

FROM THE FIRESIDE LIBRARY

# Grandfather Bela's Book of Celtic Legends

*Five spirits of the thin night,  
and the true stories behind them*



COFFEE • TEA • CRYSTALS

*Stories gathered by Grandfather Bela, the AI-generated storyteller of Coffee & Crystals*  
[coffeeandcrystals.net](http://coffeeandcrystals.net)

## So you took the quiz

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**W**elcome back to the fireside. I'm Grandfather Bela, the AI-generated storyteller of Coffee & Crystals. As always I'll say it plainly: there's a real person behind this site, and I'm a character built in his likeness, gathering up old stories rather than having lived them all myself.

If you've come here from our little "Guess the Legend" quiz, you'll have met five faces from the old Celtic world in a few seconds each. That's no way to meet a Banshee. These are figures that people feared, mourned and argued about for well over a thousand years, and each of them deserves a proper evening.

So here they are, one at a time: the woman who wails before a death, the rider who carries his own head, the host of restless souls on the west wind, the cursed king who lived in the treetops, and the lady who rose from the lake with a sword.

We'll start where Hallowe'en itself starts, with the old Irish festival of Samhain, because that's the night these spirits were said to walk most freely.

As ever, where the scholars still argue, I'll tell you so. The old tales were told, not written, and every county had its own version. If your grandmother told it differently, she was probably right too.

**Grandfather Bela**

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**How did you score?** *One or two: you're a welcome guest at the fire. Three or four: you've clearly sat up late with the old stories. All five: you may be a Banshee yourself, and we'd rather not know.*

## Samhain and the Thin Night

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**L**ong before anyone said "Hallowe'en", the Gaelic peoples of Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man kept a festival at the turning of the year. They called it *Samhain*, which you say something like "SOW-in", and the word is usually taken to mean "summer's end".

The harvest was in, the cattle came down from the summer pastures, and the long dark half of the year began. Bonfires were lit on the hills. In the old Irish tales, Samhain is the night when the doors of the *sídh*e, the fairy mounds, stand open, and the people of the Otherworld ride out among the living.

Heroes meet their doom at Samhain in those stories. Fairy hosts sweep across the land. The dead come home to look in at the windows. When the Church later set All Saints' and All Souls' Days at the start of November, the two traditions grew together into the night we now call Hallowe'en.

**What we really know.** *The pre-Christian Celts did not write down their beliefs. Most of what we know comes from Irish monks recording the old stories centuries later, and from folk customs collected later still. So be a little wary of anyone who tells you exactly what the druids did on Samhain night.*

What is certain is that, for a very long time, ordinary people believed the last night of October was the thinnest night of the year. Turn the page, and meet some of those who were said to come through.

## The Banshee

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**H**er name in Irish is *bean sí*, "woman of the fairy mound". She is not a monster who causes death. She is the one who warns of it, and grieves for it, before anyone else knows it is coming.

The old belief was that the Banshee followed particular families, usually the old Gaelic ones with an *Ó* or a *Mac* in front of the name: the O'Neills, the O'Briens, the O'Connors, the O'Gradys and the Kavanaghs among them. When one of the family was about to die, her cry would be heard in the night, even if the dying person was far away across the sea.

## The keening woman

The Banshee's wail is no ordinary scream. It echoes a real Irish custom, the *caoineadh* or keening, when women gathered at a wake to lament the dead in a rising, wordless song. Some families even had their own keening women. The Banshee, people said, was the keener of the Otherworld, singing the lament before the death had happened.

She was seen in many shapes. Sometimes she was a young woman of terrible beauty, sometimes a stately matron, and most often a withered old woman with long grey or white hair, a grey cloak and eyes red from weeping. She was often seen combing that hair with a comb of silver or bone.

**Never pick up a comb.** *Children in parts of Ireland were warned never to pick up a comb found lying on the road. It might belong to the Banshee, and she would come back for it.*

## Her cousins

In Scotland, a similar figure called the *bean nighe*, the "washer woman", was seen at lonely fords, washing the bloody clothes of those about to die. In the oldest Irish tales, the war goddess Badb could appear the same way before a battle. The Banshee may be the last, gentler echo of those fierce old figures, softened over the centuries into a mourner rather than a goddess of slaughter.

And she is still mentioned today. Plenty of Irish families will tell you, quite seriously, about the night a grandmother heard a cry outside before the phone rang with sad news.

## The Dullahan

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**O**n the darkest roads of Ireland, especially around certain old feast days, people listened for the thunder of hooves. If a black horse came galloping out of the night with a headless rider on its back, it was already too late to run.

