



The Celtic Myths: A Guide to the Ancient Gods and Legends

Miranda Aldhouse-Green

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From gods, heroes, and monsters to Druids, sorcerers, and talking animals, *The Celtic Myths* explores every aspect of Irish and Welsh myths in this appealing and authoritative guide. Besides vividly retelling the tales, Miranda Aldhouse-Green brings her expertise in the archaeology of the Iron Age and particularly shamanism to bear on the mythical world she describes, with evidence as diverse as the Gundestrup Cauldron and the famous bog bodies.

Starting with a discussion of how myths are transmitted and by whom, Aldhouse-Green continues with an account of Irish and Welsh myths, their key actors and motifs, and themes such as heroes, animals, women, environment, and the Otherworld. The book concludes with a look at the influence of monastic chroniclers on the tales, which they preserved and adapted.

Boxed features, quotes from primary texts and contemporary sources, two-color illustrations, photographs, and drawings all come together to create a comprehensive guide for anyone interested in Celtic history or the history of myth as well as anyone who simply loves a good story.

The Celtic Myths: A Guide to the Ancient Gods and Legends Details

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Erik Steevens says

It gives an insight in the mythical Celtic world. The connection exposed between other culturs was a nice dicoverly for me. But the information in the overall was short and that came over as a messy feeling.

Lisa says

Miranda Aldhouse-Green provides a basic guide to Celtic mythology and folklore, focusing particularly on Irish and Welsh myths. The difficulties in such a study are made abundantly clear: evidence for this mythology is fragmentary, sourced either from the rare archaeological find and the Medieval manuscripts that transcribed the myths, diluting the pagan themes and elements due to the prevalence of Christianity and its disapproval of other religions, particularly pagan ones.

The Celtic Myths is yet another beautifully presented book about ancient mythology published by Thames & Hudson. Last year, I read Garry J. Shaw's *The Egyptian Myths* which I adored and, having an uneducated interest in Celtic history and mythology, it was hard to pass up *The Celtic Myths* when it was presented in the same format.

Miranda Aldhouse-Green is thorough, but thrifty, in her approach to covering her topic. The book begins by discussing the sources of information and evidence on the Celtic myths, the basic themes and motifs, and the "myth-spinners" – the people who shared these myths and the ways they were communicaed. Soon, though, she delves into more specific areas – Irish and Welsh myth-cycles are given their own chapter each, but Aldhouse-Green also focuses on the presence and roles of women, animals, the land and water in the myths. Detail is also given to mythical heroes, such as Cú Chulainn, and the underworld.

I found the book a little hard to get into at first – the first few, introductory chapters seemed a tad dry, however necessary they were – but eventually, the book just flowed beautifully. It's true that Aldhouse-Green does not provide the myths in their entirety – nor does she work them into a narrative that answers the basic questions myths are formed to answer: where did we come from, what is happening around me and what happens when I die.

That is not to say that *The Celtic Myths* is not a coherent, easily understood book. Instead, I would say that Aldhouse-Green has produced a work that acts as an reference guide or framework to comprehending the myths: the main themes and motifs, the context they were recorded in and how they reflect the people whose life they enriched. It is a great introductory text that promises to enrich my understanding of the myths in any further reading and research I do.

Mark says

Very basic survey of Celtic (chiefly Irish and Welsh) myths and legends. Not bad but very broad non-

specific.

Kira Brighton says

A solid introduction to Celtic mythology with historical context.

Rachel says

Miranda Aldhouse-Green has a difficult challenge in writing this book. A small guide over the myths of an entire culture is challenging, the subject of the Celts make it more so. The Celts didn't believe in writing down their mythology and they also traveled over a large area - with each area having different stories and gods. These are understandable challenges, but what I don't excuse is the poor presentation of information. There were several times she would mention a concept but fail to define it until much later. A good example is the concept of the sovereignty goddess. She mentions "sovereignty goddess" frequently in the early pages, but it's not until page 141, 2/3 into the book, where she defines the concept. This is also true of the Celtic Otherworld, which from the text alone I only have a vague understanding of what it **is**, though I know red and white coloring is often a sign of a being from the Otherworld...

I like these kinds of books for a general overview but this left me feeling less than satisfied. I appreciated her attention on some characters, such as Queen Medbh, but if you're interested in the Celts, I think one would be better served looking elsewhere.

R.S. says

Scholarly without being dry as dust, this is a fascinating, well-written book.

