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An Interpretation of the Work of  
Fiona Macleod



AN INTERPRETATION OF THE WORK OF FIONA MACLEOD

BY

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPER-  
VISION BY Mac E. Leach

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## FIONA MACLEOD'S VIEW OF LIFE

There is one line which must be considered the motto of Fiona Macleod. "It is loveliness I seek, not lovely things".<sup>1</sup> Interpreted broadly that line contains his whole philosophy of beauty. Beauty is that reality which transcends everything; it is immutable, eternal; from it we all come, to it we all in the end return; our greatest good on earth comes from recognizing ourselves as one with it. Again, in the following passage from the Prologue to the Washer of the Ford: "Beauty is less a quality of things than a spiritual energy-in itself it is as impersonal as dew..... To each the star of his desire, but beauty is beyond the mortal touch of number, as of change and time". This beauty, with Fiona Macleod as with Plotinus, can be seen shining through the sensuous. In A Memory of Beauty Fiona Macleod speaks of Aileen, of her who was so wonderfully beautiful, who had loved supremely: "Alas, how brief was that lovely hour which was her life! It is only in what is loveliest, most fugitive, that eternity reveals, as in a sudden flame,.....as in the vanishing facet of a second,

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1. Collected Works, v, 387.



the Beauty of all Beauty; that it whispers in the purple hollow of a dancing flame the incommunicable word"<sup>1</sup>. With Shaftesbury Fiona Macleod said that life is the process by which the soul reaches the eternal reality. Alan in Green Fire, through whom the poet himself speaks, achieves eternal beauty through the girl of his love. "She was his magic. The light of their love was upon everything. Deeply as he had loved beauty, he had learned to love it far more keenly and understandingly because of her. He now saw through the accidental and everywhere discerned the eternal. Beauty, the echos<sup>e</sup> of whose wanderings are in every heart and brain though few discern the white vision or hear the haunting voice."<sup>2</sup> Death means to one who has this vision simply absorption in reality. This is the theme of Queens of Beauty. Beauty can never be destroyed. Though the flesh perish, the beauty remains a part of the immutable force which knows no laws except its own. "Empires become drifted sand and the Queens of great loveliness are dust. But the mind is changeless in that divine, continual advent and the sunlit wing is that immortal we call beauty"<sup>3</sup>.

Fiona Macleod faces the pantheistic implications of this doctrine of the absolute. Indeed one sometimes feels that his absolute is but the excuse for his pantheism. Since the various parts of the universe are contained in the absolute, there must be an indissoluble bond between them. Man is not greater than the tree or the animal or the rock. All are but different expressions of the reality beneath the myriad illusions. Civilized man has

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1. A Memory of Beauty, iii. 180.

2. Green Fire, iv. p. 311

3. Queens of Beauty, v. 289



somehow broken away from this communion with reality. His greatest good lies in again becoming a part of this universal brotherhood in the absolute. The following sentences from Green Fire have a pantheistic background, and unless we have this in mind, they sound ~~as~~ empty ~~as Paul Elmer More suggests about the work of Fiona Macleod in general~~. "Truly we are all one. It is a common tongue we speak, though the wave has its own whisper, and the mind its own sigh, and the lips of man its work, and the heart of woman its silence"<sup>1</sup>. Fiona Macleod most clearly states his pantheism in the following lines from The Washer of the Ford. "It is not only the dog, it is not only the wild beast and the wood dove that are our close kindred, but the green trees and the green grass, the blue wave and the flowing wind, the flower of a day and the granite peak of an aeon. And I for one would rather have the wind for a comrade, and the white stars and green leaves as my kith and kin than many a human companion, whose chief claim is the red blood that differs little from the sap in the grass or in the pines, and whose 'deathless soul' is, mayhap, no more than a fugitive light blown idly for an hour betwixt dawn and dark. We are woven in one loom and the Weaver thrids our being with the sweet influences, not only of the Pleiades, but of the living world of which each is no more than a multi-colored thread: as, in turn, He thrids the wandering wind with the articulate cry, the yearning, the passion, the pain, of that bitter clan,<sup>2</sup>-the Human." This is an expression of the same thing Tennyson voiced in the little poem beginning, "Flower of the crannied wall". This kinship of all

1. Green Fire, iv.

2. Washer of the Ford, ii.



things is of a more personal nature with Fiona Macleod than it is with Tennyson. Fiona Macleod borders upon a belief in the transmigration of the soul. In the Prologue to the Laughter of Peterkin, the king who is grieving for the death of his wife, son, and mother, sees in his garden a fountain, a faun and a bird. These are more than symbols of the three loved ones; they are re-incarnations.

Green Fire is a pantheistic romance. By the title, Green Fire, Fiona Macleod means the ichor that runs through all that is; it is the blood of the world. "Then there is that small, untoward clan . . . . which hears and sees and yet turns wisely, meanwhile, to the life of the green earth, of which we are part, to the common kindred of living things with which we are one."<sup>1</sup> Thus we may attain ultimate reality by recognizing again our kinship with the inanimate world. This is brought out more clearly in another passage from Green Fire. "In the Beauty of the World lies the ultimate redemption of our mortality. When we shall become one with nature in a sense profounder even than the poetic imaginings of most of us, we shall understand what now we fail to discern."<sup>2</sup> Fiona Macleod is usually light-hearted and boyishly enthusiastic. He knows that his dreams will come true, because he wants them to. He would have agreed thoroughly with William James' doctrine of the Will to Believe. There is, however, a note of gloom in one portion<sup>3</sup> of Green Fire. As he looked about him in the every day world

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1. Green Fire, iv.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.





Fiona Macleod felt that man was indeed far from the Green Fire,- that he was playing with baubles in his struggle for money, position and the outer satisfactions of life. Because man has thus turned his back on the vision of beauty, he is the cursed of the earth. He is "unable to look on his star". he uses such barren words as "scenery" and "picturesqueness" to veil what he is afraid or ashamed to look upon. But the passage ends with Fiona Macleod's characteristic note of hope and confidence. "But a day will come-nay, shall surely come-when indeed the poor and humble shall inherit the earth; they who have not made league with temporal evils and out of whose heart shall arise the deep longing, that shall become universal, of the renewal of youth"<sup>1</sup>. We must leave the sophisticated life and become as children again, must "leave our cloud palaces in the brain, and become consciously at one with the cosmic life of which, merely as men, we are no more than a perpetual phosphorescence"<sup>2</sup>.

How is man to recognize again his kinship with all things, to feel himself a part of the eternal reality? Fiona Macleod had a vision of the second redemption of the world through woman. As he looked on the world he saw that it is woman who suffers most, who feels <sup>most</sup> deeply. In her he saw the qualities necessary for a spiritual union with reality; he saw in her inevitable sorrow and suffering, an immediate need for the higher vision which the "woman who is at the heart of women" will bring to the human race.

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1. Green Fire, iv, 402.

2. Do.



In 1915 five poems of Fiona Macleod concerned with woman were collected in a little volume entitled Runes of Women. In these poems is to be found a theme which runs through the whole work of Fiona Macleod. The first of these runes bears the title The Prayer of Women<sup>1</sup>. It was first published in Pharais. Fiona Macleod states that this rune was not ancient "in the actual form here given, which is from an unpublished volume of Orain Spioradail." The poem is the protest of woman against her lot. O, Spirit save us from man whom we nourish and comfort, who useth us at his will; who, when we are old and our beauty is departed, turns from us in loathing with loss of love.<sup>2</sup>

The second is the Rune of the Sorrow of Women. O, we are weary with sorrow, and suffering in secret, and most of all of the parting. Man soweth the seed and laughs and passes on; woman bears the silent pain, the upbraiding, the forgetfulness, and gives the child life and joy though she die in the giving.

