

Aurora Borealis from House Shadow Drake

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The aurora borealis was a fairly common celestial event for those who inhabited the British Isles. Many stories were told about them, and it was even believed that omens could be derived from their movements and appearance. These moving lights in the sky were known by many names depending on the locale.

Burning Spears—Denham

Derwentwater Lights—English North Country

Lord Derwentwater's Lights—Durham, Northumberland

Merry Dancers—Denham, Scotland, Shetland, and Eigg (Cnoc-na-piobairachd)

Nimble Men (Fir Chlis)—Scotland

Perry Dancers—Suffolk

Sometimes the lights took on a more grim visage and people believed that they could see the clashing of great armies in the sky. Before the onset of the French Revolution, inhabitants of Scotland and England reported hearing the sounds of men fighting and seeing images of great armies clashing in the skies.

On February 24th of 1716, the death of James Ratcliffe, the last Earl of Derwentwater, was said to have been foreshadowed by the unusually bright vivid red and fast movements of the lights. It was said by many of the local people that they saw in the aurora borealis the beheading of the Earl. Thus, the lights became known within the English North Country as Lord Derwentwater's Lights in his honor. Before that, the locals had referred to the lights as Merry Dancers or Burning Spears.

In Scotland, the lights were often called Merry Dancers or Nimble Men. One prevalent story concerns the *Fir Chlis*, which also means "nimble man" in Scots Gaelic, who would take part in a fight between two clans whose chieftains vied for the affections of a fairy woman. The red sky beneath the celestial battlefield was sometimes called the *an linne fhuil* which in English means the "pool of blood". Sometimes the blood of the warriors slain in battle would fall from the heavens and land as stones, called the *fuil siochare* or fairy blood. According to folklore, these stones could then often be used in various spells or charms.

There are many stories in Scotland which concern the *Fir Chlis*. One of these tells of a young boy who goes out fishing. His boat is taken adrift, and being as it is night he falls asleep. When he awakens he looks about and sees several giants dancing around a huge bonfire. They are still in the distance, and so when he takes a closer look he realizes that they are not dancing but rather engaged in a fierce battle with each other. Looking down in to the water, the terrified boy realizes that the water is not water at all but rather an ocean of blood and is drifting toward the giants. Gripped with fear, he collapses back into the boat and awakens the next morning. To his amazement he finds that he is safely returned to the shore near his village, however, both he and his boat are covered with blood. He also finds that the experience has endowed him with the second sight.

The movements of the Merry Dancers were also watched by the fishermen of the Shetland. If the lights moved too quickly, the weather would be bad, but if they moved in slow graceful motions the omen was considered favorable.

The Merry Men, anciently written as "merrie men," was used as a frequent term in early songs and ballads of Northern England. Sometimes the aurora borealis in these verses was related to the a kind of cloth which contained party-colored stripes and sometimes streaks of gold and silver.