

**DONALD  
ALEXANDER  
MACKENZIE**

ELVES AND HEROES

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*Elves and Heroes:*

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# **Donald A. Mackenzie**

## **Elves and Heroes**

### **PREFACE**

#### **THE ELVES**

The immemorial folk-beliefs of our native land are passing away, but they still retain for us a poetic appeal, not only on account of the glamour of early associations, but also because they afford us inviting glimpses of the mental habits and inherent characteristics of the men and women of past generations. When we re-tell the old tales of our ancestors, we sit beside them over the peat-fire; and, as we glory with them in their strong heroes, and share their elemental joys and fears, we breathe the palpitating air of that old mysterious world of theirs, peopled by spirits beautiful, and strange, and awe-inspiring.

The attitude of the Gael towards the supernatural, and his general outlook upon life in times gone by, was not associated with unbroken gloom; nor was he always an ineffectual dreamer and melancholy fatalist. These attributes belong chiefly to the Literary Celt of latter-day conception—the Celt of Arnold and Renan, and other writers following in their wake, who have

woven misty impressions of a people whom they have met as strangers, and never really understood. Celtic literature is not a morbid literature. In Highland poetry there is more light than shadow, much symbolism, but no vagueness; pictures are presented in minute detail; stanzas are cunningly wrought in a spirit of keen artistry; and the literary style is direct and clear and comprehensible. In Highland folklore we find associated with the haunting "fear of things invisible," common to all peoples in early stages of development, a confident feeling of security inspired by the minute observances of ceremonial practices. We also note a distinct tendency to discriminate between spirits, some of which are invariably friendly, some merely picturesque, and perhaps fearsome, and others constantly harbouring a desire to work evil upon mankind. Associated with belief in the efficacy of propitiatory offerings and "ceremonies of riddance," is the ethical suggestion that good wishes and good deeds influence spirits to perform acts of kindly intent.

Of fairies the Highlanders spoke, as they are still prone to do in these districts where belief in them is not yet extinct, with no small degree of regard and affection. It may be that "the good folk" and the "peace-people" (*sitchean*) were so called that good intention might be compelled by the conjuring influence of a name, as well as to avoid giving offence by uttering real names, as if it were desired to exercise a magical influence by their use. Be that as it may, it is evident from Highland folk-tales that the fairies were oftener the friends than the foes of mankind. When

men and women were lured to their dwellings they rarely suffered injury; indeed, the fairies appeared to have taken pleasure in their company. To such as they favoured they imparted the secrets of their skill in the arts of piping, of sword-making, etc. At sowing time or harvest they were at the service of human friends. On the needy they took pity. They never failed in a promise; they never forgot an act of kindness, which they invariably rewarded seven-fold. Against those who wronged them they took speedy vengeance. It would appear that on these humanised spirits of his conception the Highlander left, as one would expect him to do, the impress of his own character—his shrewdness and high sense of honour, his love of music and gaiety, his warmth of heart and love of comrades, and his indelible hatred of tyranny and wrong.

The Highland "wee folk" are not so diminutive as the fairies of England—at least that type of fairy, beloved of the poet, which hovers bee-like over flowers and feeds on honey-dew. Power they had to shrink in stature and to render themselves invisible, but they are invariably "little people," from three to four feet high. It may be that the Gael's conception of humanised spirits may not have been uninfluenced by the traditions of that earlier diminutive race whose arrow-heads of flint were so long regarded as "elf-bolts." The fairies dwelt only in grassy knolls, on the summits of high hills, and inside cliffs. Although capable of living for several centuries, they were not immortal. They required food, and borrowed meal and cooking utensils from human beings, and always returned what they received on loan.

They could be heard within the knolls grinding corn and working at their anvils, and they were adepts at spinning and weaving and harvesting. When they went on long journeys they became invisible, and were carried through the air on eddies of western wind.

At the seasonal changes of the year, "the wee folk" were for several days on end inspired, like all other supernatural furies, with enmity against mankind. Their evil influences were negated by spells and charms. We who still hang on our walls at Christmas the mystic holly, are unconsciously perpetuating an old-world custom connected with belief in the efficacy of the magical circle to protect us against evil spirits. And in our concern about luck, our proneness to believe in omens, the influence of colours and numbers, in dreams and in prophetic warnings, we retain as much of the spirit as the poetry of the religion of our remote ancestors.