The next is the Rune of the Passion of Women. Sad is the lot of women who have never known love. But sadder by far is the lot of those who have been beloved intensely and have seen that love grow cold when youth and beauty have vanished; who day by day must serve and be true and tender and patient though the heart ache dumbly with longing.

The last of these runes is called The Shepherd. It is made up of three sonnets. In The Shepherd is to be found an indication of the solution of woman's problem. We loved, but I could not give him all. Why should I? He is but a soul as I. Lord of my life, you do not see the perilous way, you do not hear The Shepherd

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1. Pharais, i, 100. 2. I have tried to convey the spirit of the original in these summaries.



calling. My soul awake! You must be my pilot.

1

Fiona Macleod, as Ernest Rhys says, had a new feeling for the ancient predicament of woman. Down through the ages she has been the prey of man. She must suffer in silence. The ignominy of sin is hers. She must be true; a man may roam as the wind. She loves with a great love and is loved for a time. But her beauty fades, the fires of her youth die. A different light comes into the eyes of her beloved. From this time her life must be a bitter hell. But the woman who lives without a burning in her heart suffers as deeply. Desolate, she must wander down to her grave. A dull yearning is ever in her heart; at night a hot kiss is on her lips. This dilemma of woman finds expression throughout the work of Fiona Macleod.

In Pharais Alasdair and Lora love with a great love, but for Lora it means a sorrow as great. Why should such love as theirs end in sorrow? Why should her child be born blind? Lora dies without an answer. Mary Macleod, who has seen many women struggle against destiny, croons the Rune of the Prayer of Women. Alasdair and Lora did not love more deeply than Alan and Sorcha in The Mountain Lovers. The love of these two was an untamed thing. It was of the earth, and being of the earth it dwelt in the eternal. But their love likewise met an end in outward tragedy.

It is not always blind forces which thwart love. It may be the "desire of men's eyes and their cruel lust". In the Harping of Cravetheen, Silk O' Kine, and Ula and Urla the lovers are separated by the lust of man. God had given the Eilidhs and Urla here too much beauty, or he had put too great desire in the heart of man.

1. Ernest Rhys, The New Mysticism, The Bibelot, vol. viii pp.



So these lovers must die of their own will to keep their love inviolate. The morning sun sees them swim side by side out to sea—a sea which for them was shoreless.

The White Heron is a story of the death in life of a woman who has loved and <sup>whose</sup> lover <sup>^</sup> been taken by death. The shepherd on the far hills knows not the loneliness that is hers. One day follows another in monotonous procession; she can only wait. This loneliness of one whose whole life is gone out with her loved one is pictured again and again in the old women who appear throughout the pages of Fiona Macleod like mournful visions of the end of love. What a desolate portrait is that of old Falasaid MacAodh in Pharais. She had known beauty; she had known love. Her child had died. Duncan had died and now she was alone in her solitary croft, alone with her memories. "Yet the infinite patience of the poor was hers, that poignant pathos of womanhood in childless and husbandless old age, which to the very end endures—till the last thread has been used in the weaving of the crown of <sup>1</sup> sorrow".

Much of this is a protest against the convention of a double standard of morality for men and women. Enya of the Dark <sup>2</sup> Eyes gives love to two men. For Aodh, her lover, there were other women but he does not think of that when he slays her for her double love as she lies asleep. Mary Gilchrist in The Wayfarer suffers the persecution of an over-righteous world on account of a man's sin. She does not know the joy of the other Mary until her neighbors have a vision of the true Christ. The present condition is contrasted with the ideal—when man and woman shall be judged by the same standards—in the persons of Ulric and Connla in The Sad

1. Pharais, p.108. 2. Vol. iii, p. 184.





Queen. Ulric is speaking. " I, too, have loved; I have had many women for my love!"

' There is but one love', answered Connla.....

'Of that I do not know', said Ulric, 'I loved one woman well, so long as she was young and fair. But one day a king's son desired her, and I came upon them in a wood on a cliff by the sea. I put my arms about her and leaped from the cliff. She was drowned. I paid no eric'.

'There is no age on the love of my love', said Connla softly, 'she was more beautiful than the stars! And because of that great beauty he forgot death and his bonds!'

Of the women who have lived to see love go out of the eyes of their lovers, who must drag out their lives by the side of men who look on them as "True, a woman, patient, tender, divinely acquiescent, all-forbearing,

To laugh, and smile, to comfort and sustain",<sup>1</sup>—

of such women, Mrs Campbell in Morag of the Glen is an illustration.

Fiona Macleod, speaking through the niece of Mrs. Campbell echoes the Rune of the Passion of Women. "There are women who hate men with an unknowing hatred, who lie by their husbands night after night, year after year; who fear and serve him who tend him in life and minister to him in death; who die, before or after, with a slaying thirst, a consuming hunger- of these unhappy house-mates of desolate hearts and unfrequented lips, my aunt Elspeth was one".

The Divine Adventure shows that love can be too deep. It can be a flame so great that it consumes the lovers; they lose themselves in it. Because woman loves with greater abandon, it is she who usually pays. In this episode two love and through that passion

1. Runes of Women, p.31.

2. Works, iii, 49.



know all the "joy and sorrow that can come to man and woman through the mysterious gates of love". They are the embodiments of immortal flame. But for the woman the passion was too great. ....The end came—a strange, a tragic, an almost incredible end perhaps, for love did not veer, and passion was not slain, but translated into a starry dream, and every sweet and lovely intercourse was theirs still. The suffering was too great to be borne...She loved to the edge of death by Will.....She put her frail strength into the balance, then her memories, then her dreams,—finally all but her soul. That, too, she had now put there with swift and terrible suddenness. The balance trembled, then life weighed the scale lower and lower. It was gone".<sup>1</sup>

There are three stories which picture woman's rebellion, The Song of the Sword, The Sad Queen, Ahez the Pale. The Song of the Sword is a wild, barbaric thing. It makes one long to slough off this artificial covering of civilization, and go forth to fight and love and die. The setting is on the deck of a Viking ship as it bears down on the Scottish coast.

"Dost thou see yonder blue patch, Morna", cried Olaus the White to the woman who lay indolently by his side and watched the sun glow redden the mass of ruddy hair which she had sprayed on the boards, 'an net wherin to mesh the eyes of Vikings.... Morna glanced at him under her drooped eyelids. Sure he was fair to see..... When she spoke it was in the slow lazy speech that in his ears was drowsy sweet as the hum of the hives in the steading where his home was.

'It will be a red sleep the men of that town will be having  
1. The Divine Adventure, iii, 177.



soon, I am thinking Olaus. And the women will not be carding wool when the moon rises tomorrow night and-

The fair woman stopped suddenly. Olaus saw her eyes darken.

'Olaus'

'I listen'

'If there is a woman there that you desire more than me, I will give her a gift'.

Olaus laughed. 'Keep your knife in your girdle, Morna. Who knows but you may need it soon to save yourself from a Culdee'.

