



Elves and Heroes

Donald A. Mackenzie

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"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." - Donald A. Mackenzie

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.

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