## **THE HEROES**

The heroes, with the exception of Cuchullin, who appear in this volume, figure in the tales and poems of the Ossianic or Fian Cycle, which is common to Ireland and to Scotland. They have been neglected by our Scottish poets since Gavin Douglas and Barbour. In Ireland the Fians are a band of militia—the original Fenians. In Scotland the tales vary considerably, and belong to the hunting period before the introduction of agriculture. But in

this country, as well as in Ireland, they are evidently influenced by historic happenings. There are tales of Norse conflicts, as well as tales of adventure among giants and spirits.

The cycle had evidently remote beginnings. When we find Diarmid and Grainnč, like Paris and Helen, the cause of conflict and disaster; and Diarmid, like Achilles, charmed of body, and vulnerable only on his heel-spot, we incline to the theory that from a mid-European centre migrating "waves" swept over prehistoric Greece, and left traces of their mythology and folk-lore in Homer, while other "waves," sweeping northward, bequeathed to us as a literary inheritance the Celtic folk-tales, in which the deeds and magical attributes of remote tribal heroes and humanised deities are co-mingled and perpetuated.

On fragments of these folk-tales the poet Macpherson reared his Ossianic epic, in imitation of the Iliad and Paradise Lost.

The "Death of Cuchullin" is a rendering in verse of an Irish prose translation of a fragment of the Cuchullin Cycle, which moves in the Bronze Age period. Cuchullin, with "the light of heroes" on his forehead, is also reminiscent of Achilles. One of the few Cuchullin tales found in Scotland is that which relates his conflict with his son, and bears a striking similarity to the legend of Sohrab and Rustum. Macpherson also drew from this Cycle in composing his Ossian, and mingled it with the other, with which it has no connection.

The third great Celtic Cycle—the Arthurian—bears close resemblances, as Campbell, of "The West Highland Tales,"

has shown, to the Fian Cycle, and had evidently a common origin. Its value as a source of literary inspiration has been fully appreciated, but the Fian and Cuchullin cycles still await, like virgin soil, to yield an abundant harvest for the poets of the future.

Notes on the folk-beliefs and tales will be found at the end of this volume.

Some of the short poems have appeared in the "Glasgow Herald" and

"Inverness Courier"; the three tales appeared in the "Celtic Review."

# THE WEE FOLK

In the knoll that is the greenest,  
And the grey cliff side,  
And on the lonely ben-top  
The wee folk bide;  
They'll flit among the heather,  
And trip upon the brae—  
The wee folk, the green folk, the red folk and grey.

As o'er the moor at midnight  
The wee folk pass,  
They whisper 'mong the rushes  
And o'er the green grass;  
All through the marshy places  
They glint and pass away—  
The light folk, the lone folk, the folk that will not stay.

O many a fairy milkmaid  
With the one eye blind,  
Is 'mid the lonely mountains  
By the red deer hind;  
Not one will wait to greet me,  
For they have naught to say—  
The hill folk, the still folk, the folk that flit away.

When the golden moon is glinting  
In the deep, dim wood,  
There's a fairy piper playing  
To the elfin brood;  
They dance and shout and turn about,  
And laugh and swing and sway—  
The droll folk, the knoll folk, the folk that dance away.

O we that bless the wee folk  
Have naught to fear,  
And ne'er an elfin arrow  
Will come us near;  
For they'll give skill in music,  
And every wish obey—  
The wise folk, the peace folk, the folk that work and play.

They'll hasten here at harvest,  
They will shear and bind;  
They'll come with elfin music  
On a western wind;  
All night they'll sit among the sheaves,  
Or herd the kine that stray—  
The quick folk, the fine folk, the folk that ask no pay.

Betimes they will be spinning  
The while we sleep,  
They'll clamber down the chimney,  
Or through keyholes creep;  
And when they come to borrow meal

We'll ne'er them send away—  
The good folk, the honest folk, the folk that work alway.

O never wrong the wee folk—  
The red folk and green,  
Nor name them on the Fridays,  
Or at Hallowe'en;  
The helpless and unwary then  
And bairns they lure away—  
The fierce folk, the angry folk, the folk that steal and slay.

# BONNACH FALLAIDH

## (THE REMNANT BANNOCK.)

O, the good-wife will be singing  
When her meal is all but done—  
Now all my bannocks have I baked,  
I've baked them all but one;  
And I'll dust the board to bake it,  
I'll bake it with a spell—  
O, it's Finlay's little bannock  
For going to the well.

