

## Chapter Eight

# Guides, Guardians and Gods

We have looked into the origins of the tradition and the importance of inspiration, how it shapes and colours the variations in Druidry. We have also looked at ritual concepts which create a framework within which Druidry is practiced, such as the sacred circle which is both a sanctuary for inner growth and healing and a temple to the power and beauty of nature. We have looked at the Druid's perception of the changing tides and the way in which these cycles offer potential for transformation and regeneration through a sensitivity to fertility, growth, decay and rebirth, within the seasons of our climate and the processes of the human soul. We have seen how these cycles are honoured and celebrated. Turning again to inspiration, we have viewed the ways in which it is expressed within the spirit of Druidry, through the three crafts of the tradition.

*Before taking the final step in this book, weigh up the information you have gleaned, both through these words and through the images and emotions they have evoked.*

*How do you now relate to what were suggested as the key principles of Druidry: honouring the Earth and the ancestors, through the search for inspiration? How do the tenets of equality and tolerance fit in?*

### **Our Teachers**

Before long, anyone studying the faith with dedication will feel the presence of ancestral Druids, clarifying her vision in a way which increases awareness, revealing how it is the practice of Druid ritual and perception that is our most potent teacher. With clearer sight, the sacred circle becomes a mentor in itself, painted with the images and the colours of our subconscious and displaying its web of internal paths. Awareness of the changing cycles of time also acts as a guide, offering discipline and wisdom to our developing practice.

With no scripture to refer to, Druids also learn to communicate, in words or feelings, with the spirits of nature, the faeryfolk and devas of the plants of our local environment, the dryads and boggarts of woodlands and marshes, and these too guide us, revealing not simply their own lore and power but taking us deeper into ours. In accessing abilities to empathize with animals, feathered and furry, the swimmers and sliders, perhaps even to shapeshift, the Druid learns tough and important lessons in equality and tolerance, in what is appropriate action, in when to take responsibility, when to bite down and when to let go.

These spirits of nature hold and enrich our inner groves and our outer worlds. They are the willow at the garden gate, the beeches of the forest temple, the herbs we infuse for our teas that wake and sooth us. They are the pets that welcome us, the wild creatures of the land and seas, the animals that roam our inner worlds. They are the spirits that offer us the food we need, teaching us humility, dependency and respect.

Yet more powerful are the elementals, the spirits of the winds, rains, rivers, oceans, rocks and storms, fires and lightning. These too teach us, as do the spirits of place, the spirit guardians that hold the energy of mountains, moors, woodlands and waterfalls, as well as our tended groves and gardens.

Their very being reveals to us areas of our psyche, our emotional and instinctual bodies, our beliefs and expectations, that would otherwise be veiled in the subconscious, and by relating to them more closely, by moving deeper into their powers, consciously we heal and regenerate, refining the many layers of our body and soul.

Together with our ancestors, these spirits beings are honoured in ritual practice and invited to witness, bless, protect and inspire each ceremony, which itself is a celebration of awe and thanksgiving for the power those spirits bring to our worlds. Each is potentially a source of that perfect inspiration at the heart of Druidry.

Indeed, some look no further. Before them, around them, within them are all the powers of nature, of creation and destruction, of brilliance and inundation, of clarity and chaos, the manifest and the potential. This, surely, is sufficient, if the goal of the journey is the exquisite joy of accessing the highest inspiration and its perfect expression through beauty, power and knowing. All the powers of nature are more than enough.

But others look beyond – to the realms of the gods.

## **What Are Gods?**

Whether gods are merely archetypes, particular tones of life energy, or real entities, independent of the human race, brings us back not to a debate but simply to restate that both these attitudes are found amongst modern Druids. Either way, the notion of deity describes a source of power.

