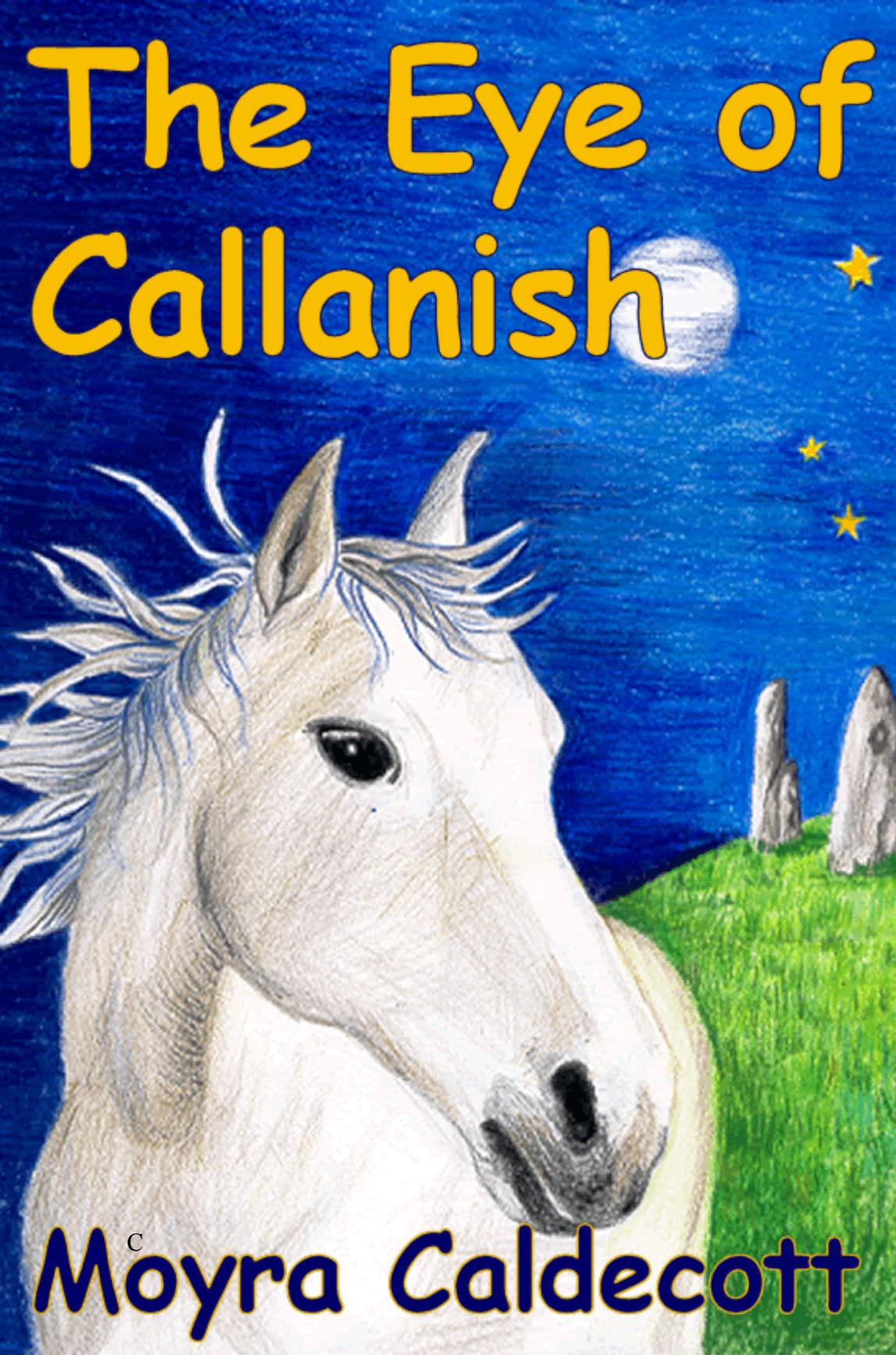


The Eye of Callanish

A painting of a white horse in a night landscape. The horse is the central focus, shown in profile facing right. Its mane is white and slightly windswept. The background is a deep blue night sky with a large, bright full moon and several yellow stars. In the distance, on a green grassy hill, are several grey stone pillars, characteristic of the Callanish megalithic ruins. The overall style is soft and painterly.

