

Fairy Lore of the Isle of Skye

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'Fairies' by Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911)

For many hundreds of years Skye remained an island isolated from the rest of Scotland. It did not exist in a complete vacuum, as it was settled by both Celts and Norse, and probably by the Picts before them. There were always comings and goings by way of ships and boats from the mainland and abroad. Due to this sea access, Skye became a Viking hot spot, like so many of the other Scottish Isles. Its isolation became more pronounced toward the Industrial Revolution. As mechanized farming equipment, rail roads, and eventually motorways became the norm across mainland Britain, residents of Skye continued using traditional farming methods and modes of transport. It is no wonder, then, that fairy lore lingered on after it had begun to erode elsewhere.

Life moved at a slower pace in Skye, and stories of fairies continued to be passed on orally. Storytelling is, after all, a form of entertainment

that comes with no technology necessary. Author Mary Julia MacCulloch recorded some folklore during her time in Skye, which was published in the journal *Folklore* in 1922. She says that nearly all of her stories were collected from in and around the village of Portree. Yet, when it comes to Skye, the location of her interviews made little difference. She explains that the island was a tight knit community, and the inhabitants were a hearty breed of folk. It was not uncommon to see an elderly woman walking twenty-six miles just to attend mass. Many inhabitants belonged to parishes at distances quite far from where they lived. So, it seems that these people, who were so used to hard work, thought nothing of traversing their island on foot. As such, stories would have travelled throughout the island with ease.

It is quite humorous to note that Ms. MacCulloch laments the fact that the youths of the island read nothing but newspapers and novellas. She blames their lack of knowledge of local lore and legend on their reading habits. Today we might dance a jig if we caught our teenagers reading the newspaper!

MacCulloch gives further background on Skye island life when she explains that most inhabitants spoke only Gaelic, so she had difficulty communicating with them. Regular Celtic Guide readers may remember that I wrote several articles on Orkney for our Summer, 2013 issues, as well as an article regarding Scotland's forgotten Germanic heritage for our June, 2013 issue. In those articles I explored the use of Germanic languages such as Norn and Scots, derivatives of Old Norse and Old English respectively, on the eastern Scottish Isles. Skye has an element of Norse heritage, just as Orkney and Shetland do. But, as explained in the aforementioned article, the Scottish Isles in the North Sea retained greater Norse influence, while the isles to the west retained a greater Celtic influence.



'The Fairy Ring' by William Homes Sullivan

Mary Julia MacCulloch mentions that themes in fairy lore tend to be universal regardless of location. This is true in many of the stories she shares. We see many of the usual stories such as a beautiful human child taken by the fairies and replaced by a sickly, ugly changeling. Also mentioned are stories of people being taken into the mounds for what seems like a few hours, but days or years have passed when they re-emerge. Another motif recognizable from such stories as Rumpelstiltskin is the fairies doing manual labor for their human counterparts. This is also

seen in another famous German fairy tale, *The Shoemaker and the Elves*. The lowland Scots equivalents to such helpful creatures are the brownies.

As we would have it, the fairies on the island of Skye have a penchant for helping make tweed. Our editor, Jim, discussed Harris Tweed as a local company manufacturing traditional fabrics on Skye in our November, 2013 issue. Well, tweed making by hand on Skye pre-dates the industrial age and, according to lore, may have been aided by the fairies. MacCulloch's interviews reveal that some Skye crofters desired to spin and weave the very tweed that their island became so famous for, but they became too tired. Under the influence of exhaustion, the would-be tweeders made the mistake of wishing aloud, so that the fairies could hear them, that the tweed would just be finished. Overhearing this wish, the fairies appeared and demanded the necessary tools to finish the deed.

Industrious were these fairies, indeed, for they would not leave when the task was completed. The crofters were forced to seek the help of a wise man. He advised them to direct the fairies to build a roof, but that the roof must

be made of a special kind of wood. There only existed one tree on the entire island that grew the kind of wood needed.

When the fairies began their building, they were unable to complete it. And so, they had no choice but to leave the crofters to their own devices, as they were before.

