



# Ancient mothers of Loch Lomond

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When I was a child, my dad would take us rambling around the hills where we lived up above Loch Lomond, Scotland. Among the stones at the top of Carman Hill, I would sit ever so quietly, scrunching up my eyes: in my imagination all the cars disappeared and with a final blink, the streets and houses were rendered invisible as well. Then I would hold my breath, hoping I could see the Old Ones that I knew lived there, the ones from the time before the roads, and cars, and houses. Even though I never saw those ancient people, I felt the energies of the land, sensing that atop Carman Hill was a place where this world and the otherworld flow into one another.

Loch Lomond attracts thousands of visitors a year, and while they may not be conscious of it as they look out over the Loch and up to the heights of Ben Lomond, a great energy silently works its magic on them: soothing their souls, stirring their hearts, and feeding their imagination.

You have to go deep or go high to know the deities whose bones form the bedrock of these lands. Among the best-known of these Ancients are primordial figures whose original names have been lost in the mists of time: the Cailleach and the Deer Goddess:

## WHO IS THE CAILLEACH?

Who exactly is the Cailleach? In his detailed study, Gearoid O'Crualaoich explains that She is an incredibly complex figure, who over Her great age has embodied various cultural meanings. She can be traced to the mother goddess of Old Europe cosmology, She is the Celtic Hag with close connections with the sovereignty Queen and She is also an ancient, supernatural female wilderness figure. She is huge, a giantess, an Amazon. She isn't a single figure, for she has many sisters.

To experience my Cailleach you have to get under the surface of the loch down into the dark peaty depths, or scale the rocky winding paths to know anything of Her. She is very old: pre-Celtic, even, as she has no known genealogy to any other gods or goddesses of this land.

I often wonder what arrangement of syllables formed her name: did it sound a little like the rolling thunder of an approaching storm, or perhaps raindrops showering down on large green oak leaves? Her original name is still unknown, except by the wind and the eagle.

There are many etymologies of her name as we know it, as its shifts in language over time also changed its meaning. In the middle ages, Cailleach was "one who is wearing a veil," and in Christian times referred to a nun. But "one who wears a veil" is a wonderful description of the Cailleach in action in Her land: the darkening clouds roll in unhindered from the Atlantic Ocean in

the west until they reach the mountains and drop their life-giving rain. When Ben Lomond ("Ben" means "mountain") is obscured completely, veiled by heavily pregnant clouds dragging low on its slopes, you can easily feel that you are truly in between the worlds.

## THE CAILLEACH IN NATURE

Stuart McHardy recognizes the giantess archetype of the Cailleach in a medieval poem, within the figure of 'Gyre-Carolling,' who is said to have formed Loch Lomond.

*"She spittit Lochlomond with her lips;  
Thunner and fireflaucht flew fae her hips."  
(She spat Loch Lomond with her lips,  
thunder and lightning flew from her hips.)*

On grey days when a wind whips up on the surface of the loch and the hilltops are lost in the mist, you can easily imagine the Cailleach walking the landscape. She's holding Her aprons, carrying rocks: the grey torn fabric of Her dress forms the clouds, and when She spits down onto the earth, Loch Lomond is formed. It doesn't take much to imagine the Great One's anger as cracking thunder, creating lightning from Her raging hips.

Out to the west of Loch Lomond lies Corryvreckan, Europe's largest whirlpool. A complex tidal system causes this whirlpool which is active even on calm days. On windy ones, the tidal bore churns up a spinning cauldron with waves that can get as high as fifteen feet. This is the Cauldron of the Cailleach, and it's when the cauldron is most active (in the winter months, especially Samhain) when She comes to wash her great plaid. After washing She shakes it dry, and as She throws it about Her shoulders, it lands on all the surrounding mountaintops, turning them white with the first snows of winter.

One of my favorite places associated with the Cailleach is a little further north: Glen Cailleach, in Glen Lyon. Here you will find a small turf-roofed structure, roughly two meters tall, which houses the Cailleach, her husband Bodach and their daughter. According to legend, the Cailleach and Her family were once given shelter in the glen by the local people. She was so grateful for the hospitality given to Her and Her family that She left the stones with the promise that, as long as they were cared for, She would ensure that the glen would continue to be fertile and the people themselves and their animals would be prosperous. It is quite magical to think that this could well be the longest surviving tradition of the Cailleach, for local folks still bring the stones out at Beltane (the beginning of summer) and then return them to their shielding at Samhain (the beginning of winter).