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Moyra Caldecott

THE EYE OF CALLANISH

MOYRA CALDECOTT

Mushroom eBooks

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Introduction

This story is set at the beginning of the twelfth century on the Island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland.

A young girl, persecuted for being in league with the Devil, believes herself to be psychically in touch with the ancient people who built the temple of Tall Stones at Callanish.

There is a suggestion in the story that these people might have come from the West, the legendary land Saint Brendan had sailed to in the sixth century, the Vinland of the Vikings, and North America of the present day. Amerindian legends of ancient migrations and recent archaeological excavations of earth works, quoits and underground chambers in North America give support to this suggestion, as does the similarity in concept between the Amerindian Medicine Wheel and the ancient Stone Circles of Britain. Yachtsmen have told me that it is easier to sail across the northern Atlantic ocean from west to east than it is from east to west. I am not suggesting however that the American Indians as we know them today emigrated to Britain, but that some ancient people – the forerunners of us both – *may* have. Callanish itself has a legend of people

coming from over the sea in ships, landing, building the temple, the priests wearing tall feathered head dresses and feathered cloaks with wrens and sacred birds circling above their heads.

This theme however is only one thread in a story that is mostly concerned with the strange human phenomenon of being at once fascinated by the search for Truth . . . and terrified of it . . .

The story also follows the further adventures of Neil, who was the hero of *Weapons of the Wolfhound*, and the hermit Durston, who, it was suggested in that book, carved the magnificent walrus ivory chess pieces known as the Lewis chess set now in the British Museum, London.

*'O God, kindle in my heart
A glimmer of the sun's warmth towards my neighbour,
Towards my enemy, towards my kindred, towards my
friend,
Towards the free, towards the slave, towards the bondsman
-
O Sons of the Earth soft and fair,
From the lowest created thing
Up to the Circle Most High.'*

Ancient Gaelic prayer offered at the time of the lighting of the Bealltuinn fires on May Day.

Quoted on p.154 of *The Islands of Western Scotland* by W.H.Murray, Eyre Methuen, 1973, from *History of Skye* by A. Nicolson, 1930.

Chapter 1

The Journey

The marshlands were full of waterfowl at this time of year, and sometimes it seemed to Neil that their island was more suitable for these creatures than it was for humans. So much water reflected the blue of the sky that his horse's hooves often seemed to wade through clouds at the edges of the meres.

It was a good day to start on a journey . . . a good day to be alive. He sang. The birds sang. The clouds scudded above and below and a cool, clean breeze lifted the silky threads of the bog-cotton and set them drifting to far away places.

The rumour that there was a pure white mare for sale in the village of Kirkoway on the eastern shores of Loch Roag, of exactly the kind Fiona, his sister, had set her heart on, had reached their farm only two days before. Neil's father, Lorn, had at first intended to fetch it himself, but had found that he was too busy. So Neil was chosen as the best horseman of the family to ride to

Kirkoway. He was delighted to leave behind his daily chores and to ride out into the world.

‘I will never be a contented farmer,’ he thought, the hills riding beside him, reflected in the mirror-smooth pools.

When he was a young boy he had run away to Iceland with a Viking sea captain called Baldur, and had returned home exhausted after Baldur’s death, satiated with dangerous adventures and only too glad to settle down to the quiet of his father’s farm. He had sat at the feet of Durston, the hermit who lived on the headland near his home, and tried to learn everything he was prepared to teach. He remembered how he had contrasted the active, violent life of the Viking, moving from one place to another as though the moving was an end in itself – with the quiet, contemplative life of the hermit, deeply aware of the rich adventures available to the spirit while the body remained in one place.

Neil remembered how he had said he was sick of the farm and the Island.

‘There is nothing here but wind and water and sheep and cows!’ he had grumbled.

