

Note: This book review is intended for the journal *Arthuriana*.

JULIETTE WOOD, *Eternal Chalice: The Enduring Legend of the Holy Grail*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016. Pp. ix, 244, 31 black-and-white plates. ISBN: 978—1—78453—520—9. \$27. £20.

In popular culture, the phrase ‘Holy Grail’ is as recognizable as King Arthur himself. Arthurian scholars are no doubt familiar with the Grail romances, but Juliette Wood’s survey expands beyond the scope of a typical scholar’s concerns. When modern editions of the romances appeared in the nineteenth century, a deluge of renewed interest in the Grail brought forth ideas about origins, meaning, and even saw various relics put forth as candidates for the Grail itself. Today, countless books, movies, and games have incorporated the Grail in a variety of forms. As Wood states in her introduction, ‘the permutations create a dizzying kaleidoscope for the modern reader, but the thread running through it all is the assumption that the Grail story is special, and its meaning needs to be explained.’ Wood attempts to provide a survey of the legend that captures how different cultures and different times have perceived and explained the Grail, and how these perceptions reflect that culture’s desires and needs. This helps to contextualize perceptions of the Grail from past to present, and I would assert that awareness of these perceptions is essential to Arthurian and Celtic scholars writing for a general audience so that modern assumptions can be addressed. Folklorists and others interested in legend development will also find a great deal to take away from Wood’s work. Furthermore, this highly readable text is accessible to a general audience, providing a moderating influence to the explosion of interest in conspiracy and alternative history since Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, on which Wood also writes.

Chapter One describes the context in which the original Grail romances developed and their medieval audiences. This is a good summary for general readers and those new to the field. For those already familiar with the topic, Wood adds a layer of interest in discussion of the veneration of relics that was an important part of worship in the middle ages. She tells us how, despite the especial popularity of relics associated with the Passion of Christ, the Grail, now so often connected with the cup of the Last Supper, is oddly absent from medieval relic collections. Most of the ostensibly medieval Grail relics were only identified as such, along with convenient stories, in more recent times.

Chapter Two concerns the Grail legend at Glastonbury. It starts with Glastonbury Abbey’s early history, expands into the discovery of Arthur’s grave, and traces the development of the Joseph of Arimathea story. Next, we are brought into the modern era where psychics, such as Dr John Goodchild, and mystics, such as Dion Fortune, nurtured the local Grail legend and promoted Glastonbury as a spiritual center.

In Chapter Three, Wood considers Welsh literature and folklore. She is meticulous in clarifying the many subtleties of the historical context behind these stories. To the well-versed scholar of Grail literature, this may be nothing new, but Wood also spends a significant amount of time discussing some examples of real objects with claims to be the Grail, with especial focus

on the legend development around the Hawkstone and Nanteos cups, which get equally thorough treatment.

The theory of the Grail's Celtic origins, so prominent in nineteenth century scholarship, is at last addressed in Chapter Four. First, Wood looks at the work of Victorian writers including Frazer, Weston, Nutt, and Loomis. Next, she considers the fundamentally flawed assumptions in developing origin theories. She then looks at the Grail from the more esoteric perspective of figures such as Lewis Spence and A.E. Waite, ending the chapter with a section on the Grail Hallows as depicted in the Rider-Waite Tarot.

We transition to another popular origin story in Chapter Five, where we learn how religious orders such as the Cathars and Knights Templar became part of the Grail legend. Here more than ever, we see the Grail become almost entirely disconnected from Arthuriana, instead becoming an exclusively Christian relic steeped in conspiracy and secret knowledge. Cathars, Waldensians, Templars, and Freemasons are all examined in the context of Grail lore. The historical reality of Rosslyn Chapel, often associated with secret codes relating to the Grail, is also brought to light. In this chapter, Wood fleshes out her argument about how, outside of academia, theories about the Grail are fueled by lack of evidence rather than the reverse. When an idea takes hold in the popular imagination, such as the theory of the Grail being a Templar treasure, the chaos of the Crusades and the convenient excuse of conspiracy are treated by many as virtual proof.

In Chapter Six Wood delves into some specific elements addressed in works on alternative history such as *Holy Blood Holy Grail*, *Le Trésor maudit*, and recent thriller *The Da Vinci Code*. She contextualizes the history of Poussin's painting, *Shepherds Gazing at a Tomb in Arcadia*, and the related eighteenth-century garden at Shugborough, both of which are popularly claimed to incorporate secret codes concerning to the Grail. Here too, she explores the *sang real* theory, discussing various supporters of a divine bloodline, and their claims, since the theory was proposed in the 15th century. She expands particularly on Mary Magdalene, examining the Apocrypha used as evidence for her romantic involvement with Christ, as well as her medieval cult and more recent connections made to the concept of the sacred feminine.

