

Chapter One

What is Druidry?

If you really want to know, stop reading, just for a while.

And into a knapsack slip a little food, bread, nuts, an apple or two, whatever you feel you need, and something to drink. Dress for the weather, taking a sweater or waterproof if necessary. Then stop for a moment. Look around you.

Walking slowly through your home, notice everything that expresses who you are, what have you created, what is in process, what you are hoping to be or be seen as. Notice what is of value to you and what is not. Choose something which embodies, actually or symbolically, that which you most value, that which has given you the most, allowing you to find the skills and certainty that you know you have. You must be ready to let go of it, to give it away; yet it must mean enough to you for the act of the releasing it to be profound, even difficult.

Put it into the knapsack or into your pocket and leave the house. Whether by train, car, bicycle or on foot, make your way out of the buildings, the tarmac and concrete, into a landscape that is as close to the wild natural world as you can reach, away from roads, noise, crowds, away from the fields of sprayed crops and rusted metal.

Wherever you find yourself is your own story. It may be on the open moors, with the buzz of bees in the heather and the wind chasing itself around your clothes. It may be in the forest, with the twigs snapping beneath your feet, the smell of leafmould infusing through you. It may be in the park, beneath a willow at a pond's edge, the purring of the pigeons lulling you, the city that holds you gently disappearing into calm. We each have a different perception of what is wild and natural (yet safe enough to be alone in). Wherever it is, stay there, for a whole day, or a few days, walking, watching, feeling, sitting, listening – to yourself, to the world around you.

Listening, in this sense, isn't a matter of effort. It is a process of simply becoming aware, without judgement, without having to react or respond. And as we listen, our bodily senses begin to awake. We start consciously to breathe through our pores, to smell with our skin, to observe and feel with our subtle body of energy. And in doing so, the effects of our presence begin to make less impact on the world around us.

Spend some time listening in this way, and when you stop to eat, share your food, openly with gratitude, by giving more than a little back to the earth, leaving a pile in a hidden place where it can be found by the little creatures and the faery folk, scattering crumbs over the ground, pouring a good drink into the soil or sand.

When you feel that your presence has begun gently to merge with the environment through which you wander, allow your mind to ponder upon your quest, your desire to know more about the old tradition of Druidry. What is your motivation? What do

you hope to gain? What are you expecting? How might it change you? Who would you hope to meet and what would they be like? What would be asked of you?

If you are listening with an open mind, quiet from blending your sense of self with the natural world, the answers that emerge will be your first taste of Druidry. Woven through them will be clarity that will teach you more than any written words. Through them will emerge, too, an understanding of the first step you must take on your journey into the tradition.

The time has come to leave your gift, both as an offering to the earth which nourishes you and to those who have travelled the path before you, to the Druid ancestors who will guide you upon the way.

How the gift is given is up to you. It may be snuggled in the crook of a tree, thrown into water or left at a charity shop on the way home. The nature of your gift and the nature of your world, together with a little common sense and environmental sensitivity, will make the possibilities clear. The important part is the attitude with which it is given, and the letting go.

And if you don't find, in honesty, that you have reached a point where you can give your gift, consciously releasing it with thanks, then come back another day, and again and again. But don't read anymore until it is done.

The Old Fellow

Somewhere in our minds stands that old Druid we have all taken on board as the original, the prototype. He is slim, around 70, a little under six foot tall, with long white hair, unkempt, and a longer white beard that tapers to a point. He is wearing a simple off-white robe with a long dark cape around his shoulders, the loose folds of a hood, his feet in sandals. In his hand may be a sprig of mistletoe, a golden sickle or an ornate wooden staff.

The details may vary, according to our own intuition as to what characteristics express the qualities he must surely have, but whether a little taller, a little rounder with dark eyes or blue, he carries aspects of sensitive and powerful older men who have walked through our lives, together with images from story books and cartoons we have read, movies we have seen.

Whether he is fair or dark, the old Druid is a source of universal and poignant wisdom. Moving with an otherworldly serenity, he blends gentleness and age with an absolute invulnerability. For many he seems to be an embodiment of the lands of Britain, Ireland and Brittany, proud with their dignity, rolling hills, wild moors and stormy nights, chaotic like their hedgerows, and as bloody-minded as can be. We sense he could talk with the birds, call up the thunder, stand fearless before any man. Above all this old Druid who potters around our minds, rubbing his chin and thinking deeply, speaking his truths with a touch of irony, is almost certainly and definitively a *he*.

The Reality

That archetypal figure even plays his role amongst the growing numbers who practice Druidry today. For a small number the old fellow's image might be a part of the incentive to search out the tradition, firing the imagination, but for many Druids it is what lies beneath the old man's appearance – his strength of spirit, his certainty and flexibility, his connection with the natural world, his sensitivity and wisdom – that is a powerful source of inspiration. Some people might admit to childhood fascinations about Druids awakened by tales of Merlin, Gandalf or Getafix, all of which link into the old wizard wiseman of our collective cultural heritage. And when someone who knows nothing of modern Druidry is told that there are actually Druids still practising the faith today, it is often that image that springs to mind.

Yet when we look at modern Druids, the picture is quite different. We are faced with an enormous range which, as more and more people discover the tradition, is growing ever wider and richer in its variation. The number of Orders and small groups is also growing, each inspired by and expressing a different facet of the tradition, each with different priorities, different spiritual and ritual texture and tones.