Deities can indeed be purely elemental forces and powers of nature. Here we are simply referring to the vibrational ‘intelligence’ of hills, lakes and hurricanes as ‘gods’ instead of ‘spirits’. At some point during our evolution our vision of these energies developed into form. The more powerful spirits became deities, some taking on animal characteristics, some blending animal with human and others becoming fully human images. None the less, the powers, energies, emotions, motivations of these gods remained entirely non-human.

There are also gods who relate more closely to the human psyche than the natural world outside it. There too are forces of guidance, strength, validation and power, and are usually associated with our ancestors. More often than not, in their dealings with the human race they are seen in human form and the teachings they offer typically emphasize those of the ancestors: they are the gods of our ancestors. Reverence for these gods strengthens the continuity and development of our bloodline and our tradition.

Some understand these gods to have been spirits of place that resided in the lands where our ancestors settled. Through perhaps generations of interaction, the tribal connection with those spirits became so strong that when the people moved on they

took with them their reverence for their divine guiding spirits. The spirits then offered the tribe the qualities which had been embodied in the land they left, be it strength, beauty, intelligence, harmony, fluidity, warmth, or whatever. They became guardians of the tribe, or of individual members of the tribe.

Some would dispute this idea and declare the gods of love and war, of communication and agriculture, metalcraft, healing, sacrifice, birth, death, justice and the rest, to be superbeings of worlds beyond those we can perceive, beings who, when adequately tempted to give us their attention, will move through the gateways that divide our worlds and breathe their energy into our work – for a fee. They are distinctly not human, though, and do not guide from ethical or moral frameworks that automatically work for our society here and now; the gods of the natural world work within the principles of natural law, tooth and claw, but the gods of worlds beyond have their own laws entirely.

Some gods are seen simply as mythical heroes. Earlier we saw how Bards were expected to recite genealogies that traced the bloodline from their king back to these ancient figures. Maybe they were people who, by some extraordinary act, were magnified to the status of deity. Having played a key role in the history of their people, they were put on a par with the guardian spirits of the land. Alternatively, they may have been deities diminished to mythical human status by an invading culture and the deities they brought with them.

### **The Gods Of Our Ancestors**

Enough evidence remains to give us a fairly clear picture of the deities of these islands between the middle of the first millennium BCE and the medieval era, though how much Druids themselves had to do with these gods we cannot be sure. Most probably, while people had their own individual deities, of their family, hearth and local environment, their craft and ancestors, all of whom would be revered with prayers, offerings and small scale sacrifice, Druids would have been summoned for anything more important.

Working with the spirit energies and the mysteries of natural law, the Druid would invoke both her own divine allies and the gods of those she was working for to guide and vitalize the work. There appears, however, to have been a reluctance to mention the gods by name. Perhaps this was simply because the vast majority of gods were so localised. The Celtic oath first recorded in Classical text and still used in Ireland a thousand years later stated simply, 'I swear by the gods my people swear by'.

Whether Druids had their own pantheon as well is debatable. There are a small number of gods with similar names across Europe, implying a wider base for their religious practice, Druids having total freedom to move across tribal boundaries. Most of these names, however, are simply descriptives that would have been important to any Pagan peoples, translating into words such as 'mother', 'young one', 'mist', 'shining', 'smith', and the like.

Archaeology has revealed iconography from Bronze and Iron Age Europe, particularly southern Britain and France, which suggest a focus on deities of the sun, thunder, water, hunting and battle, and a common theme of a triple goddess. The

Celtic culture was widely non-literate and it was not until the Roman invasion that altars and statues started bearing names. Yet still such an enormous number of deities are represented that any attempt to reconstruct a religious system becomes quickly tangled, taking us back to the understanding that deity was more about the spirit of place than some wider social order.

One of the few Classical writers who mentions the gods of Celtic culture was Caesar and even then he refers to them by what he considers their Roman names. Mercury, he states, was a favourite deity amongst the Gallic people, being the god of trade, travel and skill, followed by Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva.

### **The Gods Of Modern Druids**

With local gods and spirit guardians overwhelmingly the most common form of deity with our ancestors, the deities of the local environment are still the principal focus of devotion amongst dedicated Druids today.