At times, a human could be called to do a favor for the fairies. One such person was a midwife of Skye.



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This midwife also tended her own small herd of cows. One night she went out to call the cows home, when she was approached by a fairy man. He bid her to follow him. She refused, saying she had to tend to her cows. The fairy man insisted that if she helped him, her cows would be well looked after. When she arrived in his fairy home, she found that his wife was having difficulties in childbirth. The situation was so dire that the delivery and subsequent health concerns of mother and child took several days. By the time her services were no longer needed, eight full days had gone by! When the midwife returned to her own home, however, she found that the fairy man had been true to his word. Her cattle never could have been better cared for.

Another fairy story from Skye comes to us from K.M. Briggs who published a few decades later, also in *Folklore* magazine. She received the story from the wife of a minister from the Isle of Skye. As the story goes, a little boy and his sister had been left to stay with their grandmother while their mother went to nurse an ailing friend some distance away. A neighbor boy joined the pair to play. After a pleasant afternoon of playing in the sunshine, the children began to feel tired and a little ornery. An elderly woman happened to call on the children's grandmother. Now, this woman was known to be a "wise woman," and had an idea about how to cheer them up.

As an aside, the etymology of the word "witch" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wicca* or *wicce* (pronounced 'witch-uh', unlike the neo-pagan religion of Wicca) meaning wise person. These people were also called "cunning folk" up through the Early Modern Era. They were known for their knowledge of herbs and healing abilities, and cunning women were often the victims of witch hunts. But, I digress.

Now, this wise woman took a liking to the children and asked if they would like to see something special. They replied that yes, they would, so she beckoned them to follow her. What happened next is reminiscent of Irish poet William Allingham's most famous poem, 'The Fairies'—

*Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather!*

The children followed the old woman down a winding path through a glen and over to a little burn. Following her instructions, the children held hands, the first with the wise woman and so on so that all four were connected. Then, they sat down beside the stream. Suddenly, on the other side of the brook the children beheld an iridescent fire burning in twilight of the early evening. They couldn't believe their eyes when fairies appeared around the fire! The fairies were bedecked all in green and danced merrily about the flames. When the children arrived by the very same burn the next day to show their friends, the fairies were nowhere to be seen.

K.M. Briggs reveals that the little boy was the husband of the woman who told her this story. According to his wife, the minister reckoned it was the presence of the wise woman that allowed the children to see the fairies. By holding the hand of the witch, and all children connecting together in a line, the minister thought each child was able to tap into the energy or extra sense that the wise woman carried. For it was said among the villagers that this woman possessed the famous Celtic "second sight."

The fairies of Skye turn up in the island's beautiful landscape as well as its lore. There are many landmarks that are associated with tales of stories. And some that seem to have earned their association for their otherworldly appearance rather than any legend. The fairy pools of Skye are one such example. These are naturally occurring pools typically under waterfalls, usually with very clear water, unique rock formations, and surrounded in vivid color. Since these pools have been an internet sensation, I did make an earnest attempt to find lore associated with them.

Sadly, I was unable to. This in no way insinuates that none exists, simply that I could not locate it. However, these pools are often graced with an abundance of minerals and decorated with beautiful blue-green algae which give them a reputation as places of healing.

This phenomenon is also seen with the holy wells all over Britain, Ireland, and Europe. These were typically fresh water springs with similar properties. In most cases, these wells and springs were sacred to pagans long before the Christianization of Europe. After conversion, however, the Church adopted them as holy wells. A similar instance is seen in Bath. The famous hot springs of Bath are thought to have been a holy site to British pagans. The Romans, always one with a keen eye for opportunity, harnessed the natural heated mineral water when they built a traditional Roman bath around it.

In any case, the fairy pools at Skye have become famous through the magic of the internet. If you haven't heard of them, I urge you to look it up on YouTube where there are some wonderful videos of them.

There are many more fairy stories from Skye, and I will be sure to share them with you in the future. Please visit my writer's page on Facebook to read more on the folklore of yester yore – www.facebook.com/carolynemerickwriter.

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'Fairy Pool' by Vasilios Markousis