legends of folklore are the result of oral tradition handed down by mouth through the generations. Because literacy was reserved for the upper echelons of society, regular folk used memorization and recitation to transmit knowledge and stories.

Thus, storytelling was an important art form, as well as essential form of entertainment.

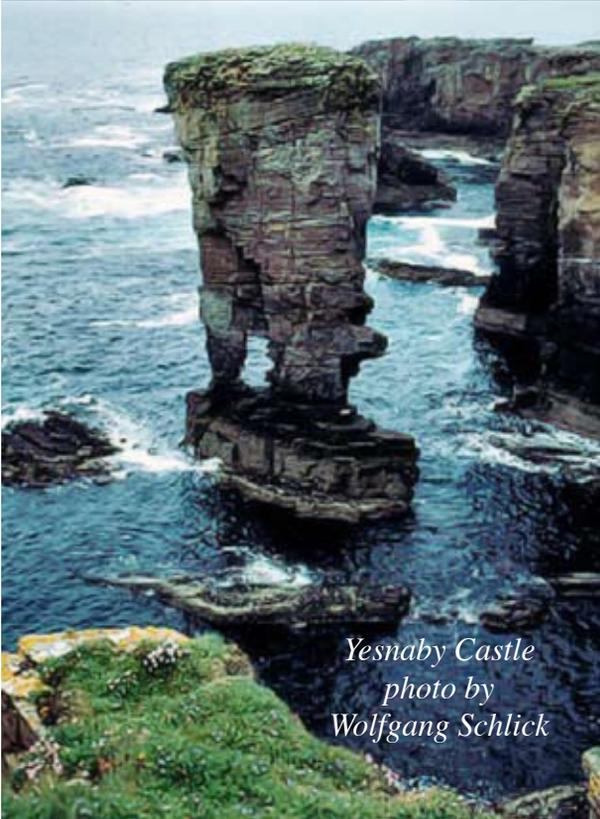
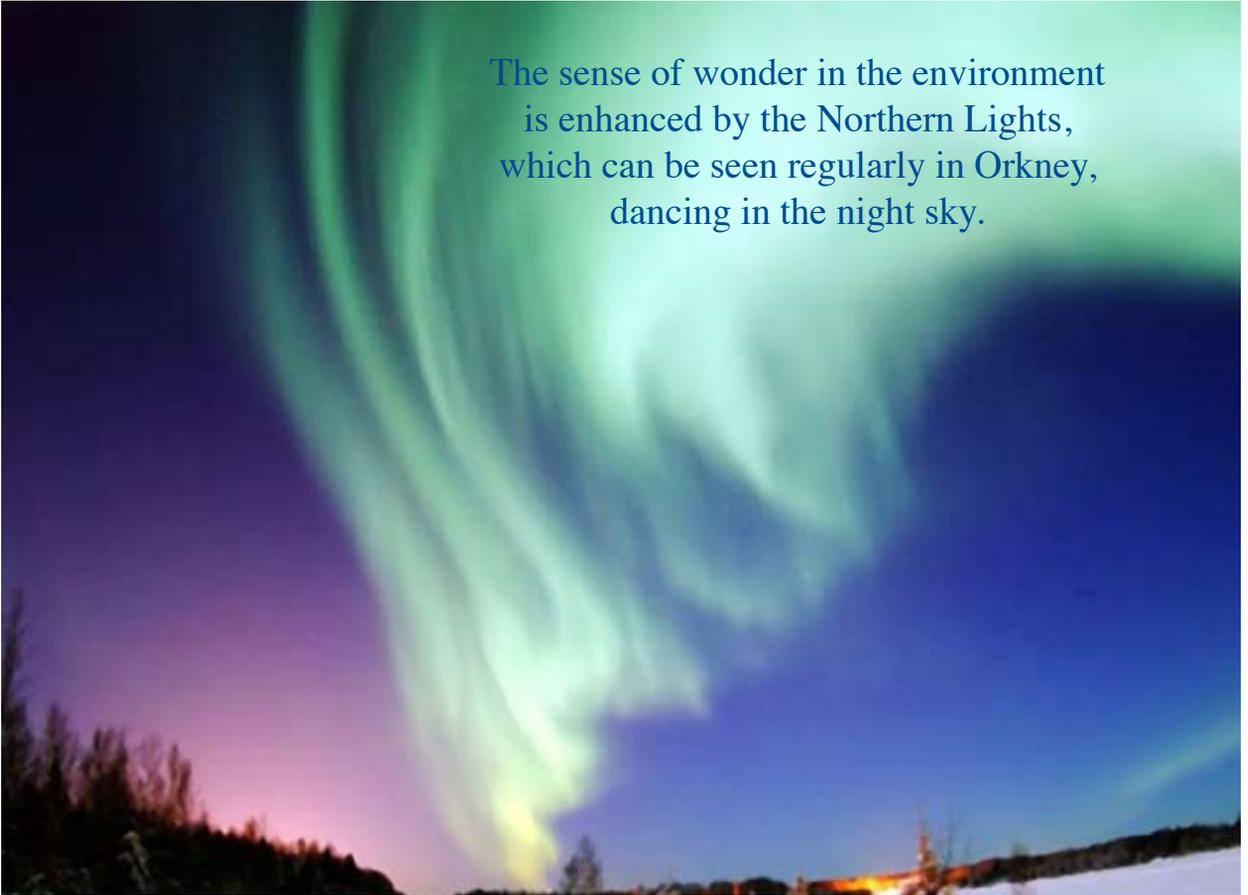
The Orkney Islands possess a folkloric tradition that is both unique and fascinating. As a small archipelago situated at the cusp of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, much of the folklore naturally involves tales of fisherman, sea voyages, and legendary creatures emerging from the waters. Due to the settlement of Orkney by the Norse, the lore of the Islands bears a stronger resemblance to Scandinavian tradition than Celtic.