However, many look back to find the gods of the old tribes too and medieval literature offers information about many of these deities, both the spirits of place and the mythical heroes. It is difficult to correlate the mythology in the literature with the archaeological finds and the Classical evidence, however, indicating again the importance of local gods. This also reveals the problems of working with texts so profoundly influenced by other cultures, not least the Christian. Nonetheless, Druids who now wish to work with the Celtic gods other than their local spirits of place look to texts such as the Welsh *Mabinogion* and the Irish *Tain and Lebor Gabala Erinn* ('The Book of Invasions').

There are many books on the market now which list the gods of the Celtic pantheons and give descriptions of their characteristics, attributes and relationships. Reading the old texts will reveal their stories. Here I offer only a brief outline, with recommendations for further reading in Chapter Nine.

### **British Gods**

Welsh literature tells of old British gods disguised as an intriguing collection of proud kings, brave knights and beguiling ladies. They are rulers of the land and the underworld, spirits of the earth and waters. As most of the tales were written down by Christian monks, we can be sure that much of the clarity and power of the gods has been diminished, but with some work there can be found sufficient gateways for the Druid now to reach these gods once again.

The earlier figures are divided into the Children of Don and the Children of Lyr, and some speculate that these were the gods of the skies and those of the underworld, but it is more likely that they were simply of different (though overlapping) regions and times.

Of the key figures, one of the most commonly invoked in modern Druidry is Arianrhod, daughter of the mother goddess Don and of Beli Mawr, from whom all medieval dynasties claim descent. She is a goddess of the stars, in particular the constellation Corona Borealis, her *Caer* (castle) Arianrhod. She is called the Lady of

the Silver Wheel, and rules over birth and initiation. Two of her brothers are Govannon, the smith god, and the god of agriculture, Amaethon.

Gwyddion is both another brother and also Arianrhod's lover. He is a lord of the skies – the Milky Way is *Caer Gwyddion* – and a god of words, a Bard. They have three sons, the first being *Llew Llaw Gyffes*, possibly one of the gods Caesar called Mercury. 'Llew of the Skilful Hand' is a god of many skills and a favourite amongst modern Druids. Cursed by Arianrhod never to wed a human woman, he marries the beautiful *Blodeuwedd*, who was created by his uncles out of cut flowers, and who deceives him. Another of Arianrhod's sons, *Dylan*, god of the waves, is killed by her brother Govannon.

Of the Children of Lyr, *Manawyddan*, another god of the sea, was married to *Rhiannon*, the horse goddess and so also a goddess of the land. Her first husband was *Pwyll*, Prince of Dyfed and a lord of Annwn, the underworld. The god of the underworld is *Arawn*, a hunter of souls who rides his grey horse through the dusk with his pack of white hounds with alarming red ears.

*Bran* is a guardian of the land and a god of war, whose head was said to be buried on the white Mount of London, where the Tower of London now stands, protecting Britain from invaders. His sister, *Branwen*, is a goddess of love and death.

*Cerridwen*, holder of the cauldron of inspiration and rebirth, is a dark mother goddess and possibly the most important goddess in the Welsh medieval literature, referred to countless times in the poetry of the Bards and highly revered by modern Druids.

## **The Irish Gods**

The Irish deities have a different texture. Less influenced by Christianity, their stories are fuller and give a clearer history of the island, however mythological that may be. Where the stories of Britain or Ireland overlap we find battles between the two, and some of the gods are similar, possibly due to common influences but also reflecting immigrations from Ireland into Wales after the Roman withdrawal.

Many of the Irish gods now revered within Druidry are of *Tuatha de Danaan*, the Children of Danu, a superhuman race who at Beltane in some year of prehistory conquered the *Fir Bolg* and took the island as their own. When later they themselves were overwhelmed it is said that the *Tuatha* disappeared into the sacred hills of the Earth where they became the faeryfolk, the *Sidhe*. Others submerged beneath the waves, heading for the otherworlds of the western horizon.