Another myth that shows Her caring side is found to the east of Loch Lomond. In the story of the creating of Loch Awe, the Cailleach had been wandering the hills with Her deer (creatures often referred to as “fairy cattle,” of which She is extremely fond.) Both She and the deer took a long drink from a nearby spring and soon afterward lay down for a wee nap in the evening sun and slept all night. She didn’t awake until late the next morning, when She discovered that She had forgotten to put the capstone back on the spring. The spring had run all night down the mountain, drowning the entire village. The Cailleach was so heartbroken at what She had done that She turned to stone and still to this day sits at the Pass of Brander.

Another interesting link of the Cailleach to animals plays out in what was once a the ritual of the Yule log. The log was dragged through the villages in winter and then burned. Maria Gimbutus in *Language of the Goddess* suggests that this ritual wasn’t just symbolizing the slumbering vegetation and its destruction but also the sacrifice

of the snake (in the shape of a log) at the beginning of its hibernation cycle. The Yule log is called the Cailleach and by symbolically killing the old snake, its revival is ensured for spring. It was believed that the ashes of the Yule log could heal cattle, enable cows to calf easily and promote the fertility of the earth. This belief of the revival of the snake — dying in winter as it goes into hibernation and “coming to life again” in spring stretches backwards through time to an even more ancient snake goddess of old Europe.

I didn’t grow up with these stories, yet I connect deeply to these great energies as I walk the land. On hearing the stories, many of us bond with them archetypally, and therein lies the power in learning them, in getting to learn the different aspects of such figures, for they bring the land alive. In our patriarchal and technology-oriented world — which sees nature as a mere commodity and women as second-class citizens — we can stretch our roots down deep in the earth to the spiritual bedrock formed by ancient Creatrix goddesses such as the Callieach and become inspired in new ways of being that our world oh so needs.

## THE DEER GODDESS

It is the deer that lead us to another ancient figure in the Loch Lomond landscape, that of the Deer Goddess. She is one who emerged for me through an experience — of ceremony and dance, drum and fire, under a night sky — similar to what our ancestors would have had. While myth and legend shaped by the archetypal stories of our ancestors bring the land alive,

what of our own experiences with them and in relating their meaning to our own lives? These ancient energies aren’t dead.

We each have a deep love of a particular place that has great meaning for us. Maybe it’s under a great spreading oak, or by a winding stream. It’s a place that we miss dearly when we are far away. John O’Donohue suggests that the very landscape has a friendship with you. Perhaps your favorite place feels proud of you, misses the sound of your voice... I believe we can be instantly connected to those far away places of the heart and soul, reconnecting through trance and dance and the power of the drum as we step between the worlds....

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*One night, close to Imbolc lured by the rhythmic heartbeat of the drum, I traveled in spirit down past the peaty layers of Loch Lomond, past the bones of ancestors both human and animal. There in the darkness of that place between the worlds, I emerged at the top Ben Lomond. In that magical place I wasn’t simply myself, I was part me yet part ancient being. Skeletal, tall with huge branching antlers — a frame hidden behind a tall ragged cloak shimmering with galaxies and nebulas, we were in a place time had no hold.*

*I watched as She held out a bony hand commanding the sun to rise; as it did She traced its path across the sky, leading it over to the west. As day changed to night, She summoned up the moon, guiding its path. Over and over She danced this dance, setting the play of the constellations. Land masses danced across oceans, the world reforming and reshaping, then ice ages: ebbing and flowing,*

*She ushered in a thaw and a great greening covered the land, She danced to bring fish to the loch, to bring in great clouds from the west who release their rain, flowing in small tributaries, gathering in streams until they pour down the mountains into the loch.*



*The greens intensified then transformed into a burst of orange and browns before dying down and returning to their roots as the white took over again. Green, golds, and whites, the seasons played out over and over. One by one She brought the insects, fish and birds, wolves, bear, auroch, and elk and the reindeer. Then people came, the people who follow the reindeer. They walked from mainland Europe following the huge herds, weaving their own stories into the land, following the luminous paths the Great Goddess had embedded in the earth, the paths that the reindeer follow, trails to sacred lands.*

*Among these people were women, the Deer Priestesses, who wore deerskins, adorning themselves with reindeer*

*antlers. Around the fires they gave thanks and presented their offerings to the Creatrix. In the flickering firelight I could see their faces painted with ochre. They climbed in pilgrimage to the top of Ben Lomond and danced Her ancient dance. Their steps followed Her steps; steps that took them between the worlds. In that dance they danced their sacred intention into the star patterns, and into networks of luminous strands, which traveled out over the earth.*

*Once everything was in place, the great Creatrix retreated to the small islands off Scotland’s West Coast, where they keep Her story alive. There She lay down, sinking into the earth. From Her bones the primeval Caledonian forest grew, the Great Tree that joins the worlds at its heart.*