The bannock on the brander  
Smells sweet for your desire—  
O my crisp ones I will count not  
On two sides of the fire;  
And not a farl has fallen  
Some evil to foretell!—  
O it's Finlay's little bannock  
For going to the well.

The bread would not be lasting,  
'Twould crumble in your hand;  
When fairies would be coming here

To turn the meal to sand—  
But what will keep them dancing  
In their own green dell?  
O it's Finlay's little bannock  
For going to the well.

Now, not a fairy finger  
Will do my baking harm—  
The little bannock with the hole,  
O it will be the charm.  
I knead it, I knead it, 'twixt my palms,  
And all the bairns I tell—  
O it's Finlay's little bannock  
For going to the well.

# THE BANSHEE

Knee-deep she waded in the pool—  
The Banshee robed in green—  
She sang yon song the whole night long,  
And washed the linen clean;  
The linen that would wrap the dead  
She beetled on a stone,  
She stood with dripping hands, blood-red,  
Low singing all alone—

*His linen robes are pure and white, For Fergus More must die to-night!*

'Twas Fergus More rode o'er the hill,  
Come back from foreign wars,  
His horse's feet were clattering sweet  
Below the pitiless stars;  
And in his heart he would repeat—  
"O never again I'll roam;  
All weary is the going forth,  
But sweet the coming home!"

*His linen robes are pure and white, For Fergus More must die to-night!*

He saw the blaze upon his hearth  
Come gleaming down the glen;  
For he was fain for home again,  
And rode before his men—  
"'Tis many a weary day," he'd sigh,  
"Since I would leave her side;  
I'll never more leave Scotland's shore  
And you, my dark-eyed bride."

*His linen robes are pure and white, For Fergus More must die  
to-night!*

So dreaming of her tender love,  
Soft tears his eyes would blind—  
When up there crept and swiftly leapt  
A man who stabbed behind—  
"'Tis you," he cried, "who stole my bride,  
This night shall be your last!" ...  
When Fergus fell, the warm, red tide  
Of life came ebbing fast ...

*His linen robes are pure and white, For Fergus More must die  
to-night!*

# CONN, SON OF THE RED

The Fians sojourned by the shore  
Of comely Cromarty, and o'er  
The wooded hill pursued the chase  
With ardour. 'Twas a full moon's space  
Ere Beltane<sup>1</sup> rites would be begun  
With homage to the rising sun—  
Ere to the spirits of the dead  
Would sacrificial blood be shed  
In yon green grove of Navity—<sup>2</sup>  
When Conn came over the Eastern Sea,  
His heart aflame with vengeful ire,  
To seek for Goll, who slew his sire  
When he was seven years old.

Finn saw  
In dreams, ere yet he came, with awe  
The Red One's son, so fierce and bold,  
In combat with his hero old—  
The king-like Goll of valorous might—  
A stormy billow in the fight  
No foe could ere withstand.

---

<sup>1</sup> May Day.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional Holy Hill

He knew

The strange ship bore brave Conn, and blew  
Clear on his horn the Warning Call;  
And round him thronged the Fians all  
With wond'ring gaze.

The sun drew nigh

The bale-fires of the western sky,  
And faggot clouds with blood-red glare,  
Caught flame, and in the radiant air  
Lone Wyvis like a jewel shone—  
The Fians, as they stared at Conn,  
Were stooping on the high Look-Out.  
They watched the ship that tacked about,  
Now slant across the firth, and now  
Laid bare below the cliff's broad brow,  
And heaving on a billowy steep,  
Like to a monster of the deep  
That wallowed, labouring in pain—  
And Conn stared back with cold disdain.

Pondering, he sat alone behind  
The broad sail swallowing the wind,  
As over the hollowing waves that leapt  
And snarled with foaming lips, and swept  
Around the bows in querulous fray,  
And tossed in curves of drenching spray,  
The belching ship with ardour drove;  
Then like a lordly elk that strove

Amid the hounds and, charging, rent  
The pack asunder as it went,  
It bore round and in beauty sprang—  
The sea-wind through the cordage sang  
With high and wintry merriment  
That stirred the heart of Conn, intent  
On vengeance, and for battle keen—  
So hard, so steadfast, and serene.