'Bah! Those white robed men-women have nought to do with us. I fear no man, Olaus; but I have a blade for any woman that will dazzle your eyes'.

But we know that Morna has not the <sup>answer</sup> ~~solution~~. Had Olaus found a woman more to his liking, he would have brought her back despite the dagger of this fiery-eyed daughter of Vikings; and for Morna there would have been the old sorrow.

Ahez the Pale likewise seeks solution through the knife. She gave her love, the love of a girl and a princess, to Jud Mael. Then she finds that he has wife and child, and that she is no more to him than any passing pleasure. On her white stallion Ahez rides him down. He begs mercy. For answer, the wild-eyed girl gives him the child and a knife with the command to kill. He cannot refuse. When he gives back to her the body of her child, she stabs him in the back and rides away. But Ahez has not found the way out. Though she has cleared herself in the eyes of man, her life must be lived with a memory of violated love and the memory of a dead child.



So Fiona Macleod presents the dilemma of woman. Life with love spells sorrow, suffering, death. Life without love is desolation, barenness, worse than to have never lived. Woman cannot solve the riddle by her own strength. Is there a way out?

According to Fiona Macleod, the redemption of woman and the world is to come from the woman of the future, "the woman that is at the heart of women". Once as a child Fiona Macleod had a glimpse of this absolute woman. Mrs. Sharp tells the incident in her Memoir<sup>1</sup> in the words of her husband. "For I, too, have my dreams, my memory of one who as a child I called Star-Eyes, and whom later I called 'Banmorair-na-mara', the Lady of the Sea, and whom at last I knew to be none other than the woman who is at the heart of women. I was not more than seven when one day, by a well, near a sea loch in Argyll, just as I was stooping to drink, my glancing eyes lit on a tall woman standing among a mist of wild hyacinths under three great sycamores. I stood, looking as a faun looks, wide-eyed, unafraid. She did not speak but she smiled, and because of the love and beauty in her eyes I ran to her. She stooped and lifted blueness out of the flowers, as one might lift foam out of a pool, and I thought she threw it over me. When I was found lying among the hyacinths dazed, and as was thought, ill, I asked eagerly after the lady in white, and with hair all shining gold like buttercups". How Banmorair-na-mara, The Lady of the Sea, is to work the regeneration of the world, Fiona Macleod does not clearly state. This "woman who is at the heart of women" is surrounded by mysticism. He is referring to her in the third sonnet of The Shepherd.

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1. Memoir, Vol. i, p. 14.





"O shepherd! pilot awake! awake! awake!

The deep must whelm us both ! Hark, the waves hiss,

And as a shaken leaf the land doth shake!

Awake, O shepherding soul and take command!"<sup>1</sup>

The essay on The Gaelic Heart contains the clearest expression of this vision. "I believe that we are upon a great and deep spiritual change; I believe that a new redemption is even now conceived of the divine spirit in the human heart, that is itself a woman, broken in dreams and yet sustained in faith, patient, long suffering, looking towards home. I believe that, though the reign of peace may be a long day off, it is drawing near; and that who shall save us anew shall come divinely as a woman— but whether through mortal birth, or as an immortal breathing upon our souls, none can yet know. Sometimes I dream of the old prophecy that Christ shall come again upon Iona; and of that later prophecy which fortells, now as the Bride of Christ, now as the Daughter of God, now as the Divine Spirit embodied through mortal birth, the coming of a new Presence and Power; and dream that this may be upon Iona, so that the little Gaelic island may become as the Syrian Bethlehem. But more wise is it to dream, not of hallowed ground, but of the hallowed gardens of the soul, wherein She shall appear white and radiant, or that upon the hills, where we are wandered, The Shepherdess shall call us home"<sup>2</sup>.

1. Rûnes of Women, p. 39.

2. The Gaelic Heart. v, 213 ff.



## II

Fiona Macleod's Use of Celtic Tradition as a Medium  
for the Expression of his View of Life

Fiona Macleod, unlike Maeterlinck, was not forced to create a medium for the expression of his visions. He found his medium awaiting him in the Celtic tradition which since his boyhood had formed a part of his life. His old Highland nurse, Barbara, Seumas Macleod, the numerous shepherd and fisher folk taught him much. They did more by creating in him a love and a feeling for folk-lore. Fiona Macleod left a tribute to Barbara in Barabal, a Memory.<sup>1</sup> In the mind of Barbara ran all the old tales of the Celt, -tales of Finn and the Fenians, tales of Cuchulain, of Deirdre and her sad love, tales of the old Highland Chieftians, and tales, too, of the fairies - the quaint hill-folk who dance in the moonlight to music from harps made of the breast-bones of birds and strung with gossamer. We can see her rocking before the open fire, softly crooning an old lament or "that sad, forgotten, beautiful and mournful air that was played at Fotheringay when the Queen of Scots was done to death, lest her cries should be heard". Barbara had also to implant in the heart of the child a passionate love for nature and the out-doors.

A further influence these simple folk had was in teaching the imaginative boy to vivify the tales he heard. He tells of offerings to the god whose presence he felt in the wood, of gifts

1. The Divine Adventure, iv, 268.



to Shony, the sea-god who dwelt somewhere under the green waters. He came to see in the wild country of the Highlands, the people of the ancient race. For him the "Green Harper" played his moving music; for him the white hounds of Finn coursed again over hill and glade; in the seal who stuck his black nose out of the water, he saw Black Angus, made an animal for his great love.

Seumas Macleod, an old Gaelic fisherman of the Isles, had a great influence on the boy in another direction. The influence of Seumas Macleod was more mystical and spiritual than that of any of Fiona Macleod's other Highland friends. Fiona Macleod later wrote in a letter to Frank Rinder<sup>1</sup>. "I would like very much for you to read some of this new Fiona work, especially the opening pages of Iona, for they contain a very deep and potent spiritual faith and hope that has been with me ever since,.... as a child of seven, old Seumas Macleod (who taught me so much--was indeed the father of Fiona)--took me on his knees one sundown on the island of Eigg, and made me pray to "Her" (i.e. to the woman "who is at the heart of women") Fiona Macleod tells another incident concerned with Seumas Macleod which happened during a later visit. One morning he came upon the old man standing before the "sunrise-out-of-the-sea", his white hair ruffled by the wind. When spoken to he said in Gaelic, "Every morning I take off my hat to the beauty of the world".<sup>2</sup>

The Celtic work of Fiona Macleod divides itself into three groups on the basis of source. First, there are the stories and plays which have definite written sources, then those whose sources

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1. Letter. December 30, 1899.

2. Seumas, A Memory. v, 264.



are oral, and finally, the work which is original save for some motif of character or superstition. Fiona Macleod is anything but true to his sources. He combines and amalgamates with perfect freedom. This is significant. It shows that the preservation of Celtic tradition cannot be Fiona Macleod's main purpose.

The work of Fiona Macleod which follows written sources, even remotely is limited to the two dramas, The House of Usna and The Immortal Hour, and the collection, entitled The Laughter of Peterkin.

