

= Fairy Flag =

The Fairy Flag (Scottish Gaelic : Am Bratach Sìth) is an heirloom of the chiefs of Clan MacLeod . It is held in Dunvegan Castle along with other notable heirlooms , such as the Dunvegan Cup and Sir Rory Mor 's Horn . The Fairy Flag is known for the numerous traditions of fairies , and magical properties associated with it . The flag is made of silk , is yellow or brown in colour , and measures about 18 inches (46 cm) squared . It has been examined numerous times in the last two centuries , and its condition has somewhat deteriorated . It is ripped and tattered , and is considered to be extremely fragile . The flag is covered in small red " elf dots " . In the early part of the 19th century , the flag was also marked with small crosses , but these have since disappeared . The silk of the flag has been stated to have originated in the Far East , and was therefore extremely precious , which led some to believe that the flag may have been an important relic of some sort . Others have attempted to associate the flag with the Crusades or even a raven banner , which was said to have been used by various Viking leaders in the British Isles .

There are numerous traditions and stories associated with the flag , most of which deal with its magical properties and mysterious origins . The flag is said to have originated as : a gift from the fairies to an infant chieftain ; a gift to a chief from a departing fairy @-@ lover ; a reward for defeating an evil spirit . The various powers attributed to the Fairy Flag include : the ability to multiply a clan 's military forces ; the ability to save the lives of certain clanfolk ; the ability to cure a plague on cattle ; the ability to increase the chances of fertility ; and the ability to bring herring into the loch at Dunvegan . Some traditions relate that if the flag were to be unfurled and waved more than three times , it would either vanish , or lose its powers forever .

Clan tradition , preserved in the early 19th century , tells how the Fairy Flag was entrusted to a family of hereditary standard bearers . Only the eldest male of this family was ever allowed to unfurl the flag ; the first such hereditary standard bearer was given the honour of being buried inside the tomb of the chiefs , on the sacred isle of Iona . Tradition states that the flag was unfurled at several clan battles in the 15th and 16th centuries ; the flag 's magical powers are said to have won at least one of them . Another 19th century tradition linked the flag to a prophecy which foretold the downfall of Clan MacLeod ; but it also prophesied that , in the " far distant future " , the clan would regain its power and raise its honour higher than ever before . In the mid @-@ 20th century , the Fairy Flag was said to have extinguished a fire at Dunvegan Castle , and to have given luck to servicemen flying bombing missions in the Second World War .

= = Description = =

In the 19th century , the writer Rev. Norman Macleod (1783 ? 1862) recalled seeing the Fairy Flag during his childhood around 1799 (see relevant section below) . He described the flag as then having crosses wrought in gold thread , and several " elf spots " stitched upon it . N. Macleod recollected that when the flag was examined , bits were taken off it from time to time ; so much so , that later in his life he did not believe the flag still existed . In August 1814 , Sir Walter Scott visited Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye , and wrote of the visit in his diary . One of several items he mentioned seeing was the Fairy Flag . Scott described it as " a pennon of silk , with something like round red rowan @-@ berries wrought upon it " . John Francis Campbell saw the flag in 1871 , and described it as being " made of yellow raw silk with figures and spots worked on it in red " . In 1927 , Roderick Charles MacLeod described the flag as then being square and brown . He measured it as about 18 inches (46 cm) squared . He considered the flag to have originally been much larger ; and remarked on its extreme fragility and the requirement for careful handling , if it should be handled at all . R.C. MacLeod noted N. Macleod 's description of the flag , but observed that it now only contained the " elf spots " ? there was then no evidence of any crosses upon what remained of the flag . R.C. MacLeod also observed that several tears in the flag had been carefully mended .

The flag was examined in the early 20th century by A.J.B. Wace of the Victoria and Albert Museum , who concluded that the silk was woven in either Syria or Rhodes , and the darns were made in the Near East . It was his opinion that the flag , in its original state , would have been quite precious ,

possibly a relic like the shirt of a saint . The belief at the time of this examination was the MacLeods were descended from Harald Hardrada , who spent some time in Constantinople in the 11th century . In line with this belief , it was suggested that the flag may have passed from Harald Hardrada down to the eponymous ancestor of the clan ? Leod . The MacLeod Estate Office (Dunvegan Castle) website claims that experts have dated the flag to the 4th and 7th centuries ? hundreds of years before the Crusades . The flag is currently held in Dunvegan Castle , along with other notable heirlooms such as the Dunvegan Cup and Sir Rory Mor 's Horn .