Then Ossian, sweet of speech, spake low,  
With musing eyes upon the foe,  
"Is Conn more noble than The Red,  
Whom Goll in battle vanquished?"  
"The Red was fiercer," Conan cried—  
"Nay, Conn is nobler," Finn replied,  
"More comely, stalwart, mightier far—  
What sayest thou, Goll, my man of war?"  
Then Goll made answer on the steep,  
Nor ceased to gaze on Conn full deep—  
"His equal never came before  
Across the seas to Alban shore,  
Nor ever have I peered upon  
A nobler, mightier man than Conn"

The ship flew seaward, tacking wide,  
Contending with the wind and tide,  
And when upon the broad stream's track  
It baffled hung, or drifted back,  
With grunt and shriek, like battling boars,

The shock and swing of bladed oars  
Came sounding o'er the sea

The dusk

Grew round the twilight, like a husk  
That holds a kernel choice, and keen,  
Cold stars impaled the sky serene,  
When Conn's ship through the slackening tide  
Drew round the wistful bay and wide,  
Behind the headlands high that snout  
The seas like giant whales, and spout  
The salt foam high and loud

Then sighed

The gasping men who all day plied  
Their oars in plunging seas, with hands  
Grown stiff, and arms, like twisted bands  
Drawn numbly, as they rose outspent,  
And staggering from their benches went  
The sail napped quarrelling, and drank  
The wind in broken gasps, and sank  
With sullen pride upon the boards,  
And smote the mast and shook the cords

Darkly loomed that alien land,  
And darkly lowered the Fian band,  
For hovering on the shoreland grey  
The ship they followed round the bay  
Nor sought the sheltering woods until

The shadows folded o'er the hill  
Full heavily, and night fell blind,  
And laid its spell upon the wind

The swelling waters sank with sip  
And hollow gurgle round the ship,  
The long mast rocked against the dim,  
Soft heaven above the headland's rim

But while the seamen crouched to sleep,  
Conn sat alone in reverie deep,  
And saw before him in a maze  
The mute procession of his days,  
In gloom and glamour wending fast—  
His heart a-hungering for the past—  
Again he leapt, a tender boy,  
To greet his sire with eager joy,  
When he came over the wide North Sea,  
Enriched with spoils of victory—  
Then heavily loomed that fateful morn  
When tidings of his fall were borne  
From Alban shore ... Again he saw  
The youth who went alone with awe  
To swear the avenging oath before  
The smoking altar red with gore.

Ah! strange to him it seemed to be  
That hour was drawing nigh when he  
Would vengeance take ... And still more strange,

O sorrow! it would bring no change  
Though blood for blood be spilled, and life  
For life be taken in fierce strife;  
'Twill ne'er recall the life long sped,  
Or break the silence of the dead.

But when he heard his mother's wail,  
Once more uplifted on the gale,  
Moaning The Red who ne'er returned—  
His cheeks with sudden passion burned;  
And darkly frowned that valiant man,  
As through his quivering body ran  
The lightnings of impelling ire  
And impulses of fierce desire,  
That surged, with a consuming hate  
Against a world made desolate,  
Unceasing and unreconciled,  
And ever clamouring ... like wild,  
Dark-deeded waves that stun the shore,  
And through the anguished twilight roar  
The hungry passions of the wide  
And gluttonous deep unsatisfied.

## II

The shredding dawn in beauty spread  
Its shafts of splendour, golden-red,  
High over the eastern heaven, and broke  
Through flaking clouds in silvern smoke  
That burst aflame, and fold o'er fold,  
Let loose their oozing floods of gold,  
Splashed over the foamless deep that lay  
Tremulous and clear. In fiery play  
The rippling beams that swept between  
The sea-cleft Sutor crags serene,  
Broke quivering where the waters bore  
The soft reflection of the shore.

The pipes of morn were sounding shrill  
Through budding woods on plain and hill,  
And stirred the air with song to wake  
The sweet-toned birds within the brake.

The Fians from their sheilings came,  
With offerings to the god a-flame,  
And round them thrice they sun-wise went;  
Then naked-kneed in silence bent  
Beside the pillar stones ...