*Dagda* is the father god, known as the Good God and Lord of Knowledge. He is coarser than the other members of the *Tuatha de Danaan*, implying that his 'father' status comes from his being an older god adopted into the pantheon. Dressed as a peasant, pot-bellied and dragging a vast club set on wheels, he is lord of life and death, offering abundance and rebirth from his vast cauldron of plenty. The *Dagda* is said to have mated at Samhain with the goddess *Boann* (of the River Boyne) and the *Morrigan*, a triple goddess of war and death (by the River Unius). *Anghus Og*, god of love, is a son of the *Dagda* and *Boann*.

In many ways similar to the *Dagda*, yet younger and more refined, with a spear

replacing the great wooden club, is Lugh, the ‘shining’ god, comparable with Lleu Llaw Gyffes. He is grandson of Balor, whose single eye burns with a ray of withering heat. Lugh’s son is Cu Chulainn, one of the great mythical heroes of the Irish texts and a guardian of the land.

Danu or Dana is a mother goddess of the land and a river goddess, similar to the British Don. Her name means ‘sacred gift’ and for some within the tradition it is used in the same way as the Welsh word *awen*, denoting inspirational energy. Some say Danu is also Brigid, a triple goddess of healing, poetry and smithcraft. Brigid is known by many similar names, slipping into Christianity as Saint Bridget, said to be the foster mother of Christ.

Among the other Irish gods, Bile is a god of death, some say husband to Danu. Mannanan Mac Lir is the sea god. Goibhnui is god of smithcraft and beermaking, similar to the Welsh Govannon. Macha is the wild fertility goddess of Ulster, a warrior and protector of the land.

## **Other Gods**

Not all modern Druids who work with non-local deities honour those of the Irish or British myths. The old Gallic gods are also acknowledged in some parts of the tradition. Esus, whose name means ‘lord’ or ‘master’, is said to be god of the sacred oak. Taranis is the god of thunder, a powerfully savage god said to have demanded human sacrifice. Teutates was a tribal god, a god of war whom both the Romans and many modern Pagans connect with Mars. Cernunnos, a horned fertility god of the wildwood, is one of the most popular gods in modern Paganism, while many Druids revere the Saxon gods, such as Woden and Freyja.

As Druids look into their ancestry of blood and spirit, gods creep into their practice from pantheons across the world, as well as those whose culture has spread to these islands. Classical deities, such as Mercury and Minerva, are not uncommonly revered in the tradition now.

In honouring both the spirits and gods of the land beneath our feet, and the gods of our ancestors and of our own soul, those we bring with us to this place, here and now, we find the guiding principle of Druid devotional practice.

An important element in the tradition is the goddess of the land, in particular through her relationship with the king. If the bond between them was strong, the goddess would bless the land with abundance, but if he dishonoured her she would cause devastation. A king who could not satisfy the goddess of his land was not a strong enough king and would quickly be challenged by one more powerful.

There are many stories in both the Irish and Welsh texts of how the bond between goddess and king was made. The sacred marriage between the land and the king was, in some cases, played out annually on ancient mounds, such as Tara. The Irish word for the marriage in many texts is *feis*, wrongly translated as ‘feast’ – it comes from *fo-ais*, meaning ‘to sleep with’. In the twelfth century Giraldus Cambrensis tells of the public ceremony in Ulster where the king mated with a white mare which was then ritualistically slaughtered, cut up and boiled. The king bathed in the broth while he

and those gathered ate the meat. Whether this actually happened or not, or how common an event it might have been, we cannot know.

The connection between horses and the goddess of the land is common, reminding us that Celtic culture found much of its strength in the use of horse in battle. One of the best known myths is that of Pwyll who, sitting on the mound of Arberth, is captivated by the sight of Rhiannon riding past on her white mare. The ancient chalk figure at Uffington, Wiltshire, is a particularly sacred place for many Druids, its white horse symbolizing the essential power of the land.

