

FINELLA - KILLER AND ENCHANTRESS

DEN FINELLA, JOHNSHAVEN

Finella was the daughter of the Mormaer or Sheriff of Angus, she was married to the sheriff of the Mearns. Brought up in Kincardine Castle, which is now just a pile of moss-covered rubble, she was used to fine dining and entertainment. Her son also enjoyed the trappings of a noble youth, but unfortunately for his mother, a bit too much. He and his friends spoiled his grandfather's castle during a riotous feast and made off with some treasures. Understandably, the Sheriff of Angus reported his grandson to the King, as he was unable to control him. Finella was horrified when her son refused to appear before King Kenneth, and was then pursued to the south of the county and tracked to the woods of Dunsinane.

Kenneth was furious at this young man's defiance of his royal authority; he had enough trouble as it was keeping his own family in order, some of whom would happily usurp him from his throne, thus the boy was executed as a warning to others. When Finella learned of her son's fate, she vowed revenge, but outwardly appeared contrite.

A keen huntress herself, Finella invited Kenneth to hunt with hawk and dogs in the woods around Kincardine Castle. She boasted that they had some fine fat stags worthy of capture. Kenneth, thinking nothing amiss, accepted the offer and went with his most trusted soldiers to meet her.

"Come to my house, my king, I have a great wonder to show you, which was created in your honour," Finella soothed as the sun dropped below the horizon. She led Kenneth to a lavishly decorated room with a golden statue of a boy in the centre of the floor. The figure was holding a ruby-studded apple in its outstretched hand.

"What is this?" Kenneth asked.

"A treasure for you, my king, to demonstrate my loyalty. If you pick up the apple, something amazing will happen," Finella smiled knowingly

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The king stretched out and lifted the bejewelled apple from the statue's hand. There was a sudden sound of whirring cogs and hundreds of tiny, sharp, metal barbs were fired from hidden orifices in the body of the statue. They pierced Kenneth in a shower of steel, cutting into his heart, his head, his eyes, causing him to collapse in a bloody heap. Choked by one of the arrows which had lodged in his throat, Kenneth could only moan in protest as he bled to death. Finella laughed bitterly: "You fool, did you really expect to escape my wrath after slaughtering my son for nothing more than high spirits? Now your kinsman Constantine will take the throne of Alba and my family will be restored to power in the Mearns!"

Kenneth stared at her in horror, his mouth trying to form the name of his son, Malcolm, whom he had already named as his successor. From dark corners in the room, Kenneth's cousin Constantine and his nephew Kenneth MacDubh appeared. They had provided the materials for the death-trap statute, only too happy to aid Finella, as Kenneth's death would benefit them the most.

"Leave his body to us, Lady Finella, we will dispose of it in the woods, a hunting accident, perhaps?" Constantine suggested.

"Do as you wish, doubtless young Malcolm will find out the truth soon enough," Finella said.

Her prediction came true, as one of Kenneth's soldiers spotted the two men carrying the body out of the castle, and, knowing his master had gone in to see Finella, guessed that he had come to some terrible end.

Malcolm arrived the next day at the head of an army, determined to arrest his father's murderer. Finella fled on horseback until she could go no further, having reached a rocky, birch-lined glen which lead down to the sea. She sent her horse away, took off her fine clothes and shoes, and ran like a young deer across the treetops, much to the surprise of the pursuing soldiers.

"She's a witch, my lord, she flies over the birds' nests like a hawk!" one man observed.

"Finella is no witch, she'll escape if she reaches the sea, get down there after her!" Malcolm ordered.

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Finella's tenants had now gathered near the cliffs, praying that their lady escaped royal vengeance, themselves no great friends of Kenneth. The soldiers scrambled along the rocky banks of the glen and saw Finella reach the waterfall, some sixty feet above the outflow of the stream. She stood tall, her long hair trailing behind her, and then jumped...

The folk of the Mearns mourned Finella, saying she had jumped to her death as Malcolm's soldiers pursued her. But late at night in the soldiers' quarters at Dunfermline, the seat of the royal family, drunken whispers told a different story.

"She flew! I tell ye, she became a bird and flew off across the sea, Finella was a witch!" claimed one.

"No, she grew wings, from her bare shoulders, she jumped and flew off into the waves!" said another.

"Hush! If his lordship hears ye, ye'll be hanged jist like Finella's son was! Keep this quiet, as far as Malcolm is concerned, the Mormaer's wife died while evading justice. Just pray she doesn't come flying over our nest!" the sergeant hisses as the men mutter. But they know what they saw.

