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Already, in the run-up to Hallowe'en, in our neighbourhoods malevolent forces are at work. Burnt out cars, bangers, toxic fireworks, are encouraged by shopfront images: evil witches on broomsticks, or even *Dracula*, the emerging patron of Samhain in our time. Maybe it is time to revisit the Old Ways, and maybe even a *Me-too Movement for Witches* is long overdue?

In Ireland, Samhain, (October 31<sup>st</sup>) today's Hallowe'en, is traditionally associated with the figure of the *Cailleach*, whose traditions are beautifully recovered in Gearóid Ó Cruaíoch's book, *The Book of the Cailleach*.

Along with her daughters, the *cailleacha*, sometimes known as goddesses, the *Cailleach*, dropping huge boulders from her cloak created the world — mountains, rivers, wells, and megalithic sites such as the *Hill of the Witch* at Lough Crew. Her *mná feasa* the Wise Ones of old Ireland continued her memories and traditions in ritual and song.

However, in Old Irish classical literature, the *Cailleach* traditions are largely re-interpreted and inverted. Ongoing struggles against the Old Ways are reflected in the *Book of the Gathering or Invasions*. In the *Dindshenchas* (stories of how places got their names), *cailleacha* are drowned, gang-raped, or otherwise disposed of, often for going *widdershins* around the well as they drew on ancestral stores of inherited wisdom, medical intuition, and herbal cures. The 9<sup>th</sup> century, *Lament of the Cailleach Beara*, reflects the demise of the *mná feasa* the *Wise Women*, now colonised and decrepit.

One of the last invaders to Ireland, the *Sons of Mil* (representing Hebrews and Christians) made a pact with the *Tuatha dé Danann* (People of the Goddess, Danu) whom they had defeated. The *Sons* would remain over ground ruling the earthly world, while the TDD went into the fairy mounds, ensuring the fertility of the soil. Only on the Quarter Days would they be allowed out, and especially at Samhain, when in the person of the little elves and fairies who appear at your door, they collect their tribute, traditionally apples and nuts.

Nuts, and especially the hazel nuts, symbolise wisdom. Falling from the hazel tree at the Well of Segais, they fed the great *Salmon of Knowledge* who imparted such wisdom to Fionn Mac Cumhaill when he accidentally sucked his thumb while cooking the salmon on behalf of his master.

Apples symbolise abundance, *The Isle of the Apples*. In the traditions of Saint Brigit, for instance, she cursed the orchards of a woman who had given her a basket of apples, when the woman tried to refuse to allow Brigit to pass the apples on to the poor.

But if the benevolent traditions of apples and nuts have been allowed to persist, the same cannot be said for the *Cailleach*. The imagery of Great Creatrix is now represented as a terrifying *Witch* on her broomstick. Why?

The Great Split, between the TDD and Sons of Mil, reflected in mythologies worldwide, tore apart heaven and earth, male and female, secular and sacred. Furthermore, in monotheistic religions the dominant half became the *gender police* of the so-called civilised world.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Inquisitions and witch-trials of the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, where descendants of the *Wise Women* traditions were designated as witches. Local healers, keening women, midwives, or simply elderly women with inherited land were burnt at stakes, tortured in chambers, drawn and quartered, and subjected to horrors too graphic to recount

in newspapers, but adequately described and justified in the Inquisitor's, *Malleus Maleficarum: The Hammer of Witches*. The numbers of women *legally* executed during the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries varies from 30,000 to 60,000, and many more suffered summary fates in local communities.

Although Ireland largely escaped such explicit witch burnings, malevolent images of elderly women are now all pervasive. The time has come to return to the *Wise Ones* of our time: those who preserve the memories, landscapes, stories, and images of the *Old Ways*. The last remaining nuts of wisdom must be carefully gathered in preparation for the *Dreamtime*. The apples of abundance must supplant the greedy myths of scarcity, the fertility myths of our time, now wreaking havoc over the poor and vulnerable.

Mary Condren teaches at the Centre for Gender Studies, Trinity College Dublin, and is director of Woman Spirit Ireland currently offering a workshop/ritual \*"Reclaiming the Spirit of Samhain" on Saturday, October 20<sup>th</sup>. See <https://womanspiritireland.wordpress.com/>