Fiona Macleod explains in the extended Foreword to his two plays that his object was to "give voice to two elemental emotions, the emotion of the inevitableness of destiny and the emotion of tragical loveliness". These dramas were written to prepare the way for plays after Fiona Macleod's own heart. Why must the eternal emotions be joined to names and have a background of history and legend? The théâtre de l'ame meant more for Fiona Macleod than Charles Van Lerberghe or Maurice Maeterlinck ever dreamed for it. Let the elemental emotions struggle as such without the clogs of name and legend and history. The forces that move Iphigenia are those that move Deirdre. Let us forget the swaddling bands of flesh and dwell in the realm of the spirit. When we <sup>have</sup> done that, we <sup>shall</sup> will not in literature talk of Helen, Beatrice and Deirdre but the emotion that dwells under the name. Thus in drama, Fiona Macleod seeks to carry out his ideas of life. These plays show his continual endeavour to discover ultimate reality.

The House of Usna takes its plot from the immortal story of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna, "one of the three sorrows of story-telling". This is probably the most familiar story in Celtic





literature. From one end of Celtdom to the other it has been told since the days when heros<sup>2</sup> walked the earth with men.<sup>1</sup> The main lines of the story which were in the mind of Fiona Macleod when he wrote The House of Usna are as follows.

During a feast at the house of Feidhlim, at which Conor, the High King of Ireland and all the court are present, Fedhlim's wife gives birth to a daughter.<sup>2</sup> Cathbad makes a prophecy concerning the child. "Let Deirdre be her name; harm shall come through her."

1. In a tenth century list of tales the story of Deridre is mentioned as being one of the chief stories of Ireland. The earliest extant written version is that of the Book of Leinster. This book was transcribed in the early twelfth century. The earliest English translation is that of O'Flanagan in the Transactions of the Gaelic Society for 1808, pp. 147-177. O'Flanagan follows a version similar to that of the Book of Leinster. In 1880 Ernst Windish edited the Book of Leinster version with variant readings from two other sources in *Irische Texte*, i, p. 59-93. A.H. Leahy translated this version in *Heroic Romances of Ireland*, v. i, pp. 91-110. The *Irische Texte*, Zweite Serie, 2Heft, pp. 109-134, contains a translation of this story by Whitley Stokes based on the Glenn Masain Manuscript which was transcribed in the fifteenth century. The translation in Hull, Cuchulainn Saga, pp. 21-55 is a compilation of <sup>the translations</sup> O'Flanagan and Stokes. Douglas Hyde translated a seventeenth century version in *Zeitschrift f. Celt. Phil.*, v. ii, pp. 138-155. Alexander Carmichael<sup>has</sup> published a version which he collected from oral tradition in the Isle of Barra, Edinburgh, 1905.

2. (In referring to different translations the following abbreviations will be used. W. Windish (summary in *Irische Texte* vi, p. 63;



She shall be fair, comely, bright-haired; her<sup>e</sup>os shall fight for her and kings go seeking her". She shall be the destruction of the Red Branch and Emain Macha". At this dire prophecy the hero Ulster would have had the child slain instantly. "Not so", says Conor, "but bring ye her to me tomorrow; she shall be brought up as I shall order and she shall be the woman whom I shall marry".<sup>3</sup> And so King Conor had a house built for the beautiful child and she was given in charge of a nurse, a hunter, and a female Satirist, Lavarcam. Conor gave directions that none were to approach the house but by permission of the High King.<sup>4</sup> And so Deirdre lived and grew in maidenhood. She was exceedingly beautiful, the fairest of the women of Ireland.

It chanced one snowy day that the hunter killed a calf. As Deirdre looked on the whiteness of the snow and the redness of the blood that was upon it and the blackness of the raven that was drinking the blood, she thought that those were the most beautiful colors she had ever seen. And she said to Lavarcam, "The only man I could love would be one who should have those three colors, hair black as the raven, cheeks red as blood, body white as snow"

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L. Leahy; S. Stokes; D.H. Douglas Hyde; E.H. Hull.) S.112; D.H.305; E.H. 23; In L. 99 and W. 63 the child is not born until afterwards During the feast it cries out in its mother's womb, a circumstance which gives rise to the prophecy of Cathbad.

3. L. 93.

4. W.63;L 93; S.112f.; D.H. 305 f.; E.H. 23 f.

5. W.64;L 94; S.113 ; E.H. 24. D.H. 306. This version elaborates the incident. Instead of comparing the "man she will marry" directly to the colors, Deirdre fashions the likeness of a



And then Lavarcam remembered Naisi, Son of U sna. And so Deirdre would have Naisi. Lavarcam contrives the meeting. But Naisi fears Conor and will not consent to love the fair Deirdre until she takes advantage of his tabu. He consents then. Ainnlé<sup>6</sup> and Ardan, the brothers of Naisi, with thrice fifty men, thrice fifty women, and thrice fifty greyhounds flee with the two to Alba. Then when the King of Alba would have his will with Deirdre because of her great beauty, Naisi takes her to an isle of the sea. Here Deirdre and Naisi dwell and their love never wanes.<sup>7</sup>

One day when seven years have passed, Conor gives a great feast and one of the questions he asks is this. "Is there, men of Ulster, any want that lies upon us"<sup>8</sup>? And when they are silent he says, "The great want we have is that the three sons of Usna should be separated from us on account of a woman". Connal Cearnach declares, when Conor asks him to solicit the return of the Sons of Usna, that he will kill anyone that will harm them. Cuchullin answers likewise. But Fergus excepts the king. Conor sends him with a message of peace.<sup>9</sup> The Sons of Usna listen to

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man out of the snow, blood and feathers, as a symbol of her future husband.

6. W. 64 ; L. 95; S. 113 does not mention the tabu. D.H. 308-311 This episode is here elaborated very much and made into a typical seventeenth century love intrigue; no mention is made of the tabu.

7. W.64; L.96; E.H. 25 f. S. The Glenn Masain MS begins here; Hyde's version ends.

8. E.H. p. 26.



Fergus though there is foreboding in the heart of Deirdre. As they leave the land of her happiness she makes a sorrowful lament for she fears the black heart of Conor. Now Fergus is under tabu to partake of any feast to which he is bidden. Conor puts it in the heart of Barach to make a feast for Fergus. In this way the king separates him from the Sons of Usna.<sup>10</sup>

The wanderers land in Ireland without the protection of Fergus. Deirdre warns them of the treachery which she fears. But Naisi will not listen. When they reach Emain Macha, Conor assigns to them the house of the Red Branch. By this action they know at last that the words of Deirdre are true words. Lavarcam comes, sent by Conor to see if the "great beauty is still on Deirdre". She tells Naisi of the king's contemplated treachery. Conor is not satisfied by the unfavorable report that Lavarcam brings, so he sends one of his retainers for confirmation. Naisi, as he sits at chess with Deirdre, sees the man at the window. He hurls a chess-man with such force that it

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9. W. 64; L. 96 makes no mention of the feast of Conor; when the king hears of the trouble of the Sons of Usna in Alba, he sends for them to return under the security of Fergus, Dubhtach, and Cormac. S.153; E.H. 25-29.

