

The Sail Weaver



Michele Fermanis-Winward

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Dedicated to people everywhere,
forced to leave their homes
and seek new lives
in inhospitable lands.

"The spirits of this place
are native bone and blood,
they care for all who sing."

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About the author: Michele Fermanis-Winward lives close to the summit of the Blue Mountains, in New South Wales, Australia. Enclosed by a landscape of towering gums, escarpments and near impenetrable gullies she imagines the lives of her bounty migrant forebears from the Isle of Tiree. This is her third work published by Ginninderra Press, following *Threading Raindrops* and *To the Dam*. A fourth, *The Eucalypt Distillery*, is to be published late 2017. A shorter poem, *Thistledown*, is published on the Isle of Tiree Genealogy website.

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The cover photo is by the author and is of her hand spindle and flax thread that she has spun. She shares this craft with her four-times great-grandmother, Mary (McKinnon) Maclean of Tiree, the subject of her poem.

THE SAIL WEAVER¹

Beyond her kin and kirk,
the shuttle and its thread,
her thoughts were free to spin.
She dreamed of mermaid isles,
of being charmed away
to palaces of shell.

Tiree was chill and wracked,
its wind a constant force
that cut her to the skin.

With basket and a stick
girls would gather weed,
a slinky mess, good for crops,
washed up by winter gales.

It sometimes brought her gifts,
small pink and pearly shells
her Dah would pierce,
knot in his Tiree cross
bound with linen thread
to protect her from the waves,
keep mermen lords at sea.

¹ The Sail Weaver : Mary (McKinnon) Maclean b.1796, Isle of Tiree, Scotland
(the author's four times great grandmother)

She eased her task
with looping skeins of song,
tales of finding pearls
and magic coral rings,
heard a mother tease,
"that girl's a siobhaire² child,
the way she loves to spin
and weave a thread to song."

A rounded hill of vibrant green
showed where the fairies dwelt,
no cautious man would till
on threat of raising ire,
they could turn his crop
to stems of hollow grain.
This patch was hers to sow.

² soibhaire : fairy (their name on The Isle of Tiree)

Fairy knolls defied
the ancient rule of clan,
they spoke her native tongue,
their faith was handed down
through rocks, the sand and wind,
a beating heft of waves.

Her fondest days
were tending to the flax,
here air smelt crisp and fine,
soil was sweet for growth.

The boys would chant,
taunt her as she left for work,
"Beware the fairies' curse
when you disturb their house."

Waist deep among blue flowers
she bundled flax to ret³,
combed and dried and sang
to her fairy host,
believed a song, made just for them,
kept wee folk on her side.

She listened to the earth,
strove to weave in tune,
her weft held light at play
despite a rigid warp
tied to the rules of man,
their dour Scots church.

Her nimble fingers ached
bent to the reeling thread,
round and round the hours,
looked up and saw
her friends were grown,
held babies to the breast
and oatmeal⁴ on their shawls.

³ ret : rot (harvested flax left to mature in dew and rain)

⁴ oatmeal placed in or on clothes : a charm against fairies

Charmed by the cottar⁵ lad
who stitched her woven cloth.
With his bodkin and keen eye,
her spindle and a loom
their sails were plain but strong,
withstood the tearing storms,
yards dragging at the cleats.

They saw a time of change
with more in need of work
at end of war's blockades,
the loss of kelp for rent,
trusting in their craft.

He would cut and sew
as she could spin and weave,
the little ones would help.

⁵ cottar : poorest farm worker

The English tidal wave,
industries' new world
Tiree refused to heed,
old paths were loath to change.
The poor and rich divide
with fear the laird
would squeeze them more
if they improved his land.

The power of cotton mills
eclipsed their cottage trade,
hand skills were pushed aside.
Large farms brought greater rent,
the laird reclaimed their plots,
sent his man to turn them out.

With nowhere else to go
their homes turned prison walls,
damp, tumbling stones,
no work, no peat, no food.

Her husband seethed,
cast as a lad from farm
and all he'd known,
to battle waves, wet through
he gathered kelp,
was sent to fish at Scarinish
then told to sew the linen sails,
he thought this craft would stand.

Hearths stripped and burnt,
her family bundled in a heap,
falling on their church.
"Ship Scotland's poor to colonies
with England's convict class."

Now they're bonded serfs,
must tame the wilderness,
enrich a foreign squire.

The smash and swoosh of open sea,
grind and groan of wood,
of iron's clang, skirling wind,
the raucous yells of sailormen,
his head aswim with noise.
The ship was truly grand,
for folk above its waterline.

She listened to it sigh,
heard it flex and sing,
joined the crush of tearful souls
heaving up insides, made do
in steerage far below.

Her babe was frail and gaunt,
mewling at the breast,
she prayed to ease her nerves,
to quell the fear of being wrecked,
of typhus and smallpox.

The awful dreams
kept her locked in fright,
she saw herself submerged,
eels nibbling at her toes.

Her mind went up and down,
one day was full of plans
the next one choking dread,
far out to sea
adrift without a home.

She mused to see the sails
so large and sleek,
fine woven by the mills,
saw them race before the wind,
great sheets of blinding glare.
Coarse sails like hers
were left to wind the dead.