## THE PEOPLE WHO FOLLOW THE REINDEER

I have talked to many people to whom this ancient figure still appears — as if an ancient and wild piece of our collective selves is seeking to be known. The untamed nature of this great figure can act as a mirror showing us that we, too, are wild. She can reveal new aspects about ourselves and embrace us in the great mystery. I have sat on a favorite rock on the banks of the loch thinking of those ancient peoples who followed the reindeer, before Britain became an island. The rock is scoured with striations, deep grooved lines carved by rocks that were picked up by the very bottom of the glacial ice. I imagine these nomadic reindeer people making camp, the female shaman petitioning the great Deer Goddess, asking for guidance for where to find the herds so they could eat and clothe themselves. Theirs seems such a different world from ours, but this is the same land: through my journey with the Deer Goddess, I now know we can petition Her for insight and guidance in how to be in this, our present-day world.

In her book, *Creations Heartbeat: Following the Reindeer Spirit*, Linda Schierse Leonard reflects on the migration of the reindeer, finding their way through dangerous wilderness even in the darkness of winter, to create new life. This gives birth to a metaphor that can help us redeem our own enduring instincts. The reindeer can again become spirit guides for us, Ms. Leonard writes, as well as images of hope and peace that inspire us to honor and affirm life, and peacefully transform ourselves and our world.

At the heart of the Sami creation myth (the peoples of the Reindeer) the world is created from the bone of a female reindeer, Vaja. Her heart is buried deep within the earth as a reminder to all who are lost that help would always be there. When peace reigns in the world it is said her heart beats with joy, and if greed and selfishness rule, her heart convulses in pain and shakes the earth with great tremors.

Looking around us today, I would say Vaja's heart is convulsing in pain, causing the ruptures and tremors shaking our very society. Shamanic practices can bring us into the realm of these ancient deities and more-than-human neighbors, from which we can make sense of the world around us. If ever there was a time when we need the wisdom of the Mother, it is now; her roots lead us down to the very spiritual bedrock of the land.

In the land we can recognize all faces of the mother, reclaiming all parts of her, acknowledging that she midwifed us into this world and carried us on soft wings when at death we crossed that threshold once again. She was the one who brought fertility to the land and the one who struck down life at the winter months. She has been called witch and destroyer, but she destroys in order to renew life. She is the great archetype which the wise women, the midwives and the healers tapped into, the women who were and are the keepers of tradition, traditions which empower and rejuvenate, inspire and co-create. We are in threshold times, a dark night of the soul, a time of transition. Recognizing our lands as sacred opens the way to making myths come alive.

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In the land we recognize all faces of the mother, reclaiming the hag, creator and renewer of life. With reindeer now back and established in the Cairngorm mountains, they serve as a fitting symbol to reawaken the Great Mother and awakening Her wildness within us. ©

### READING LIST & RESOURCES

<sup>1</sup>The Shrine of the Cailleach at Glen Lyon, [www.celticcountries.com/traditions/297-the-shrine-of-the-cailleach-at-glen-lyon](http://www.celticcountries.com/traditions/297-the-shrine-of-the-cailleach-at-glen-lyon). Also "Gods of the Hollow Hills: Earth Sanctuaries in the Pagan Celtic World," *Witches & Pagans* #28, 2014.

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**O**ur home is magical, although I didn't realize it right away. This house is ancient, and in need of foundation repair. A hundred years old, perched high on a hill beside a venerable oak, she is a quirky old structure, with wooden floors that creak, skin-prickling secret closets, and a bathroom light that must be turned on from the hallway. There are no locks on any of the bedroom doors, though all have keyholes — the kind you can peer through, if you crouch down low enough — nestled just below the doorknobs. There are scuffs in her floors and the air conditioning growls loudly in the heat of summer.

My home office has four big windows: I line the sills with orchids, aloe, African violets, succulents, spider plants, sage, and mint. I keep the inspiration of thirteen goddesses — each different from the next, each feminine and strong, Sedna of the deep and strong-willed Artemis and incandescent Brigid and ever-changing Kali — in this room to remind me that to be female is to be powerful indeed!

Our backyard is huge and wild: my herbs, flowers, and vegetables grow in tires, and pots, and raised-bed gardens, but I let the rest of the yard grow wild. I keep a neat, white-walled henhouse beneath a tree right next to a rocky frog pond.

ARTICLE AND PHOTO  
BY TARA WEST

The coop was built by my father, and it is perfect: every time I look at it I am filled with love for him.

The four hens who live there, two black, one red, and one blond, enjoy the wild foliage that grows around them just as much as I do. I was delighted when a mustard plant popped up in the middle of the yard during my first spring here: its bright yellow blooms and spicy leaves brought me joy all season. Its stalks grew brittle with the first cold snap, but the next year, eleven of its children grew in its place.