= = Tradition and legend = =

= = = Thomas Pennant (1772) = = =

In 1772 , Thomas Pennant made a tour of the Hebrides and later published an account of his travels . One of the things Pennant noted while visiting the Isle of Skye , was the Fairy Flag . According to Pennant , the flag was named " Braolauch shi " , and was given to the MacLeods by Titania the " Ben @-@ shi " , wife of Oberon , king of the fairies . Titania blessed the flag with powers which would manifest when the flag was unfurled three times . On the third time , the flag and flag @-@ bearer would be carried off by an invisible being , never to be seen again . The family of " Clan y Faitter " had the task of bearing the flag , and in return for their services , they possessed free lands in Bracadale . Pennant related how the flag had already been produced three times . The first occasion was in an unequal battle between the MacLeods and the Macdonalds of Clanranald . On the unfurling of the flag , the MacLeod forces were multiplied by ten . The second time the flag was unfurled to preserve the life of the lady of the clan , and thus saved the clan 's heir . Pennant then declared that the flag was unfurled a third time to save his own life . He stated that the flag was by then so tattered that Titania did not seem to think it worth taking back . Pennant also noted the belief of the MacLeod 's Norse ancestry and the magical raven banners said to have been used by the Vikings in the British Isles .

= = = 19th @-@ century manuscript accounts of the flag = = =

Much of the traditional history of the Fairy Flag is preserved in manuscript form . In the early part of the 20th century , Fred T. MacLeod noted one manuscript written around 1800 , which he considered to be the most detailed description of the flag . Another source of the flag 's traditional history is the Bannatyne manuscript , which documents the traditional history of Clan MacLeod . It dates to the 1830s , however , it is thought to have been based upon earlier traditions .

= = = = Description = = = =

The c.1800 manuscript stated that both the honour and the very existence of Clan MacLeod was thought to have depended upon the preservation of the Fairy Flag . Only the " highest and purest blood of the race " and the most renowned heroes , were selected to guard the flag when it was displayed . These twelve men , with a sword in hand , would stand just behind the chief who was always put in front . One family produced the hereditary keepers of the flag ; and of this family , only the eldest living male could unfurl the flag . This family was called " Clan Tormad Vic Vurichie " (" the children of Tormod , son of Murchadh ") , and was descended from Siol Torcaill . The 20th century Hebridean author Alasdair Alpin MacGregor , when writing of the traditions of the flag , stated that the flag 's bearers held lands on Skye near Bracadale for their services to the chiefs of Clan MacLeod . The first of the flag bearers from this family was buried within the same grave as the chief of the clan , on the island of Iona . The second , and last bearer , was buried at St Clements Church , in Rodel , on the island of Harris . This man 's remains were covered by a magnificent monument ; the stone coffin in which his body was placed , was six feet deep . A moveable iron grate rested about two feet from the lid , and the man 's body rested upon the grate . The man 's

male descendants were also deposited within this coffin . This meant that when a newly deceased was placed within , the bones and dust of the previous occupant were sifted through the grate into the coffin below . The writer of the manuscript stated that in the time of his own father , the last male of this family was interred this way . The tomb was then sealed by this man 's daughter . The c.1800 manuscript also noted that this family , prior to its extinction , became miserably poor .