## **The Cauldron And The Dagger**

Few ritual tools, if any, are needed in Druid practice. Many Druids have a chalice for the consecrating water and a censer of ornate metal or simple stone. A chalice or drinking horn is commonly used for the mead, wine or ale that is shared with the gods and ancestors and all who have gathered for a ceremony. Some have a sacred dish on which offerings are given to the spirits of the dead and the spirits of nature, often a portion of the family meal. The use of altar cloths, candle sticks, drums, musical instruments and other tools is varied and is a non-essential part of an individual's expression of beauty and devotion.

There are two objects, however, which though not obligatory are commonly found, either materially or symbolically, in both Druid ritual and philosophy. These are the sword and the cauldron.

The relevance of these two objects as metalwork is important, reminding us how much the power of the ancient Celtic culture was dependent on their ironsmiths. The Pheryllt, those Druid masters of metal, may well have made the innovations that were a source of such strength to the people. To modern Druids, the ore of the earth, liquefied in fire, cooled in water and raised into the air, takes the sword through all four elements in their extreme. In terms of the human psyche, the work takes clarity and knowledge, courage and strength, desire and energy, to come into perfect form, also leading us through the four elements of growth and change, each in its heightened state.

The cauldron, itself formed by the elements, is also a holder of that process, physically and psychologically. For most it is perceived as a feminine tool, the black iron that holds the fluid suggesting the dark womb of a mother goddess, heated over the fires of transformation.

The holy grail which is the source of life, the focus of the most sacred knightly quest in the Arthurian myths, is understood to be another version of this cauldron of the goddess, here refined into something almost intangible, too exquisite and too potent to behold and carrying within it, once again, the power of life and death.

It is from the Arthurian myths, those late medieval stories of the ancient British gods disguised, that the sword is brought into modern Druidry. A symbol of masculine energy, it has been gently refined over the years and shines sharp and clean, hailing light and justice. The wide and rougher dagger that would have been the contemporary of the first strong iron cauldron has connotations of a pure and brutal

male force which, for many in the tradition now, is unacceptable. For these Druids, the qualities of Excalibur have taken its place.

In Druid ritual the sword is used, among other things, to call the peace, to cast the circle, for the swearing of oaths, and as a symbol of male deity and the guardianship of the land. The cauldron is more often physically found in Druidic rites that are shamanic or goddess focused, but its imagery is common, as a source of regeneration and a doorway into the soul.

### **Beyond And Within**

It is understood within Druidry that beyond the interaction with the spirits of nature and deity is pure life force. Yet because the essence of all existence is spirit, and life force is the energy at the core of each and every spirit, it is by journeying into the essence that we find the universal Oneness of being. For many in Druidry this is simply energy and so far beyond human comprehension that it can only be understood as such. Indeed, to give this force any characteristics at all would be to limit it, to dishonour it: its wholeness must to us remain as perfect mystery.

While some revere this dark unknown and its potential chaos, others in the tradition believe there is an intelligence and a pattern within this essential energy, clues of which can be found in all life. It is only by meditating at this level, by taking the light of consciousness into that darkness, that there is, they maintain, any hope of understanding existence.

The great forger, Iolo Morgannwg, offers us the concept of Circle of Existence. The source of these ideas is unknown, though it is easy to see now Morgannwg could have devised them himself, blending the philosophies at this time. Some within the tradition do use the model, none the less.

In the centre Iolo placed *annwn*, the Celtic underworld, the place of death and transformation within the magical darkness of the cauldron. Taking form, a spirit moves out of annwn to journey through the spirals of *abred*, where all creation exists, the elements, the plant realms, the animal worlds and human kind. It is understood that a period well spent in one form will take the soul to another ring of the spiral, to a higher consciousness of life, while abuse of the life force might spin the soul back down into the cauldron of annwn, there to be transformed to begin over again. Beyond the spirals of abred is the light of *gwynvid*, the realm of those who have broken free, the wise ones and the many gods. Beyond this circle is the perfect mystery of *ceugant*, the place of Oneness.