Samantha Bee says

3.5 Stars

Good as a introduction to Celtic mythology if you aren't particularly familiar with it, but not overly in depth beyond that. Also not a huge fan of the formatting of the book. There were a number of separate blocks of text that made reading feel jumpy and inconsistent, so I skipped over those parts and returned to them later.

Rebecca says

The first quarter of this book is an introduction to origins of these legends and the history of Celts. This section was unexpected given the title, but was interesting and easy to read and understand. This is followed by short segments about various gods/goddesses as well as other legends and traditions. The content is fine, but the organization felt a bit random, especially the inserted features which broke the text of other items. The book also includes numerous greenish grey and white photographs of artifacts collected from Celtic sites

along with short articles about this items (see previous reference to inserted features). But I did like the small, easy to hold size of the book and think there is plenty here for those interested in this subject.

I received a free copy of this book through a Good Reads giveaway.

Ella says

a little bit disorganized - it reads more as a descriptive collection than a linear narrative of Celtic myth-making, but the stories (and the enthusiasm and fondness with which the author tells them) are so much fun that I don't really care.

David says

If you want to read some strange things the old Celt's sure knew what they were doing! Cu Chulainn's warp spasm is quite something to come across. This book is well written and very interesting, give it a go!

Bex Lyons says

I have taught an undergraduate class on the Myths and Legends of Britain and Ireland for several years, and think this would make a really useful primer for students on such courses - pointing them to contemporary written evidence (e.g. Caesar's De Bello Gallico for info on the Druids), archaeological evidence, and for an introduction to the main players - gods and heroes of Celtic myth. Aldhouse-Green also usefully problematises the word 'Celt' at the outset. An interesting and informative read.

Dymphny says

This book is an introduction to the celtic mythology. It explains several concepts and motives common for both irish and welsh mythology, while trying to tie it to archeological finds. Yet, it did not dive deeply into the myths or provided a direct translation of ancient texts. However, the book has re-sparked my interest in celtic mythology (and made me longed to read my mythology books).

Having said that, if you really like this book, read other books by Miranda Aldhouse-Green. She really is an expert in the celts.

Lisa M. says

I have always been intrigued by my own heritage. For many reasons, my family was never able to provide me with any specifics. I completed a DNA ancestry test to learn more. I want to acknowledge that the tests aren't perfect, but mine showed that I am almost half UK/Irish heritage. That made sense to me so I ran with it. I wanted to learn more about the history/spirituality of my ancestors so I looked at the mythology section

of my local book store.

This book stood out for several reasons. First, I have the edition with the green cover -- it is beautiful! Second, I feel like my education focused on ancient Greeks/Romans/Egyptians -- we did not learn about other areas of Europe/the world at all. I liked this book because it promised to provide some context to the myths it discussed.

I enjoyed this book overall and it lived up to its promise. As the book discusses, the term Celt is a hotly debated one. Celtic heritage/history is often romanticized. I liked that it acknowledged why there are gaps in our understanding of "Celtic" (whatever that means!) people. I also liked that it provided archeology/factual evidence for what she was stating. There are gaps in our knowledge about these people that may never be filled, but Aldhouse-Green did a good job of presenting readers with the available knowledge.

I have found Celtic mythology intimidating in the past due to the names, which I have found to be a barrier. Aldhouse-Green acknowledged this and presented the information in a way that felt easily accessible to me. I learned about various myths. Perhaps more interestingly/more importantly I learned how my ancestors may have experienced and interpreted these myths. Aldhouse-Green explained how the myths were told and how common themes acted as signals for listeners as to what would come next.

I really enjoyed this book. It gave not only a picture of the myths, but exactly what I wanted -- she gave how the Celtic people experienced them. I learned a lot and realized that these myths are not as "ancient" as I may have thought. I would love to dive deeper and learn about these cultures in the Iron Age/the shamanism they practiced -- but as this book explained, the records may not be there!

Stefanie says

This book felt like the first draft of a master's thesis. And not a very good one at that. Aldhouse-Green weakly tries to tie together archaeological evidence and Celtic myths, without doing a very good job of describing either. The book is touted as a great introduction for those unfamiliar with Celtic myths, and yet every increasingly aggravating section begins with a quote that makes absolutely zero sense until you have read the entire following section. It is possible this is full of good information, but I can't think of anyone I could conscientiously recommend it to.

