



In Search of the Mystic Past

The Magickal Isle of Skye

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Probably the most famous of the Scottish islands is Skye, off the North West coast. Only about 77 kilometres from North to South, and 43 kilometres from West to East at its widest part, the island's jagged coastline makes it impossible to be more than eight kilometres from the sea. Skye is a romantic's dream, and a mountaineer's paradise. It evokes mystery and enchantment with its spectacular scenery and ever changing colours. An aura of mysticism still remains from its Norse and Gaelic times when the Isle was known as the "Isle of the Clouds" by the Vikings, and the "Winged Isle" by the Celts. Today, with the current revival of Gaelic, it is known as "Eilean a' Cheo", the Isle of the Mist.

Cuchulainn and the Warrior Goddess Scathach

One of the better known features of Skye are the Cullin Mountains. The Black Cullins are a horseshoe-shaped range encircling one of the most isolated and remote lochs in Scotland, Loch Coruisk. The twenty sharp peaks are all over 900 metres high and are often necked in clouds. Facing these are conical summits of pink granite known as the Red Cullins. The mountains are, according to Celtic legend, named after the Ulster Sun God, Cuchulainn, when he journeyed to the domain of the Goddess Scathach, "the Shadowy One", on Skye. Scathach was a formidable warrior queen and prophetess, and the ruins of Dunscaith on the Sleat Peninsular in the south of the island are said to have been her stronghold.

Cuchulainn's journey to Skye was one for him to gain wisdom, skill and to be transformed. He passed through various trials on the way - the Plains of Ill Luck, where the feet of men could be pierced by razor sharp grass blade; the Perilous Glens, filled with its devouring beasts; and the Bridge of the Cliff, stretching between the mainland and Skye, said to throw anyone attempting to cross it to their deaths. Cuchulainn avoided this fate by performing his "Salmon Leap" (which involved twisting and turning like a salmon) to gain access to Scathach's stronghold.

Cuchulainn served as one of Scathach's students for one year and a day, and won battles in single combat against the other student before taking on Scathach's sister, Aoife, who was known for her battle skills. Cuchulainn eventually won this match, but only by out-tricking her. According to legend, Aoife, later became his lover and bore him a son, Colai, but it was the boy's own fate to be killed by his father.

Another version of the legend says it was Scathach's daughter, Uathach, who was beaten and this angered the warrior queen so much that she decided to fight the young hero herself. They battled for four days and four nights, neither eating nor sleeping, and it was only when they finally realised neither of them would win that they stopped. Scathach subsequently awarded Cuchulainn Gae-bolg, the "belly spear", which, it made a single entry, once inside the body the 30 barbs would open and tear the stomach apart. And when the youth returned to Ireland, Scathach named the Cullin Mountains after him out of respect.

Faeries and Witches

The earliest human occupation of Skye dates to around 3,500 BC. From this time came many of the chambered tombs and brochs that are scattered around the island. Brochs, being dry stone towers, were believed to have been built for defensive purposes, and are said to be "as old as Sithichean" - older than man.



Dun Beag - an entrance into the Underworld

They serve a more sinister purpose in folklore, being the dwelling place for faeries and the entrance way to their kingdoms. Mortals and cattle alike were said to be carried off by faeries to the brochs, from which emanated an eerie green light when the Sun went down.

One of the better preserved brochs on Skye is Dun Beag, near the main road to Struan, overlooking Loch Bracadale. The broch occupies a rocky knoll, making its walls appear even taller and more impressive. With its extensive views of the Cullin Mountains, there is a

surreal peace about the place, being surrounded by flowering heather, foxgloves and bracken during the summer.

This belief of the Faery folk was still strong in the 1830s when a chambered tomb near Broadford was investigated. The men who entered the chamber, were armed with pistols to defend themselves, believing that strange animals lived within. Instead, all that was found were charred skulls, several flint implements, and some pottery fragments.

The history of some chambered tombs tends to relate more to folk legend than fact. One example is of the two massive cairns close to the road at Vattern, in the west of the isle, which were said to have been built on the site of the last great battle between the Clans MacLeod and MacDonald. According to legend, thick mist descended during the battle, causing great confusion, and resulting in the deaths of most of the warriors. So many men were killed or wounded that the only people left to dig the graves were the women, children and old men. The best they could do was to make two piles of the bodies, according to clan, and cover each with stones.

Finally, amongst the rich folklore, is a story about the island's witches. Three of them once lived near Portress, the island's largest town, at Camusianavaig Point. One of their

clients was a skipper of a local fishing boat who wished to get even with a rival crew. On the day he decided to consult the witches, bring with him a bottle of whisky, only two were home. They went ahead anyway and, by the time they had decided on a suitable spell, the whisky bottle was empty. About this time the third witch returned, and she was furious - not only for not being consulted about the spell, but also because there was no whisky left for her. It is said that as the skipper's boat sailed past the point, a squall suddenly blew up, engulfing the boat and its crew. And even today, her anger can still be felt as winds still blow near Camusianavaig Point when the rest of the bay is calm.

MacDonalds of Sleat

Skye's history is long and complicated. The Celts and Norse came and went, and ever since the 13th century the island has been ruled, to a greater or lesser degree, by the Dunvegan MacLeods, in the north, and in the South by the MacDonalds of Sleat.



Dunscaith Castle, the home of the legendary Scathach

Dunscaith Castle on the Sleat Peninsular in the south, the legendary home of the island's Goddess Scathach, is attributed to the MacDonalds. It was their principle seat up until the late 15th century, and the local legend surrounding it was that Dunscaith was built in one night.

