

How the Cailleach Created Scotland



Long, long ago, before humans laid claim to the hills, laying footpaths and fences, before they built houses and called the land theirs, there was the Cailleach.

The Cailleach was older than time and wiser than knowledge. She was not a woman as we know her now, but something much wiser and wilder. The Cailleach is the giantess of our land. Her bones were the rocks, and her breath was the wind that whipped across the moors. Her hair, tangled and matted with bracken and storm clouds, trailed behind her as she walked, and every place she stopped, a mountain rose in her wake.

The people before us say she carried a basket made from twisted willow, filled with stones. Well, they were stones to her, no more troublesome than an apple would be to us. But, when we looked at her basket, it was filled with huge boulders. She'd fill her basket with handfuls of boulders she scooped up from deep underground before scattering them across the land like seeds. Some fell gently, forming smooth hills like those in the Borders. Others tumbled and crashed, shaping rugged mountains like the Cuillins of Skye or the jagged ridges of Torridon.

Her favourite tool, though, was her great staff. It was made from the twisted wood of the blackthorn tree, struck by lightning on the darkest night of the year. Its thorns were sharp as ice and its bark dark as storm clouds, crowned with an enormous crystal pulled from the heart of the earth. With it she struck the ground, splitting glens and carving out lochs. It was said one swing could change the course of rivers, and two could make a mountain weep waterfalls forever.

While the Cailleach was fierce, she was not a creature of cruelty. She loved this land she shaped. Each loch was a mirror to catch the moon. Each mountain a place to rest her weary back. The cliffs? Her laughter made solid. The rolling glens? A place to stretch her legs.

It's said that one winter, as she roamed the highlands, her basket caught on a jagged rock near Ben Nevis. She stumbled and spilled a handful of stones, creating the scattered cairns and outcrops we now find across Rannoch Moor. That's why, they say, the moor feels so strange. So in-between. It was never meant to be placed there, but the land remembered the Cailleach's misstep.

As winter waned, the Cailleach grew tired. She would curl into a mountain, wrapping her cloak of frost and ice around her, sleeping until the seasons called her forth again. Some say she rests on Ben Cruachan, others claim she favours the hills of Sutherland. But wherever she lies, the land remembers.

Now, when snow falls late in the year or frost bites at the buds of spring, folk still say, "The Cailleach is walking." And if the hills are hidden in mist and the wind roars down the glen, listen closely. You might hear her laugh, echoing across the land she made; the land she still watches over.