10. W. 64; L. 97; S. 155-163; E.H. 28-36. These last two give a picture of the happy, peaceful life of Deirdre and Naisi in Alba, and emphasize the fear of Deirdre concerning the departure.





breaks the eye of Conor's emissary. The retainer reports to  
 Conor that it was worth the loss of an eye to have seen such  
 loveliness as he saw in Deirdre. That report sealed the doom of  
 Deirdre and the Sons of Usna.<sup>11</sup> After that the king's desire  
 knew no bounds. He commanded that the Sons of Usna be taken and  
 that Deirdre be brought to him. Naisi and his brothers and the  
 son of Fergus performed prodigious deeds against the men of Ulster.  
 The king saw that they could not be seized in open fight, so he  
 called Cathbad, the Druid to work magic. Cathbad consented when the  
 king swore to preserve the lives of the Sons of Usna. The Druid  
 caused the appearance of a sea to be around Naisi and his brothers  
 When they threw down their weapons to swim, they were taken and  
 beheaded at the command of the king.<sup>12</sup> Some say that Deirdre  
 threw herself on the body of Naisi and died.<sup>13</sup> But according to  
 others, she was in the house of Conor a year. And on the day  
 the king would give her to Eogan, who slew Naisi, she leaped  
 from his chariot and struck her head on a stone and died.<sup>14</sup>

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11. W. 64; L. 97; Here the Sons of Usna are slain by Eogan as soon as they land. S. 163-167; E.H. 36-39.

12. There is no mention of the magic of Cathbad in W. or L.  
 S. 170-171; E.H. 43-45.

13. S. 175; E.H. 48.

14. W. 64; L. 98-103; S. 177-179; E.H. 49-54.



After the treachery of Conor, Fergus and many of the Red Branch including Cormac, son of Conor desert the king and join with Ailill and Medb, rulers of Connacht who are preparing a war against Ulster. <sup>15</sup> Conor sees the tide turning against him; he decides to surrender the kingship in favor of his son. But Cormac is killed by Craiftine as he returns to Ulster to take the throne. The last hope of Conor and Emain Macha is gone. And so the prophecy of Cathbad, the Druid at the birth of Deirdre is fulfilled. "Her<sup>e</sup>s and kings shall die for her; she shall be the destruction of Emain Macha and the Red Branch".

In Fiona Macleod's House of Usna, the action centers around the old king. Deirdre is dead; the Sons of Usna are dead. For Conor and for Ireland the beginning of the end has passed. The house of Usna is a drama of the soul. There is no outward plot. The action is all in the mind of the old king. In this respect, Fiona Macleod's play resembles Samson Agonistes. In both plays there is a spiritual conflict. In both there is progression; the her<sup>e</sup>s are different men at the end of the play. Samsom regains his lost manhood; he again realizes that God's way is the best way. Conor comes to a consciousness of the sin he has committed and its inevitable consequences. He knows at the end of the play what he did not know at the beginning—that there is a power stronger than man, even though that man be a king.

A feeling of the hopelessness of it all is maintained as a sombre undercurrent throughout the play by allusions to the death of Cormac, in whom lies the old king's final hope for the redemption of Emain Macha. The whole incident of Cormac's love and tragic  
15. W. 64; L. 98; S. 176; E.H. 149.



end<sup>is</sup> taken from the story Da Chocha's Hostel<sup>1</sup> ; it is not found in any traditional story of Deirdre. Fiona Macleod has also told this story of Cormac as The Harping of Cravetheen<sup>2</sup> . In the first scene of The House of Usna, Cravetheen summarizes The Harping of Cravetheen. Cormac and Eilidh the fair have loved. Because Cormac was of another race and because Eilidh had been promised to another, their union was prohibited by the king. Their love knows no law. Cormac is banished when Eilidh tells the king that the child she carries under her heart belongs to the yellow-haired stranger. Eilidh is given to the old harper, Cravetheen. But her heart is with Cormac, far in Ulster. By day and night she turns from the old Cravetheen in coldness. On the night that should have been their wedding night, Cravetheen tells Eilidh that there will be "three playings" before he will wed with her. And that night he plays the first playing. At the second playing Cormac's child is born and dies. Time passes. At last Cormac comes from Ulster at a time when Cravetheen is far away. And before Cravetheen returns, Cormac and Eilidh know the ecstasy of love united. Cravetheen looks on Eilidh, the fair ; the woman whom he loves, in the arms of Cormac and then he plays the third playing. So sweet is that music that deep sleep comes on the two, so they do not know when they die in the flame Cravetheen kindles around them.

All of this is back of the wild words of Cravetheen to Coel at the beginning of The House of Usna. Not satisfied with his revenge upon the son, the old harper would also breath revenge

1. Revue Celtique, vol. xxi, p. 157.

2. Collected Works of Fiona Macleod, vol. ii, p. 99 ff.



on the father also. " I am the spear to goad to madness  
 Conchobar, the king<sup>1</sup>!

The action of the play begins in the second scene. It is night. Conor in a white robe wanders among the shadows of the oaks. Somewhere in the gloom, the boy Maine<sup>2</sup> chants softly over and over: "Deirdrê is dead! Deirdrê, the beautiful is dead, is dead". With this refrain the spiritual drama begins in the heart of the old king, standing as Lear in tragic loneliness. The Conor of The House of Usna, unlike the Conor of tradition, loved Deirdre with a pure love, with a love that was more to him than his kingdom, than was life itself. He cannot at first realize the meaning of those words which the boy Maine voices. "Deirdrê, the Beautiful is dead, is dead". Then he speaks with Duach, the Druid who is the voice of Fate. As he listens to the words of Duach, Conor begins to realize the physical fact of Deirdre's death. "Dreams, . . . . dreams. I am sick of dreams! It is love I long for. My lost love! My lost love!" And then the lonely old man enters upon his struggle against destiny over which, to use Duach's phrase, "neither the hero<sup>3</sup>s nor the Gods shall in the end prevail". Gradually the

1. The House of Usna, Act i, scene 1.
2. There are two characters by this name in the traditional story. One was a son of Conor. The other was Maine Red Hand, a son of the King of Norway, whose father and two brothers had been slain by Naisi. It was he who struck the heads from the Sons of Usna at the bidding of Conor. The Maine here has no connection with either. Fiona Macleod makes him the grandson of Felim, the father of Deirdre.





deeper significance of the drama begins to unfold. The old king becomes conscious that there are to be consequences of which he had not stopped to dream, to that mad love of his. The House of Usna is the tragedy of the ruin of Ireland. Little by little old Conor under the relentless words of Duach, begins to feel it. Emain Macha, the beautiful city, is in ashes; the glory of the Red Branch is dim; the dreams of a united country depart with the departure of Fergus and Cormac to the forces of Connacht. Conor has not realized the extent of his ruin. "Cormac shall return; he shall be High King of Eire. His children and the children of Essa, his wife shall sit on the throne of Ireland". Remorselessly Duach, the voice of Destiny, dispels the dream. "Essa?..... Have you not heard? Essa is dead!" The spirit of the old king falters; his shaking hand presses his forehead; but he is not crushed. "My son shall reign, nevertheless. Cormac Conlingas shall be king". But there is no escape. The white hound courses through the shadows. The old king knows his last son is gone. In the dusk, the boy Mainé chants over and over: "Deirdrê the Beautiful is dead, is dead". Conor bows at last before the power he feels and he murmurs sadly, "Dreams, dreams, nothing but dreams!"

