



Scottish Folklore in *Ushig* by Annemarie Allan

In *Ushig* Ellen meets many strange creatures she recognises as 'Peerie Folk'. Author Annemarie Allan explains how she researched *Ushig* and introduces some creatures from Scottish Folklore.

Almost all the research I do for my books is through the internet. Books that were once very hard to come by are now available if you know where to look and you don't mind sifting through an awful lot of irrelevant stuff. I bounce about from site to site, collecting bits from everywhere. There are some wonderful sites, like Project Gutenberg, which provide e-texts of as many books as they can — for free. They need volunteers and they are well worth supporting!

Researching Scottish myths is not easy. Most of the people who told these stories left Scotland before anyone had a chance to write them down, so the Scottish side of things is often swamped by tales from Ireland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. But if you look hard enough, you can find them. Here are a few of my favourites (including some creatures from *Ushig*):

BAOBHAN SITH [baavan shee]: A vampire with the form of a beautiful woman in a green dress. One night a year she rises from her grave to feed in forests or glens. Instead of fangs, she uses her sharp fingernails to draw blood. She has deer hooves for feet, which she keeps hidden under her dress.

BEAN NIGHE [ben neeyeh]: The washer at the ford. A fairy woman who appears to humans at the side of desolate streams and pools washing the blood-stained clothing of those who are about to die.

BLUE MEN OF THE MINCH (storm kelpies): Spirits who live in the stretch of water between Lewis and mainland Scotland. They look for sailors to drown and boats to sink. They live in clans in underwater caves.

BODACH (old man): A bogeyman who slides down the chimney and into the house in order to steal (or some say eat) children.

BROWN MAN OF THE MOORS: With his brown clothes, frizzy red hair and wild looking eyes, he looks human, but he is not. He guards the wild creatures of the borders.

CAILLEACH BHUER [callyac vhoor]: The blue-faced hag, queen of winter. She appears each year at Halloween bringing the snows of winter, freezing the ground with each tap of her magic staff. On May Day eve, she lays her staff under a holly or gorse bush and turns to stone.

EACH UISGE [auch ooshgi]: Shape shifters, sometimes called kelpies, who appear close to water in the shape of a horse or pony. Anyone who rides the creature is dragged beneath the water, torn to pieces and then eaten.

GHILLIE DHU [gilly doo]: Solitary creatures with black hair who live in trees. Their clothes are made of leaves and moss. They are the guardians of the wood.

LOIREAG [lorreag]: A fairy who looks like a human woman. She is an expert spinner and will punish humans who are careless or lazy in their work. She loves music and will attack anyone who sings off-key.

Continued on page 2...

NUCKELAVEE: A creature who lives in the sea near Orkney, but hunts on the land. He likes the taste of human flesh. He has a huge head on top of a skinny neck, a pig's snout, one eye that burns with red flame and arms that reach down to the ground. You can see inside his body, because he has no skin. His breath is poisonous. His only weakness is that he cannot abide the touch of fresh water.

RED CAP: This creature looks like an old man, but has red eyes, claws on his hands and large teeth. He carries a pikestaff and waits for travellers in the ruined castles along the Scottish border. He dyes his hat with the blood of his victims and he must kill regularly, because if the blood on his hat dries, he will die.

SELKIES: Seals which can shed their skin and become human. In their human form they must be careful not to lose, or have their skins stolen, or they will never be able to become seals again.

THE SLUACH [slooach]: Sometimes described as the 'unseelie' (evil) fairy court and sometimes the spirits of the restless dead. They move across country like a sudden storm.

URISK [oo-risk]: Half-man half-goat, the urisk haunts pools of water. He is a lonely creature and wants to befriend any human he meets, but because of his strange appearance, people usually run away and then he will chase them.

WULVER [woolver]: A werewolf from the Shetland Islands. He looks like a man covered with short brown hair, but with a wolf's head. He is not usually aggressive and spends most of his time fishing. Sometimes he leaves fish on the window sills of poor families.

Some of these I used in my book, like [the washer at the ford](#) and the [sluach](#). The title character of the story, [Ushig](#) himself, is of course a [kelpie](#). I wanted these creatures to come alive for modern readers and I did my best to make that happen. I don't feel guilty about making changes to the creatures, as long as I stick to the spirit of the original. The storytellers who originally related tales of these creatures changed their location and characters depending on where they were and who they were with, so I'm just following a tradition stretching back for thousands of years!

In *Ushig*, Ellen learns about the Peerie Folk by reading a book called *A Journey Through the Invisible World* by Robert Kirk. Kirk claimed to have been captured by the Peerie Folk and taken to their land. This book doesn't really exist but I based it on a real book with a long title:

"The secret commonwealth; or an essay on the nature and actions of the subterranean (and for the most part) invisible people heretofore going under the name of faunes and fairies, or the lyke, among the low country Scots, as they are described by those who have the second sight" by Robert Kirk.

The real book is nothing like the book in *Ushig*, it is more like a short essay, but I borrowed the name Robert Kirk because he was very famous. Many people really believed that he was stolen by the fairies. For those people, and the original storytellers who told tales of the [bodach](#), the [loireag](#) and the [wulver](#), the fair folk (Sidhe or Peerie Folk) were as real as you or me.

Maybe they are!

Annemarie Allan

P. S — Why don't you research folklore from your area or country? You never know what creatures you may discover lurking there!

