

The Cailleach



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She crouched like a wild beast ready to spring,
She of the long nails, she of the long teeth,
She ran through the hills like thunder.

The Cailleach (pronounced "kye-luhkh") is one of the more fascinating, more powerful, and sometimes more terrifying of the Celtic goddesses.

The Cailleach is said to be ancient.

Myth and meaning of the Cailleach.

The cailleach is a sort of mystery; a Goddess who survived eons after her worship died out. she is vastly ancient, so ancient that we virtually know nothing of her original myth and ritual. she can be found in Ireland and Scotland and England, traced through folklore, through the names of ancient monuments and natural wonders, and through enigmatic verses and stories.

It is not possible to obtain an idea how long she was worshiped, or by whom. The Celts came to the lands of the Cailleach some 2000 years ago. bringing their own pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. The new arrivals recognized the Cailleach as already ancient, for as a famous Irish poem says, 'There are three great ages; the age of the yew tree, the age of the eagle, the age of the Cailleach.' It is impossible to know what this Goddess meant to her original worshipers.

Cailleach must have been very important, for she did not disappear as countless other divinities have, If nothing is truly known about her, paradoxically she is still alive, still a power in the lands once dedicated to her. from these vestiges, we can reconstruct something of the powerful original figure of ancient times.

She had many names Cailleach Bheur or Carlin in Scotland; Cally Berry in northern Ireland; Cailleach ny Groamch on the Isle of Man; Black Annis in Britain; the Hag of Beare or Digne in Ireland. She was of fearsome appearance, with only one eye an eye of preternatural keenness, in the middle of a blue black face. She was noted to have red teeth and hair white as a frosted snow covered mountain top. Over it she wore a kerchief and over her dull grey clothing a faded plaid shawl.

I am the Cailleach, Goddess of Winter, Mother of Mountains, Ageless Lady of Dark Places, Ancient Crone of Wisdom. The Winter brings the Spring, and in death, I am endlessly renewed.

In her right hand she wielded a magic rod or hammer with which she struck the grass into blades of ice. In early spring, she could not bear the grass and sun, and would fly into a temper, throwing down her wand beneath a holly tree, before disappearing in a whirling cloud of angry passion, ".....and that is why no grass grows under holly trees".

At winter's end, some accounts say the Cailleach turned into a grey boulder until the warm days were over. The boulder was said to be "always moist", because it contained "life substance". But many tales say that she turns into a beautiful young woman at this time, for the other face of the Cailleach is Bride, once goddess, now gentle Scottish saint, whose special day, February 1st marks the return of the light.

On the eve of Bride, the Cailleach journeys to the magical isle in whose woods lies the miraculous Well of Youth. At the first glimmer of dawn, she drinks the water that bubbles in a crevice of a rock, and is transformed into Bride, the fair maid whose white wand turns the bare earth green again.

At a cultural level, the Dark Goddess appears in a number of guises, and her role is to facilitate at important transition times of Celtic society, such as war and the choosing of kings. In Ireland, Morrigan, whose name means Phantom Queen, is a battle-fury. Along with Badb (Crow) and Macha, she forms a terrifying triplicity who unleash their powers of enchantment to bring mists, clouds of darkness, and showers of fire and blood over their enemies. Their howls of menace freeze the blood and cause soldiers to be the battlefield. Any aspect of this triple goddess might appear among opposing armies as crows or ravens, sinister black carrion birds of death.

Or warriors might see a lean, nimble hag, hovering above the fray, hopping about on the spears and shields of the army who were to be victorious. Another of her aspects is the Washer at the Ford, an old woman seen washing the linen of a soldier about to die in battle. Beholding her at this luminary place, a warrior knew that he would soon be crossing the river that separates life and death.

Yet to the Celts, blood and carnage on the battlefield fertilized and replenished the earth. War and death gave way to life and a flourishing land, and Morrigan, who represents this mystery, was also a goddess of fertility and sexuality, sometimes appearing as a beautiful young woman. She was strongly identified with the land itself, in her guise as Sovereignty, the goddess with whom a king-to-be had to mate in a ritual marriage to the country of Ireland.

Queen of Air and Darkness



The early Celts savored the dark side of life. They embraced war like a lover, plunging into battle naked, singing gloriously boastful songs. They were fearless in the face of

death, which their belief in reincarnation taught them was "...but the center of a long life." It was not uncommon for a man to lend money and agree on repayment in a future lifetime. Their day began at dusk; the new year at Samhain, the festival we know as Halloween. Darkness was associated with new beginnings, the potential of the seed below the ground. In Celtic mythology and folk-lore, the wisdom of darkness is often expressed by powerful goddess figures. Whether in the natural, cultural or individual context, their role is to catalyze change through the transformative power of darkness, to lead through death into new life. A Dark Goddess of nature, particularly in Scotland, is the Cailleach, a name that came to mean "Old Wife", but which is literally, "Veiled One," an epithet often applied to those who belong to hidden worlds. To this name is often added Bheur: 'sharp' or 'shrill', for she personifies the cutting winds and harshness of the northern winter. She was also known as the daughter of Grianan, the "little sun" which in the old Scottish calendar shines from Hallowmas to Candlemas, followed by the "big sun" June 21st, of the summer months.