Durston had smiled quizzically and replied: ‘Have you not seen the lichen and moss more beautiful than the finest tapestries in the royal palaces – heather crisper and richer than the thickest carpet – butterwort and flowering cotton grass, bog asphodel and lily clad more grandly than the finest ladies? Have you not seen the cunning sundew outwitting the dragonfly? Have you not seen the marshland and the green coastal hills

teeming with birds: the winchat, the whitethroat, the neat sandpiper, the agile dipper turning pebbles over at the bottom of clear running streams? Have you not seen the rocky crags, castles of the golden eagle, the merlin and the buzzard? What sickness has blinded you to the beautiful golden plover, the blue-black raven, the red grouse and the courageous storm petrel? The thickets are teeming with animals: the otter, the hare, the red deer . . . The rivers . . .'

All that Durston had said that day was true – his island world was beautiful, rich, exciting, but nevertheless . . .

Suddenly a bird sprang up from almost under his horse's hooves and hurtled to the sky. Neil's heart stirred. If only he could travel that far and that fast. If only he were not bound by the earth – by flesh and bone . . . He had learned much from Durston and he was not the foolish boy he had once been – but he had never achieved the far and free-ranging spirit the hermit seemed to have. Physical journeys and physical places still called to him.

Digging his heels into his bronze-red stallion he set off at a gallop.

'Go, Flame! Go.' he cried, and as though he too was excited at the thought of freedom, Flame responded to his master's mood and was away over the dark, soft moss and peat, shreds of it flying up from his hooves, his mane streaming out behind his head like the flame he was named for.

Neil's eyes shone, his breath came in short, joyful bursts, his heart pounded with the same rhythm as the hooves. Earth ... air ... water ... and the fire of his horse! All the elements! He was master of all the elements!

Having left at first light on a long summer's day, Neil could have reached Kirkoway before night-fall, but he had no wish to end his journey: he and Flame were enjoying the sense of freedom and the possibility of adventure too much. The wild galloping, alternating with quiet walking and a considerable period of dreaming beside the silver waters of Little Loch Roag meant that when evening approached he was still some distance from his destination. On the near shore of Loch Ceann Hulavig he found a fisherman who gave him shelter for the night and shared his meal of fish and ale. They sat for a long while beside the quiet water exchanging stories while the colour of the sky gradually deepened into purple and then into black, and the peninsulas and islands of the sea-loch gradually disappeared in the shadows. The man remembered how he had escaped to the sea when the fierce Norwegian king, Magnus Bareleg, had devastated the Island with fire, destroying every last tree and most of its people. Neil knew that his own father, as a young child, had narrowly escaped death at this time, though he never talked about it. To Lorn the important things in life were the slow rhythm of the seasons, the growth of crops from seed to harvest, and the love of his family. Wars might come and go and so might storms. He

weathered both as best he could and lived his own life his own way in spite of them. But the fisherman was a born storyteller, and before it became too dark to see he pointed out to Neil all the hills that had been covered with trees before the Norsemen had set torch to them. And he described with relish the screams he had heard before he had pulled away from the shore, the terrible scenes on the beach as too many people, frantic with fear, had tried to clamber into the few little fishing coracles, and how he had had to push them away, clubbing a woman because she would not let go of the edge of the boat when it was already over-loaded.

Neil shivered and looked up at the immense dark sky above them, seeded with stars. He hoped such power over life and death would never be in his gift.

The fisherman gave a great yawn at last and said that he was going to sleep. Neil paused at the low door and took one last deep breath of fresh air before he entered the man's dark hovel, and cast one last awed look over his shoulder at the vast heavens. Suddenly it seemed to him that one of the stars detached itself from its fixed and ancient place and crossed the sky. It happened so quickly and was so soon over that Neil was not sure it had happened at all. A slight chill ran through his limbs. Stars were so much a part of the eternal changeless background to man's ephemeral life it made him uneasy to think that they too were temporary and could fall from the sky as easily as apples from a tree.

He lay awake a long time on the rug the fisherman had flung on the floor for him, listening to the sound of the old man's breathing as he wallowed deeply in sleep. At last he drifted off himself. Wherever he stepped in his dream there was water, and in every sheet of water was the reflection of a star falling.