However, because of the geographic distance from Scandinavia, as well as probable minor influences from the Picts, Orkney's folklore evolved a flavor of its own, with mythic creatures that are not found anywhere else.

The landscape of a place surely must influence the folklore of any region. In folkloric circles, much is said about the landscape of Iceland as an influence on Norse folklore. Iceland is teeming with hot springs, geysers, volcanos, and fjords. This mystical environment, they say, must fuel the imagination to invent tales of elves and their magical dwellings.

How true this must also be in Orkney. There are many cliffs and natural rock formations around the perimeters of the islands. Severe drops highlight the delineation between land and sea. Juxtaposed next to sheer cliffs are deep blue waves splashing against the rock face to one side, and lush green pastures where animals freely graze on the other. It makes for a contrasting clash of texture and colors.

The sense of wonder in the environment is enhanced by the Northern Lights, which can be seen regularly in Orkney, dancing in the night sky.



*Yesnaby Castle  
photo by  
Wolfgang Schlick*

The Orcadian landscape is also dotted with Neolithic ruins and ancient megaliths. It is not difficult to imagine what manner of magic could be afoot when we imagine ourselves in the center of an ancient stone circle and behold the vivid Aurora Borealis shining in the heavens.

One mythological race of beings which embodies all of the influences discussed above is the Fin Folk, who are unique to Orkney and Shetland.

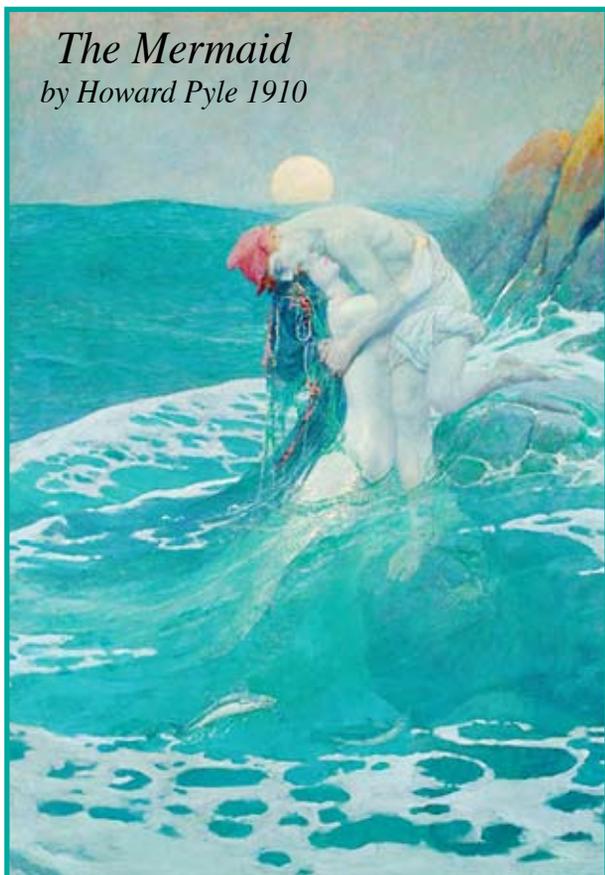
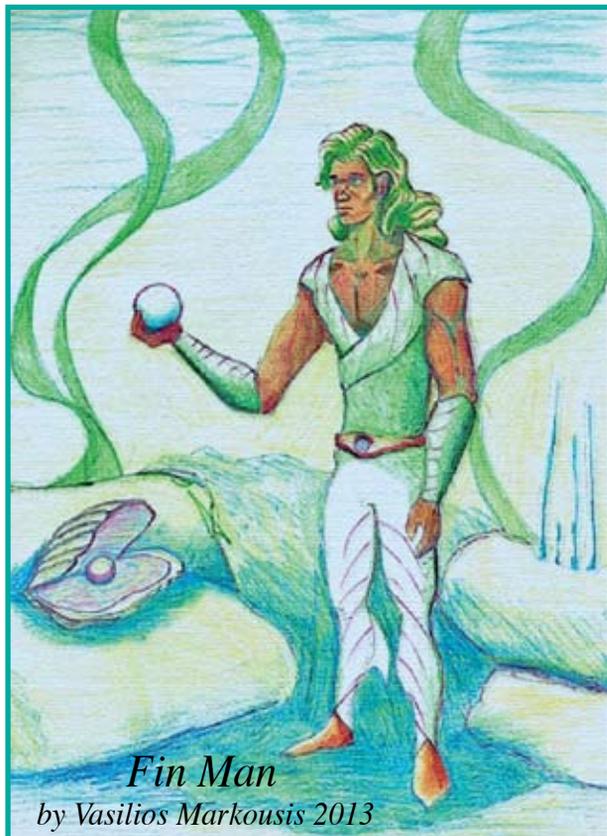
Just as the landscape is a contradiction between wild waters, harsh rocks, and gentle grasses, the Fin Folk are a contradiction in that their race is that of an amphibious sea people who can step out of the water onto land as they choose, and live comfortably between the two worlds. They are both threatening and benevolent.