*"All night the witch sang, and the castle grew.
Up from rock, with tower and turrets crowned.
All night she sang - when fell the morning dew.
'Twas finished round and round ..."*

The MacDonalds then took over Duntulm Castle in the north from the MacLeods in 1482, and this was their new home until it was abandoned in 1730, when a nurse dropped the chief's baby son from the window to the rocks below, thus cursing the household. From that point, they moved south again, and eventually ended up at Armadale, with a modest manor house which today is the genealogical centre. Duntulm Castle is said to be haunted by the ghost of the eighth MacDonald chief, Donald Gorm Mor, who is said to return to the castle with two companies to get drunk!

MacLeods and the Faery Flag

The MacLeods have fared the centuries better. Their ancestral home is Dunvegan Castle, which is lived in today by their 29th chief. Maybe this is because in their possession is the "faery flag", a 600 year old tattered silken banner which is shot with gold thread and marked with "elf spots".

Many stories are associated as to how the flag came into the clan's possession, including it being captured and brought back from the Crusades. However, one favourite is of a MacLeod chief being married to a faery. Later, when she decided to return to her own people, she dropped a piece of silk at her husband's feet at a place called the Ford of the Three Burns (known today as the "Faery Bridge", and said"

*"Keep this flag and unfurl it to the wind whenever crisis hits you.
It will save you and yours twice.
But woe betide you if you unfurl it a third time".*

Some say that the flag has been used twice - to win the battles of Glendale in 1490, and of Waternish in 1580. Others say that it was Titania, the Faery Queen herself, who gave the flag to the MacLeods.

The Ancient Picts

Before the coming of the Gaels, Skye was home to the Picts. The Picts were the original inhabitants of northern Scotland and were so named by the Romans due to their practice of adorning or decorating their bodies with tribal totems and magickal designs. Such designs were either actual tattoos and drawn with woad. The Picts had many beliefs in common with the Celts, one of which was their shared aversion to written language, their religious beliefs and traditions were committed to memory.

There is a beautiful symbol stone still standing in the open near Skeabost. The other two symbol stones found on the island are now in the Edinburgh Museum. Skye was also the most northern isle St Columbia visited when he brought Christianity to the islands, and in 1746 local lass Flora MacDonald helped Prince Charles Edward Stuart (later known as "Bonnie Prince Charlie") escape the English after the slaughter of his Jacobites at the Battle of Culloden. She dressed the Prince in her maid's clothes and hid him in a cave before he could escape to France.



The Skeabost Pict Stone

Skye Today

With tourism being very important to the local economy, the locals have a love/hate relationship with the many visitors. One custom, which is frowned upon if broke, is the keeping of the Sabbath. A visitor to the island will find that although the music and gaiety extends late night most of the week during the summer months, come midnight on Saturday, it stops dead, and any lingering drinkers are quickly ushered into the streets. This is because of firm belief of the Church of Scotland. Then, in almost complete irony, the two places opens on Sunday are the local church and the pub.

Today, the island is joined to the rest of Scotland by a bridge. Some feel that this takes away the mystic qualities about the island. But for those still wishing to go "over the sea to Skye", there are still two ferries running, to the best of my knowledge - one in the south of the island from Mallaig to Armadale, and the second is a summer only ferry from Glenelg to Kylerhea, which takes the route cattle were once forced to swim.

Skye is truly a place for more than just a few hours stop over. When I was there during the summer of 1995, I met Billy Connolly at the highland games, heard various forms of traditional music at the folk festival, and even witnessed Norwegian sailors make a quick whisky stop at the island's only distillery, Talisker, whilst out on manoeuvres. I saw

seals, otters, and an abundance of birdlife, as well as highland cattle. I heard a traditional Manx singer and harp player, Emma Christian, perform at a magickal candle-lit concert at Dunvegan Castle, and learned to spot an American at 10 paces (they are the only ones wearing not one tartan, but as many as they can put a claim too). I partook in the local ceilidhs (rather wild dances) till the wee small hours, and even dragged myself up a Cullin Mountain, living to tell the tale.

During summer when the tiny island population seemed to bursting at its seams, and when every German motorcyclist and Dutch motorhome seems to be on the isle, total peace and isolation can still be found to admire the extremely powerful beauty of this island. And if you happen to be passing the Rosedale Hotel in Portree, pop in and tell Hugh and Keith that I said hello. Although I am not guaranteeing a discount, if they actually do acknowledge that they once knew me, they might let you sit on the grass in front of the hotel's annexe overlooking the bay and Raasay Island - where you will be the envy of all the other tourists.



Old Man of Storr

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All photographs taken by author of this article.

About the Author:

Frances has been a student of metaphysics and the occult for most of her life, with her formal training commencing in 1993. She is trained in both ceremonial magick and Alexandrian Wicca, and has been initiated into the Alexandrian Wiccan tradition.

Frances founded the Temple of the Dark Moon in 1999 to provide accurate information on Paganism (in particular Wicca and Wytchcraft). For a period of six years from 2000 Frances was the secretary for the Pagan Alliance Inc (SA) and worked closely with both the SA Police and Attorney General with respect to changes in legislation.

In 2003 she was invited to speak at the New Zealand Pagan Fest where she also led the opening ritual with Chief Druid, Philip Carr-Gomm.

Frances regularly writes for Australia's number one spiritual lifestyle magazine "Insight" and her articles also appearing in over 10 separate publications around the world including the 2008 Llewellyn's Witch's Calendar. Frances has appeared in the "Sunday Mail", the "Messenger" and the "Melbourne Age" with respect to being a Wytch.

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