The third act opens with Cravetheen before the king to receive sentence for the murder of Cormac and Eilidh, the fair. Conor recognizes the parallel between himself and Cravetheen. Both had loved, neither had been beloved. Both sought revenge and outwardly both accomplished it. Now, all hope gone, both seek death. Conor grants life to the old harper. But the "Voice of the House of <sup>S</sup>Usna" sounds in the chanting of the boy Mainé

1. In Celtic literature the passage of the white hound foreshadowed death.



and the king remembers the loss of his last hope in the death of Cormac. And that remembrance makes him forget the lesson he has learned. He turns to the guards who stand beside the old harper. "Take him away! To Death!" Duach speaks as he spoke at the beginning, "O, King there is no evil done upon the world that the wind does not bring back to the feet of him who wrought it". Relentless destiny crushes through the words of Duach. Conor begins to realize that he has slain more than the physical bodies of Déirdre and the Sons of Naisi, that he has slain his kingliness and the mystery and wonder of beauty. He is magnificent in his despair. With drawn sword, he calls on the remnants of the Red Branch. At their head he will win back Eire. The transforming word is the word of Cravethen in his hour of death, "The gods do not sleep, O King ! .....Farewell". Conor knows it for the cry of the House of Usna. His sword drops; his face pales. He is an old, old man with his crumbling dreams.

The purpose of Fiona Macleod in writing The House of Usna was not to preserve or glorify Celtic story. He found in the story of Deirdre a fresh material which he could utilize in presenting his own ideas. Accordingly he does not scruple to alter the legend wherever necessary. The Celtic "file" in writing of Deirdre and Naisi did not consciously try to express the power of destiny, or the tragedy of Conor, or the beauty of death after love. The story was entirely objective for them. They were interested in the love of Deirdre and Naisi and its frustration by Conor, and not in any idea it might exemplify.

The Conor of Fiona Macleod is idealized from the traditional figure of the king. His love is purer; it has less of the sensual.



Because of his great love he forgets his kingliness and the good of Eire and does a deed unworthy of himself. The Conor of tradition was as guilty; he betrayed his kingship, the greatest sin in the eyes of his people. But it is pride more than love which causes him to kill the Sons of Usna and Deirdre. The earlier writers were not interested in the mental state of Conor after the death of the Wanderers. One must turn to a modern version before ~~he~~ he can find any reference which would indicate feeling on the part of Conor. The Conor in Lady Gregory's book, after he has killed the Sons of Usna, says, "They were my sisters children, the three brothers I vexed with blows, Naisi and Ainille and Ardan; they have died along with Deirdre"<sup>1</sup>.

Space does not permit a detailed comparison of Fiona Macleod's The Immortal Hour with the traditional story of the Wooing of Etain. The main lines of the traditional story may be briefly indicated. There are three distinct sections to the Midir-Etain story.

1) The first part takes place in fairy land. Etain is driven from the house of Midir by the jealous Fuamnach. In the form of a butterfly, she is blown across the world for seven years. Finally

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1. Cuchullin of Muirthemne, p. 140.

2. There are two main versions of the story of Etain, that found in the Leabhar na h-Uidhri which dates from the eleventh century and the Egerton, a fifteenth-century manuscript. Both versions are translated by A.H. Leahy, Heroic Romances of Ireland, vol. i, p. 1-33. Müller has translated the Egerton version in *Ryue Celtique*, iii, 351-60. The Leabhar na h-Uidhri manuscript is translated by Windish in *Irische Texte*, 1880, Vol. i, p. 59.



she is rescued by Mac O'c and dwells with him in peace until Fuamnach discovers her and sends her forth again. After another seven years Etain is reborn as an earthly child.

2) Eochaid, King of Leinster weds the beautiful Etain and takes her home to his court. Ailill, the brother of Eochaid falls in love with Etain. To cure him of his madness, she three times makes a tryst with him but Midir keeps Ailill from meeting Etain.

3) The reunion of Etain and Midir is told in two forms. (Egerton) Midir comes as a hideous monster and carries off Etain by force. By the aid of a Druid, Eochaid destroys Midir's dwelling and rescues his wife. (Leabhar na h-Uidhri) Midir comes to Eochaid and proposes that he play with him at chess. At first Midir loses and performs services for the king as forfeit. Finally Midir proposes that the stake shall be named by the winner after the game. Eochaid consents. Midir wins and asks for his reward "that he may hold Etain in his arms and claim a kiss from her". Eochaid must agree. When the Queen is in his arms, Midir changes her and himself into two white swans and so escapes with her.

Fiona Macleod in The Immortal Hour is primarily concerned with the Leabhair na h-Uidhri version of the last section of the story; the first section appears not at all; the second is rewritten in accord with the ideas Fiona Macleod would express. Dalua has been added outright to the list of characters. Dalua is the Amadan-Dhu, the fairy fool whose touch spells madness or death. He appears frequently in Celtic literature, but in no version is he connected with the Midir-Etain story. Fiona Macleod has added, also two peasants, very modern folk indeed.





One feels that he was drawing them from his friends of the Isles and Highlands.

The Immortal Hour is allegorical. In order to understand Fiona Macleod's purpose, it is necessary to interpret this allegorical element. In his Note to this play Fiona Macleod says that Etain is the symbol of the wayward but homewandering soul; Midir, a symbol of the spirit and Eochaidh, a symbol of the mundane life, of mortal love. But what is Dalua? That he appears in his traditional character is clear from the second scene of the first act and the last scene of the play. In the second scene of the first act, the touch of Dalua brings madness on Eochaidh. In the last scene of the play, after Etain has departed with Midir, Eochaid, looking after, laments,

"My dreams! My dreams! Give me my dreams.

Dalua

"There is none left but this-(touches the king who stands stiff and erect, sways, and falls to the ground)- "the dream of death".

But "madness" and "death" do not entirely explain Dalua. He has loved Etain. He speaks of himself to the Voices,

"I am old, more ancient than the gods,

"For I am son of Shadow, eldest god

"Who dreamed the passionate and terrible dreams

"We have called **Fire** and Light, Water and Wind

"Air, Darkness, Death, Change, and Decay and Birth

"And all the infinite bitter range that is"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Act I, scene 1, p. 338.



Dalua is more than death. The true explanation is to be found in The Winged Destiny<sup>1</sup> wherein Fiona Macleod explains the two mighty forces at work in "that great, abstract, overwhelming mystery of fate". One of these forces is the "Genius of the World", who weaves with time and races and empires, with life and death and change. The other is "The Winged Destiny" which has no concern with such as this but inhabits infinitude and has concern with nought save the soul. Dalua would symbolize "The Genius of the World", and Midir, "The Winged Destiny". Here again Fiona Macleod betrays his eternal seeking after reality.

The Laughter of Peterkin<sup>2</sup> is the only other extensive work of Fiona Macleod which even remotely follows a written source. It is the retelling of the "three most sorrowful tales of Ireland"- The Children of Lir, The Fate of the Sons of Turenn, and Darthool and the Sons of Usna. The titular story, The Laughter of Peterkin, more or less autobiographical, forms the prologue to the three stories based on tradition. Even here the main purpose of Fiona Macleod (as he states in the preface) was not to acquaint his child readers with Celtic tradition, but through the beauty of these stories, to give them a glimpse of the Beauty which is eternal. When the child has seen this Beauty, he will live his life more in accord with the eternal order.

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1. Collected Works, vi, 338.

2. The Laughter of Peterkin, London, 1897.



The second division of Fiona Macleod's Celtic work is made up of those stories which have their sources in oral tradition. This work is the most Celtic of the work of Fiona Macleod. It is the least original. These tales and superstitions which he collected among the Isles and on the Highlands are to Fiona Macleod what his Note Books were to Hawthorne. They are the crude material out of which he formed his more artistic work whose purpose is to set forth his ideas of life and death and reality. Fiona Macleod published these "unworked" tales because to him they represent beautiful life which is the highest ideal of art <sup>1</sup>. Among the best of these stories collected from oral tradition are Silk O' Kine, The Dark Nameless One, and The Archer.