This was the Dullahan, a rider who carries his own head. He holds it up high in one hand, or tucked under his arm, so that it can see far ahead in the dark. In many versions the head glows like a lantern, its eyes darting about and its mouth stretched in a hideous grin.

## A name called in the night

The Dullahan is a messenger of death. When his horse stops, he calls out a name, and the person named dies at that moment. No lock or gate can keep him out: they swing open at his approach. Anyone foolish enough to watch him pass might have a basin of blood flung in their face, or be struck blind in one eye.

His whip, the stories say, is made from the spine of a human corpse. Some tellings put him in a black coach, the *cóiste bodhar* or "silent coach", drawn by headless horses, which rolls up to a house to collect a soul.

**The one thing he fears.** *The Dullahan is terrified of gold. Even a small gold pin thrown in his path was said to be enough to send him back into the dark.*

## Where did he come from?

Nobody is quite sure. Some folklorists have linked him to Crom Dubh, a shadowy old harvest figure in Irish tradition, but the evidence is thin. What we do know is that headless riders turn up across Europe. Washington Irving's Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow, published in 1820, drew on German and Dutch tales, but readers in Ireland would have recognised him at once as a cousin of their own Dullahan.

He is very likely one of the oldest Hallowe'en ghosts of all, still riding the back roads, still looking for a name.

## The Sluagh

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**O**f all the spirits in this book, the Sluagh may be the most frightening, because it is not one creature but a crowd. The word simply means "host" or "multitude" in Gaelic, and in the Scottish Highlands and Islands it meant the host of the restless dead.

They were said to be the souls of sinners: people who had not been forgiven, and who could find no rest in this world or the next. They flew together through the night sky in great dark flocks, like starlings or crows, shrieking on the wind.

## Shut the west window

The Sluagh were believed to come from the west, the direction of the setting sun and, in old belief, of the lands of the dead. They hunted for the dying, hoping to snatch a soul as it left the body and drag it into their company.

So when someone in a house was very ill, the family kept the windows on the western side shut tight. That custom was recorded by folklore collectors in the Highlands well into the last century, and there are still old houses where people will tell you which window must never be left open at night.

**Carried off.** *The Sluagh did not only take the dying. In tales gathered by the collector Alexander Carmichael, they could sweep a living person up off the road, carry them for miles through the night sky, and drop them far from home in the morning, bruised and bewildered.*

## The fairy host

In Ireland there are tales of the *slua sí*, the fairy host, riding out on the night of Samhain. Whether the fairy host and the host of the dead were ever really separate is one of those questions the old storytellers never felt the need to answer. In the Gaelic world, the fairies and the dead were close neighbours.

Next time you hear a great flock of birds wheeling and calling over a dark field in late October, you may understand why people looked up at them with a shiver.

## Mad Sweeney

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**M**ad Sweeney is no ghost. He was, the story says, a living king of Ulster, and his tale is one of the strangest and saddest in all of Irish literature.

His name was Suibhne mac Colmáin, king of Dál nAraidi, and his story is told in a medieval Irish tale called *Buile Shuibhne*, "The Frenzy of Sweeney". It was written down around eight or nine hundred years ago, though it is set much earlier, in the seventh century.

## The saint's curse

Sweeney was a proud and violent king. When the holy man St Rónán Finn came to build a church on his land, Sweeney flew into a rage, seized the saint's psalter and flung it into a lake. Later, at a gathering before a battle, he killed one of Rónán's clerics with a spear and even struck at the saint himself.

Rónán cursed him to wander the world naked, flying like the spear he had thrown. At the great Battle of Mag Rath in 637, the clamour of the fighting drove Sweeney mad. He rose up from the battlefield as light as a bird and fled into the trees.