It is also possible to understand annwn to be the infinite darkness of space, the spiral of abred being our worlds that spin within it, *gwynvid* the guiding spirit within abred, and *ceugant* the spark at the essential still centre.

### **Perfect Exchange**

Relationship is the key to the way Druids work with their deities. While there is clear acknowledgement of the gods' power, there is no sense of authority or hierarchy between gods and humankind. Neither are the gods thought of as infallible; after all, it

is only humans who work with the ethics of human society and, while the gods can clarify our vision, they may have very different and even unacceptable ideas as to what should happen. Even if we look at a goddess of nature, an Earth goddess, it is clearly understood that her priorities are focused on her own perpetual regeneration rather than any concept of the survival of the human or any other species.

A Druid will strive to enchant a deity with whom she'd like to work. Giving offerings of reverence to nature and to the ancestors as a whole, she will endeavour to remain open, waiting for a god or goddess to come to her. After that first connection has been made, the process is then about building a strong relationship with that deity, learning through respect to understand the divine power and learning through devotion how it is that she can give to that god of herself.

There is surrender, yet no sense of submission. The Druid will be uncovering too, through a growing clarity and consciousness, what it is that she wants, if her deity can provide that and how she can accept it. It may be protection, love, security, freedom, healing, teaching: all the issues which disintegrate when we are separated from our own power and that of the universal life force, perceiving ourselves to be disconnected from the web of spirit. Thrown into the crises of scarcity because of that separation, we might be needing food, money or just a parking space. But more often than not, within the tradition nothing more specific is requested than simple inspiration. The Druid knows that, with the gift of divine inspiration received, she will have all she needs: the idea or solution and the energy to make it happen.

To fully accept any gift, though, we need to have given sufficiently in return. Our relationships with the gods are built on this need for perfect exchange. We offer of ourselves, both through sacrifice and through joy, giving back to the gods the creativity born of our inspiration. As our offerings are accepted, so we succeed in holding the attention of the deity, thereby nourishing the relationship. And as the relationship develops, the flow of the divine energy which we are offered also grows, as do our love and trust, together with our ability to give ... and to receive.

### ***Awen***

Reaching deep into the beauty and power of creation, through the natural world and the ancestors, the Druid offers her prayers of love and respect, opening to receive the flow of divine energy. It is in this practice of pure devotion that she touches and is touched by spirit, and the result is the sharing of energy.

The deep sensuality of that experience is emphasized by the understanding that it is born of the relationship with the spirits of nature, with the spirits of her ancestors and her gods, spirits which are most often resident within or present themselves through the natural world, be it a river or tree, the wind or a sacred mound, a cat or lover. The depth of experience is amplified by the depth of relationship the Druid has forged with that spirit, offering the opportunity for deeper trust and therefore a more profound intimacy and surrender.

The experience of communion, of sharing energy with spirit, of opening to receive the *awen*, intensifies the Druid's perception and experience of the worlds within which she lives, because of the heightened awareness caused by the increased flow of

energy. This in itself opens the mind to different levels of reality, broadening the perception and experience of life as a whole.

Spirit to spirit, consciously we reacknowledge how we are connected, tree to bird to cat to woman to man, through the land, through time, to our ancestors and gods. Consciously, with respect, we allow the perfect fluidity to flow once more, unchecked, revitalizing our souls and all the world.

*After all you have read so far, together with your changing perception and experience of life, do you sense there is a deity with whom you'd like to work? It may be a character from the myths, a guardian spirit or elemental of the natural world. From all you intuit about this god, create an altar to honour it. How does it connect you to the land you live in or where you have lived before? How does it connect to your ancestors? Make your offerings every day, gifts of your inner creativity, your soul and your life, and wait, open to all you would receive. Listen.*