= = = = Unfurling at the Battle of Bloody Bay = = = =

The Bannatyne manuscript states that the flag was unfurled at the Battle of Bloody Bay in 1480 . The manuscript related that during the battle , the clan 's chief , William Dubh (historically lived c.1415 ? 1480) , was slain , and in consequence his clan began to lose heart . A priest then ordered the flag 's bearer , Murcha Breac , to unfurl the Fairy Flag to rally the clan . Up until this point , the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan were on the opposing side of their kinsmen , the MacLeods of Lewis . However , once the MacLeods of Lewis noticed that the flag had been unfurled , they switched sides to join forces with their kinsmen . Unfortunately for both MacLeod clans , the outcome of the battle had already been determined and they were on the losing side . Among the vast numbers of MacLeods slain were Murcha Breac and the twelve guardians of the flag . William Dubh is buried on the island of Iona with his predecessors , and the body of Murcha Breac is placed within the same tomb . The manuscript states that this was the greatest honour which could be bestowed upon his remains . R.C. MacLeod suggested that the MacLeod effigy within Iona Abbey may mark the burial of the first chiefs of the clan , as well as William Dubh , and the mentioned standard bearer . William Dubh is thought to have been the last MacLeod chief buried on Iona ; his son , Alasdair Crotach (1450 ? 1547) , was buried in St Clements Church , on Harris .

= = = = Unfurling at the Battle of Glendale = = = =

According to the Bannatyne manuscript , the Fairy Flag was also unfurled during the Battle of Glendale , which the manuscript states to have been fought in about 1490 . At one point during this conflict , both the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan , and the MacLeods of Lewis , are on the verge of giving way to the invading MacDonalds . Just at this moment , the mother of Alasdair Crotach , chief of the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan , orders the Fairy Flag to be unfurled . The result is that both MacLeod clans renew the battle with redoubled fury , and despite immense losses , eventually win the battle . Among the MacLeod dead is the flag bearer , Paul Dubh , who carried the Fairy Flag throughout the conflict until his death . The Bannatyne manuscript relates that Paul Dubh was honourably buried in a deep stone coffin , with a metal grate ? much like the account given in the c.1800 manuscript . The writer of the Bannatyne manuscript states that each successive flag bearer was buried within this tomb , and that the writer 's own grandfather saw the old ceremony performed for the last time , in the 18th century . The Bannatyne manuscript states that the tomb is located in the north @-@ east corner of the chancel at St Clements Church , in Rodel . R.C. MacLeod noted that there was no trace of such a coffin or tomb ; although , he suggested that it could have been buried or possibly built within a wall .

= = = = Legend of origin = = = =

The c.1800 manuscript presented a legend of the Fairy Flag 's origin . This legend concerned a MacLeod who went on a Crusade to the Holy Land . On his journey homewards , the MacLeod attempted to cross a dangerous mountainous pass on the borders of Palestine . Here , he met a hermit who gave him food and shelter . The hermit warned the MacLeod of a dangerous spirit that guards the pass , which had never failed to destroy a true believer . However , with the aid of a piece of the True Cross and certain directions from the hermit , the MacLeod is able to defeat the " She Devil " ? who is called " Nein a Phaipen , or Daughter of Thunder " . In reward for conveying some secrets that the spirit wanted some friends to know , she revealed to the MacLeod " the future destinies of the Clan " . The writer of the c.1800 manuscript stated that this knowledge was said to

have been held by this man 's family until its extinction . The spirit then gave the Macleod her girdle , telling him to convert it into a banner . The MacLeod then used his spear as a flag pole . The writer of the c.1800 manuscript stated that the spear was by then since lost , and that the secrets conveyed to MacLeod were lost forever . The writer also gave his own opinion on the origin of the Fairy Flag . The writer stated that the flag most probably originated as a banner used in the Holy Land , and that it was conveyed back home by the character portrayed in the legend .

= = = Other episodes = = =

The c.1800 manuscript related that the spell of the banner meant that it would vanish when it was displayed for the third time . The final unfurling of the banner would either gain the clan a complete victory over their enemies or meant that the clan was to suffer total extinction . The writer of the c.1800 manuscript went on to state that the temptation for unfurling the flag for the third and final time was always resisted ; and that at the time of his writing , there was not much chance of it ever being unfurled again , since it was in such a reduced state . The writer stated that of the few shreds that remained , he himself possessed a fragment .

The c.1800 manuscript also stated that the flag was once held in an iron chest , within Dunvegan Castle . The key to the chest was then always in the possession of the hereditary flag bearers . The c.1800 manuscript related how , on the death of the MacLeod chief Tormod , son of Iain Breac , the succession to the chiefship nearly fell to the family of the MacLeods of Talisker . The young widow of the last chief refused to give up Dunvegan Castle to the next heir , knowing herself to be pregnant (although she had only been married six weeks previous to her widowhood) . In time , she gave birth to Tormod , the next chief . The c.1800 manuscript stated that at around this time , a man who wished to curry favour with the expectant heir (MacLeod of Talisker) attempted to steal the flag . Even though the Fairy Flag was later found , both the staff and iron chest were never seen again . Historically , the old chief , Tormod (son of Iain Breac) , died in the autumn of 1706 , and his son , Tormod , was born in July 1705 .