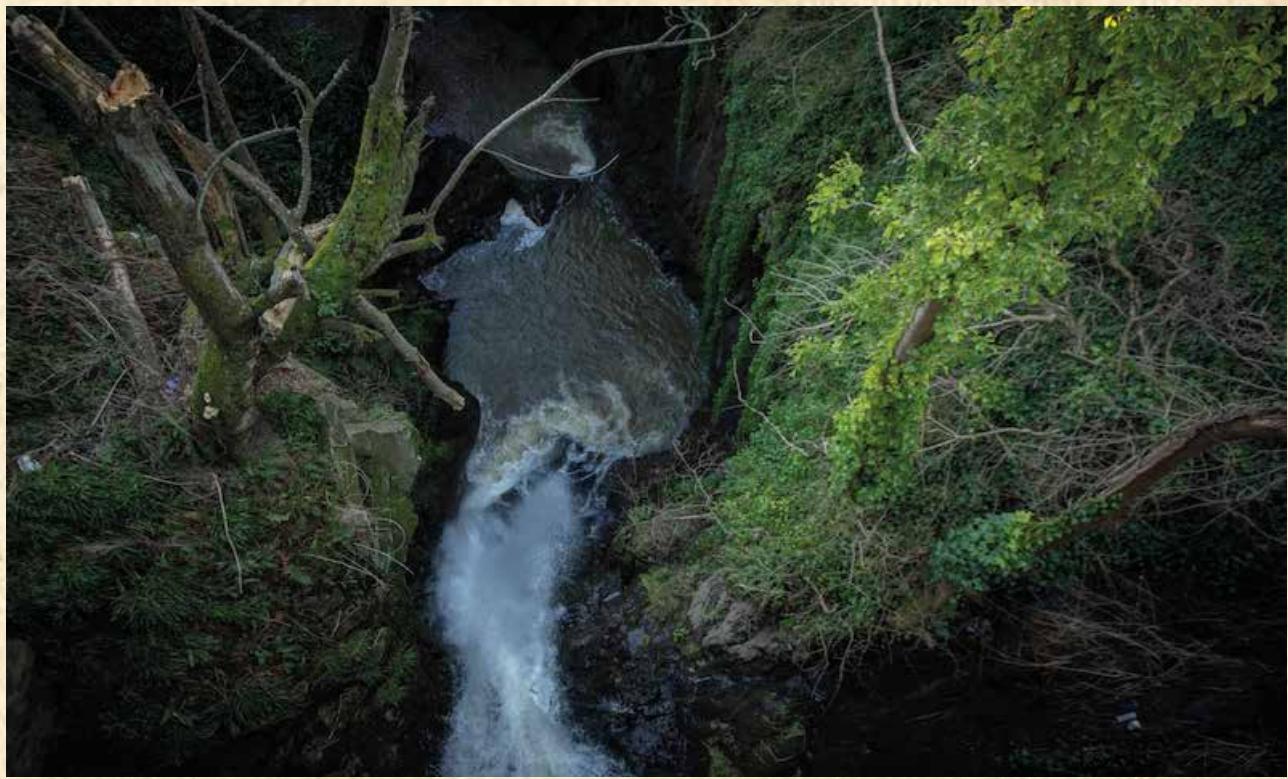


Den of Finella, St Cyrus

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Finella – the background

The deep, tree-lined valley of Den Finella near Johnshaven in the ancient burgh of Kincardine leads to treacherous sea cliffs and rocks below the now vanished fishing hamlet of Miltonhaven. Locals know that Finella was a Pictish noblewoman, bent on revenge following the execution of her son by the 10th century King of Scots, Kenneth II. This epic tale dates back to 995AD, the year of Kenneth's death, coming to us via the 1526 History and Chronicles of Scotland, written by Hector Boece, the first principal of Kings College, Aberdeen.



Den of Finella, St Cyrus

19th century advocate, John Hill Burton, recorded Finella's murderous act in his history of Scotland in 1873, observing that Kenneth "asserted his authority where it had not been acknowledged before." In this period, rulers were chosen by election from the leading kin group, a system called "tanistry"; thus, there was no automatic succession from father to son, and conflict inevitably arose between the "tainists" or candidates for the throne. Kenneth's cousin, Constantine and his nephew, Kenneth McDubh, were determined that his own son, Malcolm, would not succeed directly. Indeed history bore out that both men reigned before Malcolm ever became King of Alba, the old name of Scotland from the 9th century onwards, ruled by the descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin, whose ancestors were from Ireland.

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Could it be that Constantine and Kenneth MacDubh persuaded the distraught mother Finella to assuage her grief by aiding them in their desire to remove Kenneth II and his family from the throne of Alba? Finella's existence is so far only attested to by Boece, and his translator, John Bellenden, but the tale has embedded itself in the landscape, fleshing out earlier references that state Kenneth II was "killed by treachery".

Finella's deed has inspired modern songwriters and artists from the area. For instance, artist, Sheila MacFarlane, who lives at the nearby Tangleha' Cottages, describes how, after moving to the area, she was prompted to research Finella's story, and found similarities in Irish legends of enchantresses and witches who could shape-shift as Finella was said to have done. This resulted in two eight-foot linocut prints of Finella standing at the waterfall before jumping to her death, or miraculously, to freedom in the shape of a bird. A pair of the prints are now in possession of Aberdeen Art Gallery.

Local singers April Pressley and Rory Comerford wrote their own interpretations of Finella's adventure, both imitating traditional ballad style. April's song contains the refrain "There's many a soul has living told of how she saw Finella jump and die, ah but late at night the king's brave soldiers swear they saw me jump and fly!" Rory alludes directly to the lady's supernatural abilities in his title "Finella Wantin Wings".

Finella is perhaps a representation of the faction that stood against Kenneth, or even of the old indigenous Pictish clans who were ousted from power by his ancestors a century and a half previously, but she is also a powerful female figure credited with the assassination of an unpopular leader, and a heroine for the Mearns down to this day. Looking down into the jagged, birch-lined valley where she met her mysterious fate, we can well imagine Finella was either an enchantress who conjured up wings to escape the forces of Kenneth, or an athletic woman who escaped down through the trees to a waiting boat on the coast, never to return.