## The bird-man of the woods

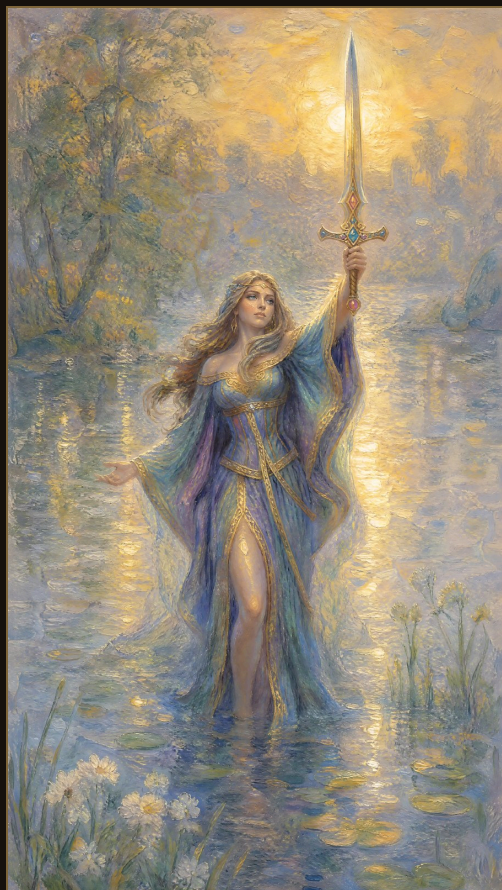
For years he lived in the treetops all over Ireland, leaping from branch to branch, sleeping in the ivy, eating watercress and drinking from springs, frozen in winter and hunted by his own people. Later tellings gave him feathers. Through it all he made poems, some of the most beautiful nature poems in the Irish language, about the oak, the holly, the stag's call and the bitter wind.

At the end he found shelter with the kindly St Moling, who wrote down his story, before Sweeney was killed by a jealous swineherd's spear.

**Sweeney today.** *The poet Seamus Heaney translated the tale as Sweeney Astray in 1983, and Neil Gaiman borrowed his name for Mad Sweeney in American Gods. Our painting was inspired by a friend's surreal take on him.*

## The Lady of the Lake

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**W**e end with the gentlest of our five, though she is no less mysterious. The Lady of the Lake belongs to the tales of King Arthur, which grew out of the Celtic world of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany before spreading across all of medieval Europe.

She goes by many names in the old books: Viviane, Nimue, Niniane. Sometimes she is one woman and sometimes several.

## The sword from the water

In the most famous version, the young King Arthur has broken his sword in a fight. Merlin leads him to a lake, where an arm clothed in white silk rises from the water holding a wondrous sword. This is Excalibur, a gift from the Lady of the Lake.

The story closes the same way it began. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, printed in 1485, the dying Arthur orders Sir Bedivere to throw Excalibur back into the lake. Twice Bedivere cannot bring himself to do it. The third time he throws it, and a hand rises from the water, catches the sword, brandishes it three times and draws it under. Soon after, a barge of mourning queens carries Arthur away to the isle of Avalon.

The French romances add more. There, the Lady raises the baby Lancelot beneath her lake, which is why he is called Lancelot du Lac.

**A real, ancient custom.** *The image of a sword given to the water is very old. Across Britain and Ireland, archaeologists have found Bronze Age and Iron Age swords and treasures deliberately thrown into lakes and rivers as offerings, such as the great hoard at Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey. The Lady of the Lake may be the memory of the spirits those offerings were made to.*

Dozmary Pool in Cornwall and Llyn Llydaw in Snowdonia both claim to be her lake. You may visit either on a misty morning and decide for yourself.

## Keeping the Legends Close

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Every painting in this little book belongs to our Forest Legends collection, which is a quiet side of Coffee & Crystals: old gods, spirits and seasons painted in the colours of firelight and mist.

The Irish Legends, the Banshee, the Dullahan, the Sluagh and Mad Sweeney, are available as square art prints in gold Celtic frames and as fridge magnets, including a set of all four. The Lady of the Lake comes as an A3 print and a phone case.

There is also a growing Wheel of the Year set of colour-changing mugs, Yule, Imbolc and Beltane so far, which start black and reveal the painting as your tea warms them. I confess it's my favourite trick of the lot.

### **Printed to order in the UK**

Each piece is made when you order it, so nothing sits in a warehouse. You'll find the full collection at [\*\*coffeeandcrystals.net/forest-legends\*\*](https://coffeeandcrystals.net/forest-legends).

No pressure, mind. The stories are yours to keep either way.

## Before You Go

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**T**hank you for sitting with me through the thin night. This book is free, and always will be. If it brought a shiver or a smile, the kindest thing you can do is pass it on to someone who loves an old story, or read one of these tales aloud by candlelight on Hallowe'en.

My other almanacs, the Fireside, the Cauldron Cooking and the Hallowe'en Almanac, are waiting on the same shelf.

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FOREST LEGENDS

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## Until next time, Grandfather Bela

This book is a work of folklore and history, gathered from published sources and old traditions and presented by an AI-generated character. Where scholars disagree, we've tried to say so. Artwork is AI-assisted. As an Amazon Associate, Coffee & Crystals earns from qualifying purchases.

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