= = = Reported partial fulfilment prophecy around 1800 = = =

Late in his life , the writer Norman Macleod (1783 ? 1862) related to one of his daughters of having heard an old Gaelic prophecy concerning the flag , and of events which took place in his childhood which were reported as examples of the prophecy being partially fulfilled . A summarised version of this prophecy was published in the late 19th century , within an account of the life of one of his sons . Soon after , in 1878 , Alexander Mackenzie proposed that the prophecy as dictated by N. Macleod , may have been a fragmented remembrance of one of the prophecies of Coinneach Odhar (who is popularly known as the Brahan Seer) . N. Macleod 's tale of the prophecy is as follows :

N. Macleod then related how as a child , he had been close to an English smith employed at Dunvegan . One day the smith told him in secrecy that the chest in which the flag was held was to be forced open the next morning , and that it had been arranged by Hector Macdonald Buchanan that the smith would be at the castle with the necessary tools . N. Macleod then asked Buchanan for permission to be present , and was granted leave on the condition that he not tell anyone ? especially the chief ? what was about to be done . The next morning the chest was forced open and the flag was found to be held within a wooden case . N. Macleod described the flag then as being a square @-@ shaped piece of cloth with crosses wrought on it with gold thread , and several " elf spots " stitched onto it . After the flag had been examined , it was placed back into its case . N. Macleod stated that at around this time it was learned that the heir to the chiefship , Norman , was killed at sea . The HMS Queen Charlotte , on which he was a lieutenant , caught fire and exploded at sea killing 673 officers and men . N. Macleod stated that at about the same time , MacLeod 's Maidens were sold to Campbell of Ensay . He also stated that he personally saw a fox with cubs , which lived in the west turret of the castle . N. Macleod related how he was grateful that the worst part of the prophecy remained unfulfilled ; and that the chiefly family still owned their ancestral lands

R.C. MacLeod , who wrote in the early 20th century , considered that this prophecy seemed to have been fulfilled . At that time , the Macleod chief had no gentlemen of his clan as tenants on his estate ; also , an heir to the family ? named Ian Breac ? was killed in the First World War . R.C. MacLeod noted that the prophecy stated that a " John Breac " (Gaelic : Iain Breac , " Iain the speckled ") would restore the fortunes of the family . R.C. MacLeod stated his belief that this may still happen , when he lamented the loss of his son , stating that Iain Breac " showed that his race had not lost the loyalty and courage which were their chief claims to glory in ancient days " .

= = = Walter Scott , 1814 = = =

When Sir Walter Scott visited Dunvegan Castle in 1814 , he learned of several traditional tales relating to the area and the clan . He was told that the Fairy Flag had three magical properties . The first was that it multiplied the number of men upon a battlefield . The second was that when it was spread upon a nuptial bed , it ensured fertility . The third was that it brought herring into the loch .

= = = Other traditions = = =

In the early 20th century , R.C. MacLeod noted several traditions concerning the flag . One told how the flag came into the possession of the MacLeods through a fairy . A similar tradition relates of a fairy @-@ lullaby .

= = = = Fairy lover = = = =

The first of these traditions related by R.C. MacLeod tells how one of the chiefs of Clan MacLeod married a fairy ; however , after twenty years she is forced to leave him and return to fairyland . She bade farewell to the chief at the Fairy Bridge (which stands about 3 miles (4 @.@ 8 km) from Dunvegan) and gave him the flag . She promised that if it was waved in times of danger and distress , help would be given on three occasions . A similar tradition , related by John Arnott MacCulloch , stated that although the fairy 's gift had the power to save both her husband and his clan , afterwards an invisible being would come to take both the flag and its bearer away ? never to be seen again .