As the night progressed he began to feel more and more uneasy as though the star falling was a warning in some way that he should not take his own bright and easy life too much for granted. He woke depressed and was not surprised to find the sun had gone and that heavy grey clouds hung low and obscured the hills. By the time he came to take his leave the wind had brought a steady driving rain. He unstrapped his sheepskin jerkin from Flame's back and put it on, thinking ruefully back to the warm and golden sunlight of the day before. He wished now that he had hurried and been well under cover at Kirkoway.

He thought about his sister, not much more than a year older than himself, and yet about to be married. The year before a party of young noblemen from the Scottish court had been on the Isle of Lewis, guests of the Norse jarl at Stornoway. Some of them had ridden west – one in particular, Sir Kenneth, from a local family, seeking childhood memories though his own parents were long since dead and he had lived most of his life on the mainland. Neil's parents had made them welcome and Sir Kenneth, the nicest and least Normanized among them, had paid particular attention to his sister. Just before leaving he had asked for her in

marriage, but her father had said that the romance was too sudden and that he must wait a year. Messages had gone back and forth, the last announcing that Sir Kenneth would be with them by the end of June, hoping that Fiona's family would now accept him as bridegroom.

It was now very nearly the end of June and Sir Kenneth was on his way to Uig. It was so that his sister would have a worthy steed on which to accompany her new husband that Neil was on his way to Kirkoway. They had been told that the 'sheen of the mare's coat would make the silk of a bishop's cope seen dull'. Neil smiled, in spite of the rain, to think of his tall, beautiful sister with her flame-red hair riding such a steed to meet her new lord. They would show these Mainlanders that islanders could match them elegance for elegance. He smiled also as he remembered his father's anxious and often repeated warnings not to be cheated in the bargaining – to pay a fair price but no more.

* * * *

What with the rain driving into his face so that he kept his eyes half closed, and his thoughts wandering far and wide, Neil did not realize that he had left the main road until he began to notice that the path was unexpectedly rough and pitted and so narrow that the heather bushes had almost closed over it. Flame startled and almost threw him as his hoof caught in a hidden pot-hole.

Puzzled Neil reined Flame in and looked around. He was beneath a sombre hill which loomed out of the

swirling mist, crowned by a clustered group of tall, sinister shapes. His heart skipped a beat.

He had heard of this place. The Norsemen called the hilly peninsula 'Callanish': but the locals always referred to the Standing Stones as the 'Devil's Stones'.

He shuddered. The wind howled, the icy rain stabbed at his skin, and yet, fascinated, he could not leave. He remembered stories he had heard about the Stones . . . how someone who had dared to walk the avenue that led to the central circle had gone mad . . . how a child had disappeared in the district and the villagers had been convinced that it had been taken by the 'Stones' . . .

Neil crossed himself, murmuring a prayer to his god for protection.

'Flame,' he whispered, 'we must get away from here.' But Flame had discovered that there was something to crop after all in this desolate landscape and was happily tugging at the fine grass between the heather and the sedges.

'Flame!' Neil repeated, louder, his voice sounding strange to him as he looked back fearfully at the hilltop.

A shadow moved. *Something* was moving amongst the Stones!

Neil broke out in a sweat.

'Flame!' he shouted, and drove his heels savagely into his peacefully cropping steed. The horse reared in protest, whinnying loudly, and Neil was flung off his back onto the rough, wet ground.

‘O Lord save me!’ he almost sobbed, convinced that the Devil would surely have him now. Flame moved off unconcerned, and left his master struggling with slippery clinging heather branches and mud that sucked at his feet. He dragged himself upright at last and ran stumbling towards his horse. Flame was cropping again a little distance away – sensing no harmful influences.

Twice Neil fell as he ran towards him and twice missed his grip on Flame’s wet back as he tried to mount. Convinced that there was some dire spirit trying to hold him back he was shivering with fear. But at last – muddy, dishevelled and shaken he was mounted and, without a backward glance, was galloping back across the headland towards the main road from which he had so foolishly strayed.

Behind him, though he did not see it, the mist was lifting and the sun was touching the stones so that they shone like silver at the top of the hill. A young girl standing among them detached herself and mounted a white mare.

She did not follow him, but picked her way carefully down the other side of the slope, towards the shimmering sea.