Wood concludes the text with a brief and rapid overview of some of the most popular modern interpretations of the Grail in books, movies, and other media. She summarizes how the modern Grail resonates with the Grail of the past. Poignantly, she reminds us how the Grail, an object of a quest always achieved in medieval romance, has today become synonymous with unobtainable secret wisdom, always just beyond our reach.

While *Eternal Chalice* proposes intriguing arguments on legend development, there are times when alternative perspectives are missed or ignored. For example, in the chapter on Glastonbury, Wood suggests that the local Arthurian legend was promoted as a way for the abbey to gain income and royal favor following a disastrous fire and the death of their patron, Henry II. While the convenient timing of the discovery of Arthur's grave at Glastonbury is suspicious, Purdue University's Dorsey Armstrong points out that historical evidence suggests that the monks did a poor job of advertising this discovery and failed to play up the Joseph of Arimathea and Grail connections, which makes little sense if their goal was to gain funding. Wood's discussion of the legend development at Glastonbury is so dependent on the assumption that the story was engineered through necessity that when we look at another possibility her argument falls apart. This is a good reminder that Wood's attempts to trace the development of the legend are not without flaw, and while her evidence is strong and her conclusions sensible, her theories are not set in stone.

With that caution in mind, I cannot fault Wood for her approach to this survey. She accomplishes her goal to explore the perceptions of the Grail over time, mapping the evolution of culture to the diverse interpretations of the Grail. However, such an expansive topic necessitates brevity, and I cannot help but feel unsatisfied. While certain topics are given adequate coverage and depth, others are lacking. As stated previously, this text is excellent for providing context, but I would never recommend it for exploring the role of the Grail within a specific romance, for instance. Fortunately, Wood is well-read and has a plethora of sources which makes finding additional information feasible. Altogether, *Eternal Chalice* is a highly readable text, with a wide scope and fascinating details, that brings us on a quest to discover the Holy Grail not in a magical castle, but in the ever-shifting fabric of popular consciousness over time.

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Note: This encyclopedia entry is intended for Koch, J. (2006). *Celtic culture: a historical encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc.

fairy cats

§1. INTRODUCTION

The *cat sí* or *cat sìth* is a supernatural feline appearing in the folklore and mythology of the CELTIC COUNTRIES, primarily Ireland (ÉIRE), Scotland (ALBA), and Wales (CYMRU). The term ‘fairy cat,’ while a direct translation of the Gaelic name, is misleading as these cats are not always directly associated with the FAIRIES. They should be instead compared more closely to other LEGENDARY ANIMALS. In the main, fairy cats are described as much larger than normal cats. They tend to reside in remote areas, such as in the Scottish Highlands or within dark Irish caves. Generally hostile, they act as an obstacle to a hero or a threat to a community. However, like the CŴN ANNWN and other spectral hounds, they serve a variety of roles largely separable by country. While there can be some conflation between real cats and fairy cats, fairy cats and other monstrous felines tend to be of OTHERWORLD origin and so the folklore around them can be considered separately from folklore of housecats or native breeds such as the Manx cat.

§2. IRELAND

Otherworld cats almost always serve as guardians in early IRISH LITERATURE. They are commonly found at the mouths of caves serving as entrances to the otherworld. They are exceptionally fierce. In FLED BRICRENN (‘Bricriu’s Feast’) three of the greatest heroes of ULSTER, including CÚ CHULAINN, are tasked with slaying a group of such cats. Unable to claim a decisive victory, the best they can do is to hold the cats off until dawn, when the morning light causes the creatures to vanish. In IMRAM CURAIG MAÍLE DÚIN (‘The Voyage of Máel Dúin’), a cat turns one of Máel Dúin’s crewmembers to ash when he attempts to steal one of the treasures the cat watches over.

One story about SENCHÁN TORPÉIST, Chief Poet of Ireland, describes how the food Senchán’s wife prepared for him was eaten by mice. The poet, furious, satirizes the mice as well as the cats who failed to stop them, and even goes so far as to satirize the king of the cats, Írusán. The monstrous Írusán, deeply insulted, comes after and seizes Senchán, taking the poet back to his cave to devour him for the affront. By a stroke of good fortune, St CIARÁN witnesses the abduction and kills Írusán by spearing him with a hot fire poker, saving the poet.

In certain areas, local folklore about the Irish *cat sí* parallels the Scottish fairy cat, discussed below.