But now

Brave Conn upon the ship's high prow  
Hath raised his burnished blade on high,  
And calls on Woden and on Tigh  
With boldness, to avenge the death  
Of his great sire ... In one deep breath  
He drains the hero's draught that burns  
With valour of the gods; then turns  
His long-sought foe to meet ... Great Conn  
Sweeps, stooping in a boat, alone.  
Shoreward, with rapid blades and bright,  
That shower the foam-rain pearly white,  
And rip the waters, bending lithe,  
In hollowing swirls that hiss and writhe  
Like adders, ere they dart away  
Bright-spotted with the flakes of spray.

When, furrowing the sand, he drew  
His boat the shallowing water through,  
A giant he in stature rose  
Straight as a mast before his foes,  
With head thrown high, and shoulders wide  
And level, and set back with pride;  
His bared and supple arms were long  
As shapely oars: firm as a thong  
His right hand grasped his gleaming blade,  
Gold-hilted, and of keen bronze made  
In leafen shape.

With stately stride

He crossed the level sands and wide,  
Then on his shield the challenge gave—  
His broad sword thund'ring like a wave—  
For single combat.

Red as gold

His locks upon his shoulders rolled;  
A brazen helmet on his head  
Flashed fire; his cheeks were white and red;  
And all the Fians watched with awe  
That hero young with knotted jaw,  
Whose eyes, set deep, and blue and hard,  
Surveyed their ranks with cold regard;  
While his broad forehead, seamed with care,  
Drooped shadowily: his eyebrows fair  
Were sloping sideways o'er his eyes  
With pondering o'er the mysteries.

The eyes of all the Fians sought  
Heroic Groll, whose face was wrought  
With lines of deep, perplexing thought—  
For gazing on the valiant Conn,  
He mourned that his own youth was gone,  
When, strong and fierce and bold, he shed  
The life-blood of the boastful Red,  
Whom none save he would meet. He heard  
The challenge, and nor spake, nor stirred,  
Nor feared; but now grown old, when hate  
And lust of glory satiate—

His heart took pride in Conn, and shared  
The kinship of the brave.

Who dared  
To meet the Viking bold, if he  
The succour of the band, should be  
Found faltering or in despair?  
Until that day the Fians ne'er  
Of one man had such fear.

Old Goll  
Sat musing on a grassy knoll,  
They deemed he shared their dread ... Not so  
Wise Finn, who spake forth firm and slow—  
"Goll, son of Morna, peerless man,  
The keen desire of every clan,  
Far-famed for many a valiant deed,  
Strong hero in the time of need.  
I vaunt not Conn ... nor deem that thou  
Dost falter, save with meekness, now—  
But why shouldst thou not take the head  
Of this bold youth, as of The Red,  
His sire, in other days?"

Goll spake—  
"O noble Finn, for thy sweet sake  
Mine arms I'd seize with ready hand,  
Although to answer thy command  
My blood to its last drop were spilled—

By Crom! were all the Fians killed,  
My sword would never fail to be  
A strong defence to succour thee."

Upon his hard right arm with haste  
His crooked and pointed shield he braced,  
He clutched his sword in his left hand—  
While round that hero of the band  
The Fian warriors pressed, and praised  
His valour ... Mute was Goll ... They raised,  
Smiting their hands, the battle-cry,  
To urge him on to victory.

The one-eyed Goll went forth alone,  
His face was like a mountain stone,—  
Cold, hard, and grey; his deep-drawn breath  
Came heavily, like a man nigh death—  
But his firm mouth, with lips drawn thin,  
Deep sunken in his wrinkled skin,  
Was cunningly crooked; his hair was white,  
On his bald forehead gleamed a bright  
And livid scar that Conn's great sire  
Had cloven when their swords struck fire—  
Burly and dauntless, full of might,  
Old Goll went humbly forth to fight  
With arrogant Conn ... It seemed The Red  
In greater might was from the dead,  
Restored in his fierce son ...

A deep  
Swift silence fell, like sudden sleep,  
On all the Fians waiting there  
In sharp suspense and half despair ...  
The morn was still. A skylark hung  
In mid-air flutt'ring, and sung  
A lullaby that grew more sweet  
Amid the stillness, in the heat  
And splendour of the sun: the lisp  
Of faint wind in the herbage crisp  
Went past them; and around the bare  
And foam-striped sand-banks gleaming fair,  
The faintly-panting waves were cast  
By the wan deep fatigued and vast.

O great was Conn in that dread hour,  
And all the Fians feared his power,  
And watched, as in a darksome dream,  
The warriors meet ... They saw the gleam

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