

Welcome to another edition of Deity Deep Dives, a short form essay series for the Science Witch Podcast. I'm your co-host Anjel and for this episode we are going to invoke the Crone of Winter, Goddess of Storms, and Ancient Hag who dictated the changing of the seasons: The Cailleach.

I always thought Groundhog day was stupid, even as a child. How is a rodent supposed to be the arbitrator of whether or not we get 6 more weeks of winter? And the weird cult that has formed around Punxsutawney Phil every year just seems to get increasingly weirder with each rendition. This past Groundhog's day, the poor creature chosen to don the mantle of the official Punxsutawney Phil was roughly grabbed out of his burrow at dawn and declared to have seen his shadow, which foretold 6 more weeks of winter. There was much celebrating and cringey musical performances to herald in the event, despite the fact historically the accuracy of the groundhog's prediction is approximately 36%. This is probably troubled even further with Climate Change, as climate patterns continue to destabilize, as evidenced by the record-breaking snow storm that the Deep South experienced 3 weeks ago where areas of the Gulf Coast received more snow than ever before.

It wasn't until I was an adult and years into my witchcraft practice that I learned about the true decider of the changing of the seasons, and the OG (original groundhog) who predicted the coming of Spring was actually the ancient Gaelic Goddess known as the Cailleach. Around the first days of February, the Cailleach would look out her window, and if she decided to go out and gather firewood, it meant that there would be 6 weeks more of winter. However if the weather was gloomy on this day, she would decide to stay in her cozy hut, which would indicate an early spring. This makes so much more sense to me as a myth to explain the predictions of when Spring would happen in the Northern Hemisphere, and it was likely when puritans co-opted this celebration in the mid 1800s, they erased the ancient Goddess from their observances in favor of a groundhog. Thus we as modern Americans celebrate Groundhog's day instead of Cailleach's Day. I however hope to bring back the original expression of this event.

The Cailleach is associated with more than just being robbed of her title by a rodent, she is known throughout the British Isles as the Crone of Winter.

The Cailleach is at times considered to be a "Dark Goddess" in that she doesn't fit the mold of the caring benevolent mother goddess. She is past her child bearing years, if she ever had kids to begin with and she is often depicted as a harsh and at times cruel and unfeeling deity that is to be feared. In Ireland she is the Goddess of Storms, and her influence was often blamed for the harsh winter conditions especially in the southern part of the Irish isles. In some stories, she is even said to be responsible for the death and destruction that can come with winter storms. In that way, Ireland is much like the Pacific Northwest, as our winters are our rainy season and during the full moons we experience the powerful King tides. I advocate renaming them the Crone tides, as the raging waves of the ocean remind me of the wrath of Femme deities more than any mere king. These crone tides have been known to claim the lives of those who do not give her the proper respect and each year, inevitably there are people washed out to sea after sneaker waves abruptly crash into the shoreline and sweep anyone who dares to be too close to their watery grave. The Crone of storms is a force of nature, demanding our respect and the understanding that we are mortal beings given this incarnation to know divinity but also respect

its power. As we continue to witness and experience the increasing effects of Climate Change, the Crone of Storms becomes all the more enraged and wrathful.

Within the mythology, the Cailleach is often associated with Bridget, or Brid, Celtic Goddess of fire, sacred wells and poetry. In some of the ancient tales, they are the same goddess, with the Cailleach representing the cold, harsh time of the year and then transforming into the beautiful spring maiden of Brid when the weather turns warmer. In her dual aspect, she corresponds to the cycle of life, death and rebirth and has also been associated with fertility. The holiday that would become groundhog day in ancient times was known as Imbolc, or Candlemas in Christian liturgy, a holiday that modern Pagans celebrate and honor the goddess Bridget. It's no accident then that the Cailleach as the judge of the coming of spring was also revered during a holiday known to be the realm of Bridget. If you are interested in learning more about Bridget, I recommend finding our episode on the Goddess featuring my co-host Enku, which I will link to in the show notes. The Cailleach can then be considered the Crone to Brid's maiden, two halves of the same entity echoed throughout time and representing the life cycle of femme people through the ages.

The Cailleach is likely a title that was given to crones, and she is usually depicted as an old woman, wise and powerful in her knowledge of life and death. She tends to lack representation in our modern depictions, in part due to the fact that old age is not revered in our post-modern Capitalistic society. Women are not supposed to age, and femme people who are often public figures will employ cosmetic surgery and botox to circumvent the signs of aging. The Cailleach is therefore radical in her wisened visage, and wears her age as an act of resistance, reminding us that women who survive to old age are worthy of respect and admiration. She teaches us to embrace old age, and not fear or try to subvert the cycle we are all apart and to understand that we need our crones and sages.

I want to be a queer elder. I just turned 40, and according to life expectancy in the US, I'm right at the middle point of what people assigned female at birth survive. In the year since I turned 40, I met one of the great loves of my life and had a major career shift where I spend the majority of my working hours with young people. Up until this point I had been working in private sector jobs I hated, determined to use my vast skill set as a science professional towards a career in a field I found to be soul crushing and filled me with existential anxiety. So after years of resistance, I finally decided to take the plunge and got my substitute teaching license. This was in part dictated to me by divine guidance after I attended a ritual at the Sanctuary of Hecate, and received instructions that I was to teach this next generation science and gardening. I have learned to listen when the Goddess of Witchcraft and Crossroads makes demands of me, and since then I have found a renewed purpose in life. Even my hardest days with mouthy middle school students and rambunctious elementary students are better than my best days working in the corporate world. I use the honorific Mx. in the classroom, in part to introduce students to the concept of a gender neutral prefix but also to signal to the queer non-binary kids that we do grow up to become queer non-binary adults. You're not alone. Gen-Z seems to have no trouble with this concept of gender fluidity, and the most push back I find is usually from other adults from my own generation or that of Gen X and Boomers who are currently trying to legislate queer, trans and non-binary people out of existence. But we have always been here and we will remain, at times needing to be subversive but persisting. Many queer people were denied the

right to become elders in their communities, and therefore I feel it is my specific charge to grow old and get weirder, queerer and embrace my croning age, that is if I survive the next 4 years. Thank you for listening to this episode of Deity Deep Dives. If you would like to hear more content like this, check out the Science Witch Podcast which can be found wherever you listen to podcasts. Until next time, hail and farewell, and blessed be.

Works Cited

- Monaghan, Patricia. The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore. New York: Facts On File, 2004.
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In this edition of Deity Deep Dives, Anjel talks about the Crone of Winter, Goddess of Storms the Cailleach, where the original groundhog myth comes from and about embracing their own cronehood. Original music by Ruby. To listen to more episodes like this and support our work, check us out on [Patreon](#).

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