Known as powerful sorcerers, Fin Folk can control the weather. They may reward fishermen with pleasant sea waters, or punish them with

treacherous storms. Sometimes, a human may be asked to do a favor for the Fin Folk. If so, they will be rewarded with copper coins. But never silver, for Fin Folk value silver greatly and are loathe parting with it.

Resembling humans in shape and form, Fin Folk could be distinguished from Orcadians in a few ways. Unlike Mer-people, whose bodies are traditionally constructed of a fish tail from the waist down, Fin Folk were fully humanoid (except for their daughters who were mermaids, which is explained below). The Fin Folk were thus named because their bodies were draped by fins that hung in such a way that they fell like the cloth in human clothes. This made differentiating between a Land person and a Fin person difficult at a distance. However, during a face to face interaction, the fins that adorned their bodies would make a Fin person fairly easy to recognize.

Apart from the obvious feature of literal fins, the Fin Folk were known for some other



features. They were said to be very well built with good proportions, and described as athletic. Renowned for their boating ability, Fin Folk traversed the sea without the aid of sails. It was said that they could move from Orkney to Norway with only seven strokes of the oar. And whereas the majority of Orcadians were of Nordic stock, and therefore fair complexioned, the Fin Folk were known to be rather swarthy.

There are some differing characteristics between Fin men and Fin women. Fin men were said to have dark, brooding faces and sad eyes. They, apparently, could make deals with human fisherman, enlisting their help in return for compensation. However, if humans were found fishing in seas claimed by Fin fishermen, woe betide them. Fin men were vengeful creatures and not above boring holes in the boats of trespassing humans. However, they were both vengeful and cunning. The clever Fin men would place the small hole in such a place unlikely to be seen by the fisherman until he was out to sea, and slowly the water trickled in.

Apparently, Fin physiology differs between male and female children. Male Fin children are shaped just as the adults are, in humanoid form. Female Fin children, however, are born with the fish tail of a mermaid, which they wear until they reach maturity when their tail will split into legs. As they develop into young women, the mermaids are enticingly beautiful. Much of the typical mermaid lore surrounds the Fin Folk version. Sailors can be enchanted by the striking beauty of these mermaids and pulled by them into the depths of the sea. But, the mermaids are not all treacherous. For many of these maids, their strongest desire is to marry a human man. If they marry a human, the mermaid will remain stunningly gorgeous for her entire life. However, if she marries a Fin man, the poor woman is doomed to become a haggard Fin Wife.

The Fin Folk had their own kingdom called Finfoykaheim. Located at the bottom of the sea, Finfoykaheim was an underwater paradise. It was said to be an exquisitely beautiful place, with sprawling gardens of brightly colored sea plants. Fin Folk lived in houses made of coral. Larger buildings, also made of coral, were adorned with turrets and towers which glistened with pearls and gemstones. Pearls were plentiful in this realm. And, not just any pearls. These were gigantic pearls the size of boulders! There were so many lying about, that they would be ground into glistening pearl dust, which the mermaids used to powder their tails to make them sparkle. In the center of Finfoykaheim was a dancing hall. It was a brilliant palace constructed of crystal. Phosphorous from the sea caused the crystal to glow with a misty natural bioluminescence. Within the palace was a concert hall with a large stage. The curtains adorning the stage also shimmered and glowed... for they were made of fabric trimmed from the Northern Lights!

There is much more to be said on the Fin Folk. Celtic Guide will keep you updated on

the release of my book, which will explore the Fin Folk in greater detail. In the meantime, stay tuned for another adventure through Orkney in next month's issue.



*Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom  
by Ilya Repin 1876*

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***About the author: Carolyn holds a bachelor's degree in Literature and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Library and Information Science, with a concentration in Archives.***