2

Silk O' Kine, Fiona Macleod says, was told to him by Ian Mor, an old poet of the Isles. Ian "had it" from old Barabal Mac Aodh, his foster mother. It is the story of Eilidh and Isla and their great love. When the king would give Eilidh to Osra mac Osra, her words are words of defiance, for she loves Isla. The king decrees that she and Isla shall have their last night together. As the dawn is breaking, the two rise and move hand in hand to the sea. "Eilidh flung the gold fillet of her dusky hair far into the sea. Isla broke his sword, and saw the two halves shelve in the moving greeness. Then they turned and kissed each other on the lips.....no man knows whether they went to life

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1. Celtic, Vol. v, p. 185.

2. Works, ii, 115.



or death; but that Isla and Eilidh swam out together against the sun, and were seen never again by any of their kin or race". This story is truly Celtic in spirit and conception. Its passions are laid bare.

Silk O' Kine is a particularly happy illustration since Fiona Macleod used this theme in the artistic Ula and Urla. Ula and Urla moves in the realm beyond life. Isla awaits there the coming of Eilidh who carries that their child may have breath. One day as Isla lingers almost in despair at the Stone of Sorrow. Eilidh comes and at last she and Isla know the meaning of love. The vision, for such it is, ends characteristically. "But are they gone, these twain, who loved with deathless love? Or is this a dream that I have dreamed?"

"Afar in an island sanctuary that I shall not see again, where the wind chants the blind, oblivious rune of Time, I have heard the grasses whisper: Time never was, Time is not!" The theme of Ula and Urla is the reality of love which lies behind the great love of earth. The theme of Silk O'Kine is the love of Isla for Eilidh and their escape over the waves. The one is contemplative, the other active; one is abstract, the other concrete. The difference that is between spiritual and physical lies between them.

"The Dark Nameless One" was told to Fiona Macleod by Ivor McLean, a boatman of the Isles. It is a story of Saint Columba. One day as the holy man is walking by the water, a seal raises its head and curses him. Columba in surprise questions the animal. The seal tells him that its name is Black Angus and that before





its transformation it had been Angus Mac Odrum. Angus then asks Columba concerning Kirsteen McVurich. That night Murtagh tells Columba of the Kirsteen who was a servant of Christ and was won to the waves by Angus of the race of the seal. Now Angus is doomed endlessly to search for Kirsteen for she was the fabled first wife of Adam and Angus is none other than Black Judas.

This story is crusted with Celtic superstition. It is to be seen in the each uisge, or sea-kelpie, who dwells in the caves of the sea, in the seal-man, in the old curse, "a stake for your belly and nails for your hands and thirst for your tongue". Here is shown especially the Celtic mingling of Paganism and Christianity—Columba and Black Angus and Judas, Kirsteen and the "first wife of Adam".

The Archer is the story of the love of two men for one woman. Though she loves Ian, Silis stays with her husband when the chance for freedom comes. Had Fiona Macleod been telling an original story based on this theme, and not one told him by Coll McColl of Barra, it would have ended differently. Silis would have gone with her lover. For Fiona Macleod love always came first; it is the greatest flame. Beside that eternal force, duty is a man-made thing and very artificial. His The Passion of Pere Helion and Cathal of the Woods, treat this theme; in both love is the conquering force.

The third division of the Celtic work of Fiona Macleod can be classified into two groups depending on the nature of the Celtic element therein contained. These stories are either built



around a character or characters of Celtic legend or they connect themselves with a Celtic superstition. The examples most worthy of mention in the work of Fiona Macleod of original stories dealing with well known Celtic characters are, The Sad Queen, The Laughter of Scathach, the Queen, and Dalua.

The first two are concerned with Scathach, the Amazonian Queen in Celtic literature from whom Cuchulain received his training in arms. She dwelt "far to the east of Alba". The way thither was full of inconceivable difficulties, both of a natural and supernatural nature. Cuchulain wins his way to the realm of the dread queen and from her demands training in arms. Fiona Macleod, acting on a hint in the traditional story, makes Scathach love Cuchulain.

In The Sad Queen, Scathach, because of her love for Cuchulain, sends Connla, who reminds the queen of her obdurate lover, to death by red brands on his naked breast. Ulric "who has loved but one" she spares. In The Laughter of Scathach, the Queen, Scathach with her band of women-warriors falls on a shipwrecked Viking crew and takes them captive. "Because of the sorrow in her heart which is called Cuchulain", she sends them all to a living death. Neither of these stories is to be found in Celtic tradition. Fiona Macleod wrote them, as was indicated above, solely to express one phase of woman's struggle against love and the order man has made for her.

Around the character of Dalua, whom we have met with in

1. P, 10 et sq.



the discussion of the Immortal Hour Fiona Macleod has woven a story which he calls by the name of that sinister god. Dan Macara sees Dalua, the fairy fool, whose touch spells death or madness, moving over the moor as a shadow and leading a flock of sheep which appear as shadows. The music of Dalua's pipes is so compelling that Dan Macara follows him on and on. Dalua shows him that the world is but a shadow and that all in it are phantoms. In the end, the god touches the piper with his mysterious touch and from that time to the everyday world, Dan Macara appears mad; but in truth he is seeing reality under the ever present shadow. This story does not appear in Celtic tradition. It is the expression of Fiona Macleod's mysticism, his seeking after the eternal realities, and his belief that, compared with the spirit realm, the physical realm is as a shadow.

The Honey of Wild Bees is based on late redactions of the Deirdre story which ascribe to Deirdre two children, Gaiar and Aebgreine. When they leave for Emain Macha, Deirdre and Naisi place their children in the keeping of Manannan, god of the sea. Bobaras, a poet, has the instruction of them. Aebgreine is given in marriage to "Rinn of the land of Promise".

Fiona Macleod takes these characters and weaves an allegory around them. Manannan gives to the Druid poet, Bobaran, who represents religion, the two children of Deirdre to keep from all harm. The Druid saves Gaer, who is youth, from the dangers of warfare, and from lust in the form of a beautiful woman from beyond the seas. But he cannot save the boy from revenge which Rinn, who is death, awakens in his heart. Nor can Bobaran save



Aebgreine from the dream of love, though she knows it means death. The interest of Fiona Macleod is in the allegory. It is the old cry echoed in the Runes of Women. Love, great love must on this earth end in tragedy, in death.

"We who love are those who most do suffer,

"We who suffer are those who most do love".<sup>1</sup>

The Washer of the Ford forms a transition from the stories based on Celtic characters to those based on Celtic superstitions, for it contains both elements. The superstition that before death, the warrior sees a mysterious woman at the ford washing his shroud, is to be found throughout Celtic literature. When Cormac is hastening home to receive the High Kingship of Ireland, he sees a red woman at the ford of Athluain, washing chariot and harness. She tells Cormac that she is washing the harness of a king that will soon perish. That was the night of Cormac's death.<sup>2</sup> Before Cuchulain went to his last battle he saw a young girl with long yellow hair washing and ever washing clothing stained with blood. Cathbad, the Druid begs him to turn back. "Little Cu", he said, "do you see what it is that young girl is doing? It is your red clothes she is washing and crying as she washes, because she knows that you are going to death against Maeve's great army".<sup>3</sup>

Sir Samuel Ferguson has made artistic use of the Washer of the Ford in his poem, Congal.<sup>4</sup> In this poem a whole army sees the

1. Runes of Women, p. 23.

2. The Destruction of Da Chocha's Hostel, *Revue Celtique*, xxi, 157.

3. O'Grady's translation of The Great Defeat on the Plains of Muirthemne, E. Hull, op. cit. p. 247.

4. Sir Samuel Ferguson, *Congal*, 1872, p. 56ff.





woman washing innumerable shrouds. The water of the river runs red. The next day they are horribly defeated when they go to battle.