A gift of iron nails⁶
for mending sailor's clothes.
If hammered in a door
and placed beneath the bed
they kept the siobhaire out,
gave hope for days to come.

She saw the Chinamen
and dark skinned, tattooed boys,
white teeth of naked girls,
whole islands locked in palms,
there were coconuts
and queerly tasting fruit,
so much to marvel on.

She searched the depths
for any glimpse
of mermen at their play,
saw many fish
and fearsome sharks,
but merfolk kept below.

⁶ iron nails : charms against fairies

Sydney's port at last,
then drowning in the heat,
a world of dust and flies,
the foreign English words
were caustic to her ears,
nothing here was kind.

Screeching from the trees,
she blessed herself and cursed
"demented, dangerous birds."

The leering eyes of men
on wives and frightened girls,
it set her skin to crawl,
the burning of the sun,
sore head and weeping eyes
each time she left the shade,
gagged when near
the stench of sweating men.

Another lurching boat
until they knew the man
who tied them to his farm,
the Hunter River bound in trees
with trunks so vast
no arms could wrap about.

A dark, forbidding green
that swallowed light, "God forbid
that this would be their home."

She ached for coastal fog,
open fields of summer flax,
the cold to glaze her skin.
Met sad-eyed native girls
forced to work and bed,
prayed for their heathen souls.

Her husband lost in work,
the children making wild,
she found relief in God.
The church was dense like stone
in rules and ways of man,
a house that she could scrub
with hymns and Gàidhlig⁷ rants.

She listened to the birds
learning all their names,
to know each one
and the colours of its song.

Watched natives making string,
weave palm-frond basketry,
she turned the craft
to hats for girls and men.

⁷ Gàidhlig : Scottish Gaelic

Midsummer's day at home
was named midwinter here,
stranger than a lack of cold
she marvelled at the giants
wreathed in scented leaves,
holding up the clouds,
trunks glistened in the sun.
Tiree was bare of trees,
had gorse, bent shrubs and grain.

This luxury of wood,
she did not have to beg
for ends of wave thrown drift
filled with salt and worm
the way they did at home.
Fresh logs were free to use
for her to burn at will.

Their home of sturdy planks
could boast a shingle roof
so gentrified it seemed.
With table and some chairs,
now animals lived outside.

She reeled and wove and stitched
the soft and oily wool,
joined skins of kangaroos
swapped skills and food
with songs and ribald tales
to waulk⁸ the cloth along.

Taught her girls to love
the rhythms found in yarn,
made war with cockatoos,
trained the dingo pup
to chase them off the grain.

⁸ to waulk : to felt cloth (women would gather in groups
to roll and knead the cloth while singing, often making up songs.
No song was repeated for fear of upsetting the Ioireag;
the fairy of warping, weaving and waulking the web.)

Curses have a will
to cross the sea like us.
First they met was drought,
"What demon land
withholds its rain?"
She prayed, but still
the skies were flaxen blue,
her skin turned brown,
wrinkled like old men.

The farm grew only debt,
a failure of their crops,
the sheriff's sale of lease and home,
their public shame
a stone inside her throat.

Forced to seek relief
from the fire and brimstone clan,
their church and charity.

The loss of all their work
broke her husband's will,
each day was burden hued,
a tankard then some more
slaked the hurt for him.

When free of tasks,
enough to bide⁹ her thoughts
and being on her own,
she sought the trees,
old forest cloaked by vines,
enclosed within its cave
wrapped in their leafy plaid¹⁰.

If all was stilled
she heard the whispering,
a ribbon of unwinding words
to hold and lift her heart.

"Trust the earth and stones
this land has much to give,
songs are threads
you can spin and weave
as sails can ride the wind,
stories move across the years
to bind with unknown lives.
The spirits of this place
are native bone and blood,
they care for all who sing."

⁹ bide : to endure

¹⁰ plaid : tartan blanket

She told them of her home,
its ocean's rage and wind,
the summer harvesting,
tales from fairy lore,
of loss and what she dreamed,
the ill wish blighting them.

If not for girls waiting her return
she'd sleep and drift away,
let herself become the earth
with leaf mulch food for trees,
roots entwine her bones.

Their strength
was something she could hold,
wept to see them felled and milled,
fire burn them to black cores,
her forest claimed by fields.

She prized a tripod stool
made by her boy, said it held
the spirit of this land,
four scraps of Cedar tree,
a reeling seat beside the hearth,
handed down and carried
home to home.

A worn and wonky thing,
it ended in the flames,
a remnant of her days
of grained and polished wood.

How far can hearts be drawn?
I listened and she sang,
plied strands of her two lives,
wove a kindred sail
for me to cross time's barrier,
gave me a love of working thread,
to know old mysteries.

There is the twist,
a heritage of broken lives,
the fairy curse held in our blood
that carries us in tow.
When each of us confronts the fiend,
some lose their minds,
some turn to drink or drugs,
others are possessed.

I hear the spirits whispering,
know my riven mind
moves to our singing earth,
it lifts and holds my heart
the way she knew it would.