

Notes on Fairy Creatures

The creatures of Celtic Mythology are very fluid in nature. Depending on when and where you are, Brownies, Gruagachs and Úruisgs vary from being small creatures who live by the fire, helping with household tasks - to giant hairy creatures who like to fling clods of earth at passers-by. Descriptions are often interchangeable between these various fairy beings. So you're never quite sure which hairy, half-goat creature you're dealing with. For these Culturing Crofting cards, we have therefore had to be selective in the descriptions we have chosen.

Gruagach

Gruagach, now a common word for 'girl' means 'hairy'. In Celtic mythology, the Gruagach is a solitary fairy seen as a giant or ogre. His characteristic long hair links the Gruagach to the woodwose or wild man tradition of Northern Europe. In Scotland, the term gruagach may also refer to a fairy woman dressed in green or to a slender, handsome man.

Fachan

The Fachan (Fechan or Fachin or Peg Leg Jack) is a found in Scots-Irish Folklore. A Fachan's appearance is so terrible it was known to cause heart attacks. It has one eye, one leg, one withered arm coming out of its chest and a mane of black feathers.

It has been suggested that the Fachan is an imperfect memory of Celtic Seers who when casting spells would stand on one leg, close one eye and extend one arm.

'Ugly was the make of the Fachin; there was one hand out of the ridge of his chest, and one tuft out of the top of his head, it were easier to take a mountain from the root than to bend that tuft.'

J F Campbell, Popular Tales of the West Highlands

Ghost car

It isn't just the ghosts of people you have to worry about. If you're driving between Portree and Sligachan in the dark, keep your eyes peeled for a mysterious phantom car which is said to haunt the road.

As far back as the 1950s reports were coming in of mysterious headlights which would come racing out of the darkness towards oncoming cars, then disappear without a trace. The car, believed to be a 1934 Austin, has been spotted numerous times over the years. One local policeman who saw the racing lights tried to give chase, only for the car to vanish into thin air.

Seal maiden

'Families in the Shetland Islands explained webbed fingers and toes as relics of the marriage of a mermaid and her captor, while the entire MacCodrum clan of the Outer Hebrides, known as "The MacCodrums of the Seals"', claimed to be the offspring of a union between a selkie and a fisherman. In this case, the sign of preternatural parentage was not delicate beauty but an hereditary horny growth between the fingers that made the MacCodrum hands resemble flippers.'

from *Strange and Secret Peoples: Faeries and Victorian Consciousness*

Water horse

'In summer, women in Heisker [islands off North Uist] washed clothes in a loch away from the township. They always went in twos as a water-horse was said to be in the loch. The people reared a bull in case it was ever needed to fight the beast. A woman once went to the loch alone and a handsome man approached her while she rested. He sat beside her, put his head on her lap and slept. He had gravel from the loch in his hair, and hooves, and she realised that he was the water-horse. She managed to get away without waking him, but soon heard him chasing her. As she neared the township, she cried for the bull to be let out. The bull and water-horse fought; the bull drove it into the sea and they disappeared. The woman took to her bed and never rose again. Many years later, the bull's horn came ashore. It was used as bar on a gate for many years.'

<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/7936/3;jsessionid=021937BC36192C83562AADDC9BE2EDF5>

Ùruisg

'Ùruisgs are short, half-goat, half-human beings that haunt pools and waterfalls. They sometimes interact with people and help them with their daily chores and housework. Ùruisgs are excellent herders of cattle.'

from *The Backyard Goat: An Introductory Guide to Keeping and Enjoying Pet Goats*

Fairy

'The Fairies of Scotland are represented as a diminutive race of beings, of a mixed, or rather dubious nature, capricious in their dispositions, and mischievous in their resentment. They inhabit the interior of green hills, chiefly those of a conical form, in Gaelic termed Sighan [sic], on which they lead their dances by moonlight; impressing upon the surface the marks of circles, which sometimes appear yellow and blasted, sometimes of a deep green hue; and within which it is dangerous to sleep, or to be found after sunset.'

from *Scottish Fairy and Folk Tales*, selected and edited by Sir George Douglas.

Mermaid

'Tales of mermaids have been around for centuries, and form a large part of seafaring lore, especially round the coastal areas of Britain such as Cornwall, and the Northern Isles of Scotland. Their sighting was thought to be a bad omen, foretelling storms and rough seas. There are numerous folk tales describing their interaction with humans.

'The descriptions of mermaids were remarkably similar from the tip of Cornwall, to the Outer Hebrides. Generally their upper body was that of a beautiful woman with long hair, and the lower half of their body from the waist down, was that of a fish. In many of the classic descriptions mermaids are to be found sitting on a rock just off the shore, combing their hair, singing sweetly and admiring their beauty in a hand mirror. Their beautiful singing brings men into their clutches much like the classical sirens, and the unfortunate victims are either drowned, spirited to their world, or eaten in the depths of the sea.'

<http://www.mysteriousbritain.co.uk/folklore/mermaids.html>