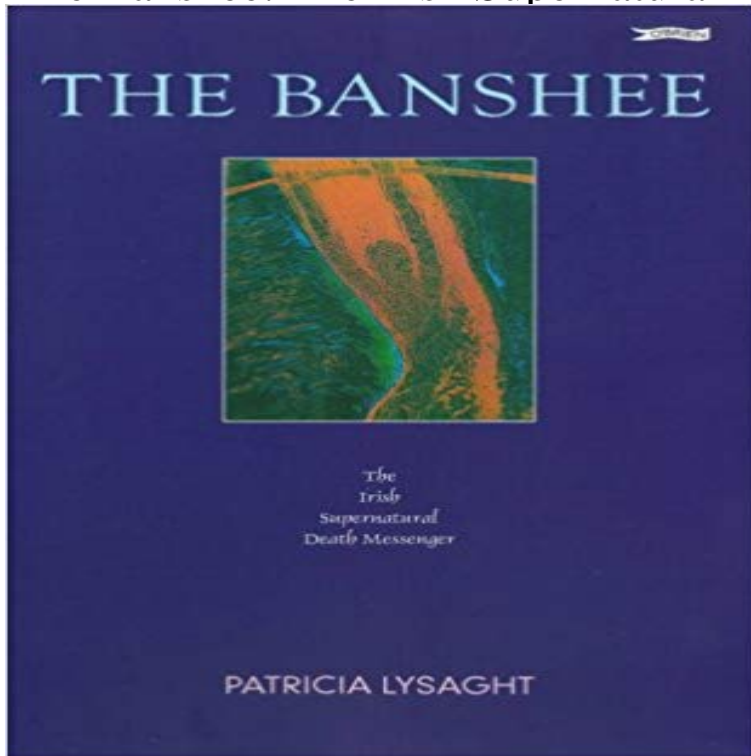


The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-messenger



The banshee is traditionally in Ireland the female supernatural herald of death. Based on folklore and documentary sources, this work examines the characteristics of the banshee and of the belief in her, and her origin and regional variations. The methods of Scandinavian scholars are adapted to an Irish context, and the author also develops cartographical and other methods of analysis and presentation. From the scientific analysis of the folklore sources emerges a composite picture of the banshee, and the functions of the belief in this creature of the folk imagination are examined. A thorough survey of literary texts in Irish, from the Old Irish period to the present, combined with the folklore material, reveal the complex development of a tradition and a belief. In correlating the evidence of the folklore and literary sources, extensive use has been made of Scottish Gaelic material, and insight is also gained into the work of 19th-century writers such as W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Lady Wilde. In Ireland even today, there is an opportunity to observe a belief which is clearly very ancient, analysis showing that it existed in some form in the 8th century and probably earlier. While this study of the banshee throws sidelights on the political, social and cultural history of Ireland, it highlights the psychological function of the belief at the crisis of death, and also the changing Irish attitudes to death over the last few centuries.

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