

An Chailleach

She never brought mud from this puddle to the other puddle.
She never ate food but when she became hungry.
She never went to sleep till she grew sleepy.
She never threw out the dirty water till she brought in clean water

Siamsa an Gheimhridh, D. O'Fotharta (1892), p116-118.

The word Chailleach and the Gaelic word for girl/woman, Cailin, share a common root. The Chailleach is one of the most ancient and enigmatic entities in Irish folklore and mythologies. She was a complex character, neither fully good nor evil. She cared for animals during the dark winter months, was the patron of wolves and was known as the Winter Queen. She is said to have created mountains and islands by discarding rocks from her apron and could control the wild oceans of the Atlantic. Unlike her counterpart Bríd, the goddess of spring and growth, the Chailleach was less amenable to sainthood and was thus demonised by male theologians of the past. In the 10th-century poem entitled *The Lament of the Hag of Beara*, we find reference to her power and glory but also the disempowerment of her nature at the hands of Catholicism. It is a remarkable poem with a beautiful example of the widespread idea that human life is ruled by the flow and ebb of the sea tide.

The flood-wave and the two swift ebb-tides;
What the flood-wave brings you in,
The ebb-wave sweeps out of your hand.
The flood-wave and the second ebb-tide;
They have all come as far as me,
The way that I know them well.”

Translated by Lady Augusta Persse Gregory (1852-1932)

There is a stone at which the people of Beara still leave trinkets and tokens to the goddess. According to one version she is said to be forever awaiting the return of her husband Manannan, the God of the Sea.

The actual plaque bears all the hallmarks of a myth erased. It tells us not of her power but rather that she was a lesser witch who was turned to stone after stealing the prayer book of St. Caithighearn.

This version not only strips her of her power but reduces her to an old crone, weak without the power of the Catholic god. It also fails to mention that she was said to be the creator of Dursey Island, the location of the only cable car in

Ireland. One of her names, Boí, gave rise to the name Oileán Baoi, the Gaelic name for the Island which was said to be her home.

This exemplifies the way in which the stories of female figures in Irish mythology were distorted to belittle their importance. This has served to disempower women by hiding their own strength from themselves.

This remarkable female figure resided in the place where I was raised, the Beara Peninsula. This finger of land reaches out into the Atlantic and is shredded and ground down by the immense power of the ocean. In such a place, mythologies like the Cailleach strike a deep note in one's soul. She is the *Genius Loci*, the protective spirit of Beara.

The following series of photographs are based on the importance of myth and landscape in the understanding of our psychological geographies. Where we grow up deeply affects our perspective of ourselves and our place in the world. When history is erased and modified, to fit changing religious or social narratives, we are robbed of our connection to the lineage of tradition that connects us with people and place.

I used the complex process of double exposure in which two images are exposed to the same frame of film, chemically binding them. I feel this was the best way to capture and demonstrate the bond between a place and its people, a landscape and its myth.

My muse and model is a woman of Beara who represents the wisdom of the Cailleach. The landscape in the images which overlays these portraits are all taken on the Beara peninsula. Some of them show the Rock of the Cailleach and the offerings left behind by its people.

I hope to petition a new plaque dedicated to the true story of this elemental, historically overlooked, goddess.



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