

# Tradfest: The Story of Scotland's Creation

✘ The audience at this Tradfest event learned how Scotland came to be formed in the new telling of the 3,000 year old myth of the Cailleach, or old hag, who, it is believed, created Scotland. The storytellers brought the tale to life through wonderful narration, bright costumes and traditional music.

Taking place at the Storytelling Centre, the myth was narrated by Janis McKay and David Campbell. The hour-long performance was accompanied by renowned traditional Scottish musician Allan MacDonald. The performers aim is for the story to become part of the 'yes' campaign on Scottish Independence, getting their inspiration from the Finnish Creation Myth, Kalevala, which helped Finland's independence from Russia .

Janis McKay took centre stage looking dramatic in a flowing floor length turquoise gown, embroidered with Celtic designs. After an introduction to the evening, she explained how the story was put together through research and with guidance from Campbell. He was fittingly resplendent in traditional highland costume, complete with a bright yellow shirt and red necktie, costumes which set the atmosphere for the night's theme. Campbell narrated the story alongside Mackay, also taking the part of the male role of the young prince.

She then introduced MacDonald, describing him as a "wonderful musician", to which he replied "And she's an awful woman!" to roars of laughter from the audience made up of people of all ages and cultures, and with the theatre full to capacity.

The stage was now set for a light-hearted and entertaining evening, as the audience settled down in expectation, and the lights dimmed. In fact, MacDonald, from his place at the side

of the stage, did indeed transpire to be a wonderful musician, evoking a sense of Scotland's natural beauty, the mist over the mountains and scenic lochs through several traditional instruments. These included the smallpipes, Jew's harp and malodoan, with Campbell weaving music into the storytelling with an obvious talent and skill.

Mackay began the narration of the tale by explaining how the story of Cailleach, the ancient hag who created the nation, unfolded. We learned how she had been living and working in Finland, when she came across the work of Elias Lonnrot, who had gathered and wrote a creation myth for the country in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. She said:-“While I was there I asked what is the Scottish original myth?” She then started to do research into this, and explained:- “I was guided by David Campbell, and we found this Earth Cailleach figure. What you will hear has been rescued from many tales, but the words are our own.”

She also completed the story's setting for us, about a place called Glen Lyon in Perthshire, and which is very isolated from anywhere. Here , she said: – “The Crailleach's little house, about four feet tall, still stands”. Campbell explained that this was where the shrine to the Crillieach (meaning old woman in Gaelic) is maintained. This has been taken outside the house and left to stand in the air for the summer until the arrival of winter, or Samhain.

She said this is a “tribute to the goddess,” and the “longest continuing ritual in Europe”, since ancient times. Until very recently, it was carried out by a shepherd, and is now carried out by the local historical society.



We were then transported into another world as the story progressed over the next forty- five minutes, with a genuinely infectious sincerity and passion. This enabled the suspension of disbelief and a childlike entry into the magical world of

gods and goddesses, princes, hags and strange creatures and beautiful beings.

The theme, as in the billed title, was creation. The tale of how Scotland emerged from a wasteland where there was once nothing, when the Callieach, described as “the mother goddess and creation of this land” came into being. She made “the first and ancient rock of her beloved Caledonia” which was claimed to be Iona. The story documents how she created each aspect of the country, the islands when “she gathered peats and carried them on a creel on her back. She fell, and the clods scattered, creating the islands”. mountains, the lakes and streams, were made.

Described as “the hag of winter”, she was not ready to lose her grip on the land, when one night her alter ego, Bride, the goddess of spring, came into existence, through a dreamlike vision. Bride threatened to uproot the Cailleach’s cold supremacy her with her youthful beauty.

For Bride, flowers and grass grow everywhere she walks. The Calleach becomes inflamed, and therefore dresses her in rags, enslaves, then imprisons her, “but her beauty never faded”. Angus Og, the prince of the eternally youthful and green land of Tir Na Nog, sees what is happening in a dream and sets off towards her.

The Cailleach then washed her plaid, and to dry it out, threw it over the mountaintops, coating the land in ice and darkness. She sees a beautiful young face in her well, perhaps a younger version of herself. The prince soon arrives, and a battle ensues. He tells her:- “Begone, begone, your time has come”, portraying the eternal struggle between life and death.

The Cailleach had no intention of growing old gracefully, but is finally defeated and driven away to her isle in the west. She eventually comes to realise what she has become, when she

speaks to the tide about “how she is no longer mighty.”

The story ends when Bride then “took the outstretched hand of Angus and walked into the living Earth”, and flowers grew behind their footsteps.

With regard to the ‘yes’ campaign, Campbell spoke to The Edinburgh Reporter explaining the nationalist aim for the story. He explained:- The Finnish story was part of the thing which galvanised the sense of belonging, that traditional independence lives in the heart and spirit of the people.”

He continued:-We aim to support the ‘yes’ campaign where we can through performances for example at the Edinburgh Fringe. The tale spreads a sense of the legend and story of people, and if people get that strong feeling, then that belongs to our destiny.”

“You can gather people’s support in elections or “win by poetry” as its beautiful sense speaks to the heart, spirit and imagination, but once the support is there, you rule by prose.”

For more information, visit:

<http://www.daviddcampbell.co.uk/about-me.htm>

<http://www.janismackay.com/about-me/>

Photos courtesy of Mike Wilkinson and Catriona Murray