

Finn MacCool and the Giant's Causeway - A Legend from Ireland

Ulster is the most Northern of Ireland's ancient kingdoms. Its landscape is fabulously beautiful - it has towering cliffs and rocky hills, winding rivers and scooped-out lakes that look like they could have been made by the hands of slightly crazy giants.

There are many stone tombs here, five thousand years old, made of enormous boulders that could not possibly be lifted by one man, or even a whole family of ordinary men. For many years the local people have named them "Giant's Graves"

Stories are told of one great Irish Giant, Finn MacCool, whose most fearsome enemies were the Scottish giants. Finn was so angry, and determined to get at them, that he built a whole causeway from Ulster across the sea to Scotland. He built it of unusual six-sided cobblestones, so they would fit neatly together like a honeycomb, and they made a very pretty pavement indeed!

One day he shouted a challenge to the Scottish giant Benandonner, The Red Man, to cross the causeway and fight him. But as soon as he saw the Scot getting closer and closer on the causeway, he realised Benandonner was much, much bigger than he had imagined! Finn skidaddled back home to the Fort-of-Allen in County Kildare, and told his wife he'd picked a fight but had thought better of it now.

Finn heard the stamping feet of Benandonner from Kilcock, and when those feet got to Robertstown, Finn had to stuff five pounds of moss into each ear. Red Man's spear was as tall and thick as a Round-Tower, and he used it to knock on the door of the Fort-of-Allen. Finn would not answer the door, so his wife shoved him in the great bath with a couple of sheets over him.

Finn's wife, Oonagh, thought quickly. She opened the door to Benandonner saying, "Sure it's a pity but Finn is away hunting deer in County Kerry. Would you like to come in anyway and wait? I'll show you into the Great Hall to sit down after your journey." Oonagh invited Red Man to look around the room, and showed him what she said were some of Finn's possessions.

"Would you like to put your spear down? Just there next to Finn's" - It was a huge fir tree with a pointed stone at the top.

"Over there is Finn's shield." - It was a block of building-oak as big as four chariot-wheels.

"Finn's late for his meal. Will you eat it if I cook his favourite?"

Oonagh cooked a cake of griddle-bread - baked with the iron griddle pressed inside it. Red Man bit it hungrily, and broke three front teeth. The meat was a strip of hard fat nailed to a block of red timber; two back teeth cracked. He was given a five-gallon bucket of honey-beer to drink. "Would you like to say hello to the baby? Wait! - I'll have to feed her first!"

Oonagh threw a loaf of bread to the huge baby in the bath-cradle and, peeping out from a huge sheet-like dress and bonnet was Finn MacCool himself, contentedly sucking his thumb.

Benandonner said he wasn't much good with babies. The honey-beer made him feel woozy, and he asked to go outside to clear his head.

Oonagh showed Red Man out, where the gardens were scattered about with boulders as tall as

the giant.

“Finn and his friends play catch with these rocks. Finn practises by throwing one over the Fort, then running round to catch it before it falls.”

Of course Red Man tried, but it was so heavy he could only just lift it above his head before dropping it. The blow only ricked his neck - luckily the Scotsman's head was very hard. But it was also full of good sense. He thanked Oonagh for her hospitality and said he would wait no longer, but return to Scotland before the tide came in.

Finn leapt from the cradle, thanked Oonagh for her shrewdness, and chased Benandonner out of Ireland. Passing Portadown, County Antrim, Finn scooped a huge clod of earth out of the ground to fling at the retreating Scot. The hole filled up with water and became the biggest Lough in Ireland - Lough Neagh! The clod he flung missed its target and landed in the middle of the Irish Sea - it became The Isle of Man!!

And both giants tore up the Giant's Causeway, just leaving the ragged ends at the two shores! And if you go to the North coast of Ulster, or to Staffa, the nearest isle of Scotland, you may visit them today - the ends of the beautiful causeway that is, not the giants - those giants are long since in their graves!

The Fairy Flag of the Macleod - A Legend from Scotland

Just off the North West coast of Scotland lies the Isle of Skye. On the west side of this beautiful island, looking out across to the remote islands of North Uist, Harris and Lewis, is Loch Dunvegan. On a rocky headland, half way down the loch, is Castle Dunvegan which has been the home of the chiefs of the Clan Macleod since the 12th century. If you visit the castle you will see the famous Fairy Flag of Macleod.

Legend has it that a long time ago a handsome chieftain of the Macleods fell in love with a fairy princess, one of the Shining People. She also fell in love with him. They begged the Fairy King to let them get married. At first he refused, saying it would break his daughter's heart as her husband would grow old and die while she would live forever. Moved by her tears, the King eventually agreed but on one condition; at the end of a year and a day she must return forever to her fairy folk.

The happy couple had a wonderful ceremony and within the year a bonny son was born. Alas, the year and one day passed all too quickly and the time came for her to keep her promise and return to her father, the Fairy King, who waited for her on the bridge, now known as 'The Fairy Bridge'.

Before she left, the princess hugged her son and husband for the last time and made the chieftain promise that he would never allow their young son to be left alone and to cry, for she would hear his cries, even far away in the fairy kingdom under the hills.

The chief of the Macleod was heartbroken after his beautiful wife left and, as time went on, his sadness grew. Finally his friends organised a great birthday feast for him, to try to cheer him up. There was singing and dancing and piping and harping, and soon the chief began to enjoy himself too.

There was so much music and laughter that the baby's nursemaid slipped out of the nursery to watch the fun from the top of the stairs. The baby boy awoke and began to cry. The nursemaid did not hear him and he was left to cry pitifully, all alone.

When the nursemaid did return, she was surprised to see a beautiful woman wrapping the baby in a shawl and singing softly to him. The nursemaid knew she would never forget such a beautiful tune. When the baby stopped crying, the woman put him gently back into his cradle, kissed him and vanished into the night.

As the Laird's son grew older, he told his father of the night his mother visited him. He said that the shawl was magic and could be used by the Macleods when they were in great danger, to summon the Fairy Knights to their side. But the flag could only be used three times. The chief immediately ordered a special casket to be made to hold the fairy flag and he carried it with him at all times.

Hundreds of years later there came a time of great danger. An enemy clan, the McDonalds, raided the island and, one Sunday, they attacked the MacLeod church and set it afire, killing the people

praying inside.

The angry Macleod warriors who were left, were hopelessly outnumbered. They gathered on the beach and unfurled the fairy flag. Magically, the band seemed to grow to ten times its size. Their terrified enemies turn and ran, never to return. The flag was carefully put back safely in the casket.

Many years later, a terrible plague swept through the islands and the cattle and sheep lay dead and dying. Faced with utter famine, the Macleods waved the flag once more, and the fairy host rode out and touched the animals with their swords. Immediately the cattle and sheep became healthy once again and the clan were saved from starvation.

The Flag has not been used for a third time, but it is said that during the Second World War, when the threat of invasion was at its greatest, the clan chief of the Macleod offered to bring the Fairy Flag to the white cliffs of Dover. We don't know what Churchill thought of this generous offer.

The song the fairy mother sang to her child, that was overheard by the nursemaid, is still sung on Skye; it is known as The Cradle Spell of Dunvegan.

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