= = = = Fairy lullaby = = = =

R.C. MacLeod considered the above ' fairy lover ' tradition to be connected to another about a lullaby . This tradition originated with Neil MacLeod , who was the clan bard in the last half of the 19th century ; he obtained the tradition from several old women in ' MacLeod country ' . This lullaby @-@ tradition related how on an autumn night , a beautiful fairy visited Dunvegan Castle . She passed through several closed doors and entered the nursery where the infant heir to the chief was lying in his cradle . The nursemaid , who was within the room as well , was rendered powerless by a spell and could only watch as the fairy took the infant on her knee and sang him a lullaby . This song was so remarkable that it was imprinted upon the nursemaid 's memory , and later she lulled the baby asleep by singing the same song . R.C. MacLeod stated that , over time it was believed that any infant of the chiefly family , to whom this lullaby was sung , would be protected by the power of the fairies . For a while , no nurse was employed by the family who could not sing this song . A period of 200 years then passed before any chief had been born within the castle , and the custom of singing the fairy 's lullaby ceased to be followed ? but according to R.C. MacLeod , not completely forgotten . R.C. MacLeod claimed that a nursemaid sang this lullaby at the castle in the year 1847 , for his infant elder brother , who would later become Sir Reginald MacLeod of MacLeod (1847 ? 1935) , 27th chief of the clan . An English translation of the lullaby is shown to the right .

= = = = Fairy music = = = =

Another tradition , related by R.C. MacLeod , told of certain events which took place after an heir to the clan 's chiefship was born . The story related how at this time , there was much rejoicing at Dunvegan Castle , and since the infant 's nursemaid was anxious to join in the festivities in the hall below , she left the infant alone in her room . When the baby awoke , crying of cold , no human help could hear him in his secluded room ; however , a host of fairies appeared and wrapped the infant in the Fairy Flag . Meanwhile , the clansmen banqueting below demanded to see the child and the maid was ordered to bring him forth . When she brought out the baby , wrapped in the flag , everyone gazed in wonder at the child and the garb wrapped around him . The room was filled with the fairies ' song which declared that the flag had the power to save the clan three times . When the song ended , and silence fell across the crowded room , the flag was taken from the infant and locked in a chest where it has ever since been preserved .

= = = Eastern origins = = =

R.C. MacLeod listed another tradition , somewhat similar to the one that appeared in c.1800 manuscript . According to this version , a MacLeod joined a Crusading army , and went to the Holy Land . While in the desert @-@ wilderness , he came across a witch , from whom he managed to escape . He then came upon a river , and proceeded to cross it at a ford . However , a fairy maiden appeared from the water and blocked his passage . After a struggle , MacLeod overcame the fairy and passed over the river . He then became friends with her . Before they parted , the fairy maiden gave him a box of scented wood ; this box , she told him , held several other smaller boxes , which fitted inside one another . She told him that the innermost box contained a magic banner , which when waved would bring forth a host of armed men to aid its owner . The fairy warned the MacLeod , that if he were to open the box within a year and a day from then , that no crops would grow on his land , no livestock would be born , as well as no children . When the MacLeod returned home he gave the box to the chief 's wife . The wife , however , ignored the MacLeod 's warning , and opened the box . Immediately a host of armed men appeared and that year , no children were born . The tradition concluded that ever since that time , the flag had been preserved for a time when such an army might mean salvation for the clan .

= = = Unfurled numerous times = = =

R.C. MacLeod wrote of another tradition which stated that the flag was waved at a battle in Waternish , in about 1580 ; and of another which told of how it was waved during a time when a cattle plague was raging , and that it stopped the murrain . R.C. MacLeod stated his belief that the flag would only have been waved twice , and so rejected the tradition of it being unfurled at the Battle of Bloody Bay ? because the MacLeods were on the losing side ! R.C. MacLeod also wondered if it had been waved in 1600 , when the clan was in a desperate state in the midst of warring with the Macdonalds of Sleat .

= = = Supposed powers of the flag in the 20th century = = =

In 1938 , a fire broke out in a wing of Dunvegan Castle , and according to Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk , the flames were checked and extinguished when the flag was carried past to safety . During the Second World War , the chief of the clan , Dame Flora MacLeod of MacLeod , received a letter from a member of the clan who attributed his luck during bombing missions over Germany to a photo of the flag which he carried in his pocket .