In some tales, she does not turn to stone, but rather appears at the house where the fiancée lay and begs that she might be allowed to warm herself at the fire, and when she crept into his bed he did not repulse her, only put a fold in the blanket between them. After a while he gave, "a start of surprise," for she had changed into the most beautiful of women that man ever saw. So, it would seem that the Cailleach represented a goddess of both winter and summer.

So is also her guardian spirit a number of animals. The deer have that first claim to her. They are her cattle, she herds and milks them and often gives them protection against hunters. Swine, wild goats, wild cattle, black cats and wolves were also her creatures. In another aspect, she is a fishing goddess, as well as the guardian of wells and streams. She also turns up in Manx-Gaelic as Caillagh ny Groamagh.

There is a story of two young hunters that did NOT follow Her hunting advice. The Cailleach pointed them in the right direction to hunt and they were able to make a kill of a large Stag. The two then proceeded to drag the heavy Stag on the long journey home. After toiling all the way home they found that the Stag was gone. They told their father of what had happened. "Did you bless the meat as the Cailleach told you?" he asked. When they replied that they had not he said, "Well, if you don't bless the meat, then it's the fairies who get their share!"



Dedicated to The Cailleach

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She with the all knowing eye of two faces
One of royal blue and youth
Beautiful and desirable
Giving birth to a nation
Our mother who nurtures us
Cradling us to her bosom

She with the all knowing eye of two faces
One of deepest black and knowledge
Withered, aged, older than time
Standing guard over her people
Guiding them back to her ancient womb
She with the all knowing eye of two faces
Mother and Crone

With us at the beginning and at the end
She with the all knowing eye of two faces
Sees all injustice

A quick and swift warrior is she
Do not fear the unleashing of her power
She with the all knowing eye of two faces
Teaches through destruction
To renew the life process

She with the all knowing eye of two faces
Cailleach



Symbols of the Cailleach

Because of her great antiquity, it is difficult to know for sure what symbols of her original worshipers connected with the Cailleach, In reading and hearing about her from my parents the vestiges of her worship that remain in my own mind. I can say with association to the big rocks and mountains were indeed connected with her from ancient times. Many high rocky, foggy misty hills in Ireland and Scotland bear her name; Many legends, as well which relate how she created mountains by dropping the contents of her apron on the ground. At Loughcrew, are also named for her, There is on other rock monuments of the Megalithic people, we can find superlative spiral imagery that has been tied to a Goddess, though it is impossible to know if she is the Cailleach. There to is as connection The Cailleach appears in form of a cat who tests the morality of a hunter in the middle of a stormy night. Black Annis, an English form of the Cailleach, was said to appear in spring in the form of a black cat. In the far west of Ireland there are traces of a vestigial cat Goddess whom lived in a cave and answered questions like a prophet. The connection of the hag Goddess with the cat in other lands (Egypt and Korea) supports the use of a cat as a symbol for The Cailleach.

Feast of the Cailleach

May 1, on the Isle of Man, the hag Goddess fought with her sisters over possession of the land; Mock combats were staged between the forces of winter and summer, with summer always winning, In Scotland right through the beginning of the 17th. century, March 25 was celebrated as New Years Day, with contest being held to drive out there winter Hag.

The connection with the crone in winter and with the change of seasons is to found in Spain where, on Feb 5th. the feast of St.Agatha was celebrated, Clearly descended from the ancient Goddess, the "saint" was depicted as an old women who takes winter away by stuffing it into a sac, she carries for just this purpose.

Invoking the Cailleach

Embracing the Cailleach can be a step towards embracing our own potentials as purple-clad, powerful Crones ourselves.

Collect a variety of rocks with which to decorate your altar. A wonderful way to do this is to walk along a beach or take a nice hike, walk listen and smell nature as best you

can where you are able to do so., A spiritual magical hike, a kind of meditative state, make sure you are aware of your surroundings at all times. let her messages be clearly heard. Do not pick up any rock you find, feel it listen to it, let the selection of rocks be a part of a ritual she whispers in your inner self. Take a Granny smith apple, cut it so that the star will show to you, place this on a red cloth like The Cailleach teeth or on a piece of plaid cloth like the clans folk if you desire. Cast a circle place a mirror on or above your altar. bless the elements, salt, water ect. as you would normally do. Ask yourself what strengths are written on the face you see in the mirror? intelligence, curiosity, serenity. Hold these ideas in silence. Then begin to praise the women you have become and will still yet to become. The qualities that you saw in yourself write them down, praise them and yourself for embodying them. Close the circle then invoking The Caileach again, praising her for the strength she has given you. Celebrate afterwards with a feast of fruit juices or wines , aged cheese and your Granny Smith apple or apples. Celebratory foods reminding us that age at it`s best, is a time of refinement, good taste, and great power.

Researched information:

The Goddess Path by Patrica Monaghan.

365 Goddessess by Patrica Telesco.

Count Nikolai Tolstoy.

Peter Cherici.

Dr. Glenys Goetinck.

The legends and myths past down by my family.