§3. SCOTLAND

The Scottish *cat sìth* is described as black in color with a white spot on its chest. It is the size of a dog and is often depicted with its back arched and hairs bristling. The description bears a strong resemblance to the Kellas cat, a hybrid between the Scottish wildcat and domestic breeds. One common belief is that the *cat sìth* is a witch transformed into a cat, a transformation which the

witch can perform up to nine times. Prior to burial, it was believed that *cat sìth* could steal the soul from a corpse by simply stepping over or alongside the body. For this reason, a watch called the *Feill Fadalach* (Late Wake) would be held over the body. Fires would be put out, to avoid attracting the *cat sìth* with their heat, and people would attempt to distract it from the corpse with games, such as wrestling, and riddles which were left unanswered for the cat to ponder. On SAMHAIN, the *cat sìth* would bless any household that left out a saucer of milk but would curse those that did not.

A newspaper article from the 1824 *Literary Gazette* records the last known instance of a ritual known as Taghairm, which it claims was performed as late as the seventeenth century. By roasting living cats over a fire for four days, replacing the cats as they died and fasting all the while, a powerful *cat sìth* would be summoned and grant two boons. However, for performing such a cruel act, upon their death participants in the ritual were condemned to hell.

The English folktale ‘The King of the Cats’ appears to describe a group of nine *cat sìth* carrying a coffin. A man witnessing the strange occurrence is told by one of the cats to ‘Tell Tom Tildrum that Tim Toldrum is dead.’ When the man returns home and reports the strange occurrence to his wife and cat, his cat Old Tom replies, ‘What?! Old Tim dead! Then I’m the King o’ the Cats!’ and disappears up the chimney, never to return.

§4. WALES

In Wales, the TRIADS describe how Cath Palug is a single, monstrous feline born of the white sow Henwen. The name *Cath Palug*, literally Palug’s Cat, stems from the cat’s upbringing at the hands of Palug’s sons after it was cast into the sea as a kitten and washed ashore at Angelsey (Ynys Môn). The sons were unaware that Cath Palug would become one of the island’s three great plagues. In the BLACK BOOK OF CARMARTHEN, the poem *Pa Gwr* implies Cath Palug is slain by Sir Cai, but only after the cat had already slain 180 other soldiers. Because the surviving example of *Pa Gwr* is incomplete, it is not entirely clear how this victory is achieved, but some scholars believe that Cai’s polished shield distracts the cat with its own reflection or shadow, granting Cai his opportunity to deliver the finishing blow.

In French sources, Cath Palug, here called Capalu or Chapalu (when it is named at all), combats ARTHUR himself. Sometimes Arthur fights a group of monstrous cats rather than a single entity. Sources vary on the outcome. A French poem or poems, now lost but alluded to by an early 13th century Anglo-Norman author, describes Arthur’s ignoble death by the cat. In the Vulgate Cycle, the cat is found in a lake and raised by a fisherman, only to grow into a monster and kill the fisherman and his family. It then continues to slay any travelers who venture near the lake. This time, Arthur combats it and is victorious.

§5. MODERN PHANTOM CATS

Though certain species of big cats used to live in the British Isles and may have influenced the development of fairy cat lore, native species are now largely extinct. Despite this, since the early 1900s, numerous sightings of large cats variously termed phantom cats, mystery cats, or most commonly alien big cats (ABCs), have been reported throughout the British Isles. These sightings tend to be considered either misidentified animals or escaped exotic pets. Examples include a Canadian lynx shot in Devon in 1903, a puma captured alive in Scotland in 1980, and a wildcat native to Africa and Asia known as a caracal, which was shot and killed by police in Northern Ireland in 1996. Despite names like ‘The Beast of Bodmin’ and ‘The Beast of Dartmoor’ given to some of the more commonly sighted phantom cats, they tend to be perceived

as real biological animals, unlike the otherworldly fairy cats of folklore. Still, the sightings could be taken as a modern continuation of the long tradition of folklore surrounding fairy cats, substituting a supernatural explanation with one more plausible to the modern mind.

FURTHER READING

ALBA; ARTHUR; BLACK BOOK OF CARMARTHEN; CELTIC COUNTRIES; CIARÁN; CÚ CHULAINN; CŴN ANNWN; CYMRU; ÉIRE; FAIRIES; FLED BRICRENN; IMRAM CURAIG MAÍLE DÚIN; IRISH LITERATURE; LEGENDARY ANIMALS; OTHERWORLD; SAMHAIN; SENCHÁN TORPÉIST; TRIADS; ULSTER; Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*; Bromwich, TYP; Jacobs, *More English Fairy Tales*; *Literary Gazette*, Mar 1824.172; Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*; Le Fanu, *Dublin University Magazine* 58(348).714; Le Fanu, *Dublin University Magazine* 62(371).495; MacGillivray, 'Cait Sidhe'; Matthews, *The Element Encyclopedia of Magical Creatures*; McMahon, *Duffy's Hibernian Magazine* 2(8).63; Mudge, 'Meet "The King of the Cats" from Celtic Folklore'; Patrick, *Gentleman's Magazine* 299(2100).538; Shuker, *Mystery Cats of the World*; Yeats, *Fairy and Folktales of Ireland*.