ArwendeLuhtiene says

2.5-3/5

In my opinion, this book works as a basic introduction to Celtic culture and Irish and Welsh myths, and I found it easy to read. The structure is a little bit chaotic at times, though, and there are a smallish handful of potential typos/dubious claims in it as well, especially in the introduction (such as equating 'the people of Gaul' with the whole of Celtic Europe).

Regarding one of my favourite themes **-feminism and the treatment of female characters -**, the author uses '*men and women*' and '*he and/or she*' in her writing and tackles the issue of the women in Irish and Welsh myths: She has a whole chapter dedicated to the women in the myths and also makes references to the

treatment of the female characters more than once throughout the book (apart from the existing inherent Patriarchy of Celtic culture, she makes emphasis on the way Christianity viewed the original Celtic female characters in a negative way because they did not conform to their set gender roles: "*powerful women are not treated with any great sympathy and over-enthusiastic sexual behaviour is frowned upon*").

I appreciated the fact that she discusses women quite often, and in general I agree with her interpretation and views on the matter, but there are a couple of cases where she suddenly seems to uphold deeply problematic sexist views (especially about Blodeuwedd and, to a lesser extent, the battle goddesses and the 'virginity test/virgin footholder' issue of the Mabinogion with Goewin and Arianrhod), and that's where the 2.5 came from. It also made little sense that someone who comments quite a lot of times about Medieval Christianity's sexist warped views on Celtic women (about Queen Medbh, for example) should be upholding the *exact* same views on some specific characters. Sometimes it seemed to me like the author switched mentalities, feminist-wise, depending on the character she was discussing (she definitely seems to have some kind of problem with Blodeuwedd), and I found it both grating and confusing.

A couple of examples:

- "*A strong mythic tradition in the Ulster Cycle is the association of goddesses with warfare (...) they were (...) promiscuous, sexually insatiable and intent on seducing young heroes*"

It's pretty incoherent to comment on the way Medieval Christians criticized Celtic goddesses for their freer sexuality (and kudos for that, don't get me wrong), and then write something with this kind of wording (apart from the fact that women are entitled to their sexuality - as if 99.9% of the males in these myths were not as - or more - sexually active! But they're not called promiscuous for it, are they?! About the Daghda, for example, the wording is '*his sexual appetite was prodigious*' He, or other men like Cúchulainn, are never called 'promiscuous', and the men who assault women (like Gilfaethwy) or take them as wives in arranged marriages (like Conchobar, Fionn or Lleu) aren't exactly criticized either!)

And the most problematic case, **Blodeuwedd**. The author seems to really hate this character and bashes her like three or four times throughout the book. Pretty hypocritical (and very confusing) to be that level of sexist and, like I said, uphold the exact same views Medieval Christians did, after seemingly criticizing that issue more than once! It's also particularly grating when other authors, such as Jean Markale (who happens to be male!), includes such a feminist take on the matter (in his book about Celtic women).

Blodeuwedd is a woman created, very much like Eve (and Lilith) were, with the sole intention of being a male protagonist's wife - she's considered as an object who is entitled to 0% consent about the issue. Like Lilith, Blodeuwedd is not exactly happy about the arrangement (and can you blame her?), and so she takes a lover (and apparently women being able to choose a sexual partner is a criminal offense but men are entitled to own them in any way?) and conspires with him to kill the forced husband (not enforcing killing in any way but again, can you exactly blame her? It was like the only way to try to break free). But while Markale sympathises with the character and criticizes the extreme misogyny and objectification of women oozing from the story, the author here views Blodeuwedd as an 'amoral', 'evil' character who 'betrays' and 'tricks' her 'poor' 'wronged' husband:

Vs Markale's "*the woman is [in this tale] a manufactured object which men can own and use as they wish (...) Rejecting her alienation, Blodeuwedd vindicates her right to freedom (...) the rebellion of the Flower Daughter constantly threatens the basis of patriarchal society (...) Like Blodeuwedd, Lilith (...) is handed over to Adan, like an object. She rebels and refuses to obey Jehovah, the Father (...)"* (*Celtic Women, 'The Rebellion of the Flower Daughter'*)

in this book we have

"the wicked adulteress (...) Her powerful amorality is explained in terms of her not being truly human (...) Lleu obtained a magical wife, conjured from flowers (...) But she was faithless (...) she was fundamentally

flawed, untrustworthy and ultimately too dangerous to be among humans. (...) she is a wayward, amoral spirit-being"

Way to go, Ms Aldhouse-Green!