Fiona Macleod elaborates the old superstition of the Washer of the Ford and gives it a new meaning. A boat manned by the Gael is taking Torcall, a blind harper of the north, to the mainland. The men beg for a song. The song Torcall sings is of the Washer of the Ford who laughs when the shrouds are many and red. Torcall succeeds in stirring up strife among the boatmen because of an old feud. In the fight all meet death except the blind old harper. That night in his boat of death, Torcall dreams. The River of Blood courses by. On its bank stands The Washer of the Ford. After she <sup>has</sup> washed the red foam from the souls sent to her, she tramples them under her feet. And then Torcall dreams of Hildyr, whom he had loved and left so long ago when he sailed from Lochlin. Hildyr tells him of the weary love that is hers, the weary woman's pain that is in her heart. Then she presses the wee one who had never known its father into Torcall's arms. The baby lips whispered a love song whose burden was this: "What of me and Hildyr now that a river with red waters lies between us and my father?"

The next day Torcall landed. A child met him and led him through the strange land. It spoke of a river which was beyond and of a woman who was there. Sight came to Torcall when he ate of the fruit offered him; and he saw the river and the woman washing "shrouds of woven moonbeams". She sang, and Torcall knew her to be Mary Magdalene and that here in the running <sup>a</sup> <sub>^</sub> water, she washed off



the red stains of sin. Across the river a woman sang and a child cried. Torcall would cross. As he passed the Washer she asked, "What is best, O Torcall, the sword or peace?" "Peace", he answered and he was white now and old".

Once more it is an original idea which is at the root of Fiona Macleod's "retold Celtic story". Again he recchoes the Runes of Women, this time, in the sorrow which comes to her and her children from war, the pain that is hers when red must be washed from shrouds and she is left alone. Here, too, is a veiled suggestion of the part the woman of tomorrow is to play in the change to come. This woman appears as The Washer of the Ford who is also Mary.

Of the stories of Fiona Macleod based on a Celtic superstition, The Sin Eater is most appreciated. There is a superstition of the Isles that a man burdened with sin may be relieved at his death if a stranger be found who will take upon himself the sins of the dead by means of a ceremony known as "eating the sin". Neil Ross arrives penniless at the home of his boyhood on the day of the death of Adam Blair. Since he left the Isles years before to wander over the world, Neil Ross has carried a burning hatred in his heart for Adam Blair for Blair's greatest sin was against the young mother of Ross. Now he finds that he has arrived too late to curse the old man "between the two eyes". When the suggestion is made to him that he go through the ceremony of eating the sins of Blair, Ross is at first indignant. But he needs money and Andrew Blair will give him, for he believes Ross to be a stranger, two silver half-crowns if he will "eat the sins" of old Adam Blair. As Ross sits through the gray morning brooding over old Sheen Macarthur's peats, his mind changes. "The



dead are dead, Sheen Macarthur. They can know or do nothing. I will do it".<sup>1</sup> The fires of revenge are kindled anew in the heart of Ross at the words of Andrew Blair as they discuss the "sin eating". "The Sin-Eater as he is called, and a good Christian act it is, for all that the ministers and the priests make a frowning at it, the Sin-Eater must be a stranger, and should know nothing of the dead may, above all bear him no grudge."

At that, Neil Ross's eyes lighted for a moment.

"And why that"?

"Who knows? I have heard this, and I have heard that. If the Sin-Eater were hating the dead man he could take the sins and fling them into the sea and they would be changed into demons of the air that would harry the flying soul till Judgment Day".<sup>1</sup> These words bring great joy to the heart of Ross. He is not a stranger and he bears a grudge against the dead man. So he goes through the ceremony that puts the sins of Adam Blair upon himself. After Neil Ross tries to throw the sins of Adam Blair into the sea that they may turn into "demons and torture the soul of the old man", he has no peace. He must live with that burden on his heart, crushing him day by day until at last he binds himself to a spar in the form of a cross and leaps into the sea.

Even<sup>in</sup> this simple allegory of the cancerous nature of hatred and the necessity for forgiveness, the ideas of Fiona Macleod may be traced. Here again he cries out against the lot of women. It was because of Blair's sin against the mother of Ross, that there was hatred in Neil Ross's heart which spelled his madness and death. The reaping is not all done by the women. As the babe of Torcall sang, the children, too, must suffer.



## III

## CONCLUSION

Fiona Macleod's view of life is the key through which his work becomes intelligible. Without this key it cannot be fully appreciated and understood.<sup>1</sup> The basis of Fiona Macleod's view of life is beauty—a beauty which is not conditioned, which exists in and by itself and has no necessary relation to any other being. This beauty is the reality which is the harmonizing principle of the universe; in it all is contained.

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1. Certain critics have failed to see this unity of idea in the work of Fiona Macleod. Lloyd Morris (The Celtic Dawn) considers Fiona Macleod simply as an obscure singer in the choir of the Celtic Renaissance. Paul Elmer More (Shelburne Essays, viii.) dismisses his symbolism as "impressive because it really symbolizes nothing, and also accuses him of striving to become spiritual by becoming abstract. Federico Olivero sees Fiona Macleod preeminently as a stylist (Studi sul Romanticismo Inglese).





An outgrowth of Fiona Macleod's conception of absolute beauty is his pantheism. Since all are parts of a greater whole, all must be indissolubly related. Man must acknowledge kinship with the animal, the tree, the rock. The inanimate part of nature is closer to the ultimate reality than is man. Man's greatest good lies in entering again this charmed circle from which civilization has led him away. The third idea of Fiona Macleod is in his presentation of the dilemma of women and his vision of the second redemption of the world through the "woman who is at the heart of women". It is she who is to lead man back to a realization of his kinship with all nature and with the ultimate reality.

In such work of Fiona Macleod as The Divine Adventure, Green Fire, The Gaelic Heart, The Prologue to The Washer of the Ford, Iona, The Runes of Women, these ideas are plainly presented. Though they are not so obvious in the "Celtic" work, we have found that they are there and are vital to an understanding of it.

Fiona Macleod never afterwards equalled his first two books, Pharais and The Mountain Lovers. Just enough Gaelic coloring is here, just enough mysticism, just enough story, all blended with the artistic skill of one who sat at the feet of Rossetti. Fiona Macleod was born at the wrong time. He was a Romanticist writing in an age which was becoming more and more an age of realism. The pseudonym under which his work was done represents an attempt to get away from this realistic world. Had he been born a century earlier Fiona Macleod would have disputed the laurels with the great men of the age. But it is fitting that



since a Gael in the person of James Macpherson did so much to initiate the movement known in literature as Romanticism, a Gael should close it. That is what Fiona Macleod did.



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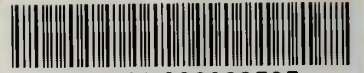
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