



Classics in Short: Hebridean Treasures on the Isle of Mist

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Created *Nov '20*

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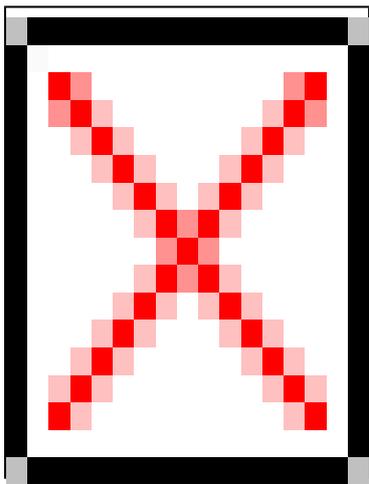
Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Hebridean Treasures on the Isle of Mist

Brian Alderson considers **The Treasure of the Isle of Mist** by W.W. Tarn, a classic with an unusual publishing history.



Fairies

are said to inhabit the Isle of Skye, at least before mankind built a bridge there. They are briefly vouched for by the Seers of Lewis (introduced to us here on page shown) and encountered in this story by young Miss Fiona.

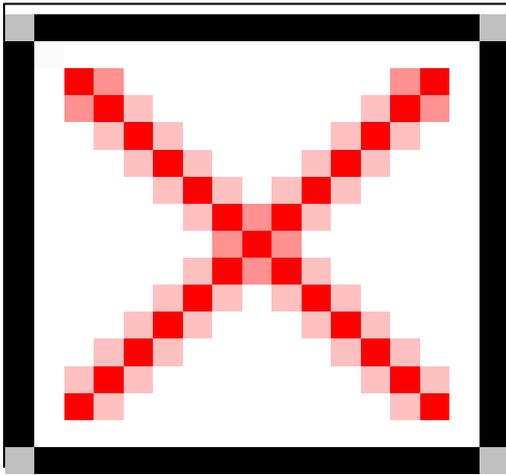
Her father

was born, and brought up in Skye and owns the Big House on the sea-loch, but he is a Student and must needs let it out to holiday-making Sassenachs and others, living more cheaply with his daughter in the cottage next door. At the start of the story the Big House is inhabited by an entomologist friend of the Student and his son, the Urchin, a boy with whom Fiona is planning to row to a neighbouring island in search of a cave where, it is said, the treasure lies that was shipped from a Spanish galleon at the time of the Armada.

Into this scene

comes a hawker, seemingly well-known to the Student of old, and wishing to give him a gift. He is though a man of magical attributes and offers one instead to Fiona ? the gift of a Search along with a bracelet that allows her to speak

with the creatures of the island. She takes the Search to mean the quest for the Spanish treasure and her conversations with the local wildlife give licence to the author, W.W. Tarn, for some jocularly at the bracelet's expense: a whale, who gives vital information about the location of the golden doubloons complains about barnacles being scraped off his tail by coming too near the rocks, a centipede, friend of the Student's book-worms, quotes Hegel on the unity of opposites.



But darker events are in the offing.

The Urchin has thrown a stone at a shore-lark and broken its wing ? an offence to the culture of the island and, worse still, a visitor to the Big House ? cast as a typical fictional money-grubbing city gent, Jeconiah by name ? has come by an ancient map of the location of the doubloons and is to seek for it in the same cave as the children. In both cases, calamity attends upon their visits: the Urchin falls on the rocks in the dark cave and disappears and Jeconiah is floored by a falling part of the cave wall and suffers an acute catalepsy, being shipped back to the House and confined to bed.

These events

constitute stages in Fiona's Search as she comes to see that there is an onus on her to solve their mysterious connection with the exploration of the cave. She is persuaded that she must take a track up the hillside of Glenolisdal (later identified as the real Branderstaig) where she gains access to the court of the island's fairy king. It is here that a trial is to be held to determine the guilt of the mainland strangers who have been abducted by the fairies from the cave for their transgressions. It is a big fantasy occasion, allowing the author on the one hand to indulge his love of inditing great poetic lists such as a grove with 'every tree or plant famous in legend or history' or an assembled concourse of fairies, 'all the lost peoples and nations' from the Old Stone peoples to those of Marco Polo's City of Heaven. On the other hand there is an almost Carrollian court scene with the defendants' defence conducted by a goblinish Chancellor whose remarks sounded like 'a series of unedited cablegrams'. Through Fiona's presence as an honoured visitor, matters are resolved. The Urchin is released to Fiona's care and Jeconiah, who comes out of his catalepsy, is restored to normality, the latter clearly a sadder and wiser man.

But what of the Search and the Treasure?

This somewhat preposterous tale has the engaging informality of its classic origin, having been first told by Tarn to his fifteen-year-old daughter when she was ill in bed. (He had been a lawyer [hence the comic barrister] but had become the Student turning his mind to Hellenism and Alexander the Great.) The background to the story derives from their move to Skye where the Big House still exists and where several details of the lore of the island figure in its fairy episodes, and indeed, the Fairy King has something of a Seeing Stone in his crystal sceptre. The Search, initiated by the hawker, does not bring gold to Fiona but 'the treasure of the island which you love' and indeed, in the life lived after the story, Fiona, daughter of both the Student and W.W. Tarn was to become as noted an authority on Skye as the Student was on the Ptolemies.

First told in 1913,

The Treasure of the Isle of Mist had an unusual publishing history. It was turned into a book and published by Philip Allan in 1919 and subsequently, in 1938, issued in a new edition by Oxford University Press, illustrated with photographs of the Hebridean locale. It also, though, had a great appeal in the United States and in 1934 an edition came out in New York with remarkable black and white illustrations by Robert Lawson. After the War in 1950, with the great John Bell as editor, Oxford reissued an edition with illustrations by Margery Gill.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His latest book **The 100 Best Children's Books**, Galileo Publishing, 978-1903385982, £14.99 hbk, is out now.

The Treasure of the Isle of Mist is published by [Leopold Classic Library](#) [3], £10.95.

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Source URL (retrieved on Sep '21): <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-hebridean-treasures-on-the-is>

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