The underlying qualities of the old fellow are still there, like a scent in the air, but he is seldom an obvious presence. A Druid now is just as likely to be a woman as a man, and may come from any social, religious or educational background, may have any economic status, be of any sexuality and any race or nationality. People of every age are coming into the tradition, from the children of Druids to the oldest members of society. Urban or rural, the Druid might be an environmental lawyer, a primary school teacher, an art student, a hospital ward sister, an accountant, someone living in a twigloo on a road protest camp or running a computer systems consultancy from Budleigh Salterton or Leeds...

There is no element of 'evangelism' within Druidry, so that while Druids would hope to live their beliefs with integrity, most would not broadcast the nature of their spirituality. Many work or live alongside colleagues who have no idea that they are practising Druids. So the Druid may be the executive with her laptop, or the lady serving in the cafeteria, or the bloke at goods inward with the funny moustache, the marketing director who seems so laid back, the photographer at the wedding, the counsellor, the girlfriend's mom...

These diverse people might celebrate their spirituality in huge open rites or in small private gatherings or joyfully alone. A Druid ceremony might be wild and dramatic, a gathering at night in the depths of the forest, with colour and chanting and drums and firelight, or it might be poignant in the depth of its stillness, thoughtful and precise, in a candle lit room reverberating with the words of old poetry. Modern Druids may also change as they prepare for their rituals, festivals and prayers, the briefcase or toolkit replaced by a harp or chalice, the mind opened wider for the dance of the rite, the everyday suit or jeans laid aside for robes or other special clothes of blue and green, or red and gold, or many colours, often made of undyed natural cloth, some plain, others beautifully ornate.

Whatever the celebration, a key goal is living and breathing the philosophy. So the old fellow who is the Druid archetype of our culture is as understood by the lad sitting in

a pool of calm, playing upon his harp in a dark green robe beneath the old beech trees, as he is by the woman who meditates before her immaculate altar, sliding into her clearest concept of the perfect light, in a robe of white, edged with violet and red, pondering on the problem she has been asked to resolve. Yet what they have both taken from this archetype, consciously or not, to inspire their expression of a spirituality which they both call 'Druidry' might be quite different. What of the priestess with feathers in her hair who walks the moors to an ancient stone circle, chanting to her goddess, laughing with the elves and sprites that run along beside her? She has a connection with the archetype which is different again, as is that of the priest who, in a headdress of antlers, stands at the edge of the field of swaying barley and calls with an Earth-shaking voice to his god of the glorious sun.

From the sage to the mage, the hermit or the court advisor, the Wildman of the woods and the village healer, the balladeer and seer, the 'Druid' images held by those now coming into the tradition are almost as varied as the Druids themselves.

So what is it bringing all these people together as active students and celebrants of one tradition? What is Druidry?

The Land Beneath the Mist

The areas of common understanding where Druids join together are those which are fundamental to modern Druidry as a whole. It is these that guide the Druids' behaviour, ethics and relationships. When it comes to ritual practice, the common ground is often less obvious, though deeply implicit.

To discover the essence of Druidry we must go further than the archetype of the old Druid in white with his sparkling eyes, reaching back to the land from which he emerged. Only in journeying to this place can we hope to understand what it is that inspires such a faith to be practised still, with its wealth of individuality, creativity and celebration.

Druidry is a land that has always existed, yet for thousands of years it has lain beneath a mist. Whether it has ever been without it can only be speculation, a dream memory of the soul. It is a land which knows the mist and is content with it. It is not a comfortable place for an incarnate soul to live, though it is possible to travel there. This mist is not impenetrable, but the journey can be difficult: visibility is often minimal (though at times suddenly and startlingly clear) and there are dangers.

If we were to travel to this land from our own, flying perhaps on the back of a merlin falcon, we would be best not to attempt a landing through the mist. However, over the few last millennia, various regions of the land, most often areas of high country, hills and mountains, have broken through the mist. They look, from the merlin's back, like islands in a milky grey sea. The vegetation may be similar, as may the wildlife, and if we are sensitive enough to feel the energy, the atmosphere, we might believe there to be some ancient connection.

When an area does emerge out of the mist, the word spreads amongst those who are interested in this land and it is visited by many people eager to travel through its old

forests and meadows, across its moorland and mountains, discovering ancient trackways or creating new ones.

Some parts that emerge don't stay clear for long, but disappear beneath the mist again, to be visited only by mystics and madmen.

Some areas remain clear for hundreds of years, so that those who visit change the landscape by their presence, taming the wild unknown, making it more accessible for others to follow. Other regions are claimed by those who have visited them and high walls are built as the land is taken into exclusivity. Some are uninhabitable, too high or unstable, but the view of them fills the onlooker with awe.

From whichever way you approach this land, wherever you touch your feet upon the Earth, it is not possible to see the whole country. Yet from journeys taken across the different regions that have enjoyed the clear air, and from descents made into and through the mist, we can come to an understanding about the nature of the land.

Upon this merlin's back, if you will join me, we will catch a glimpse of what lies beneath the mist. And, if you would listen well, while we make our journey, I will speak of what I know to be below that grey and magical sea.

The Problems with Finding a Definition

Within a spiritual tradition where there are so many different views it is almost impossible to find an all-encompassing definition. Groups have gathered to discuss this very issue, both serious and with ale-fed humour, both by studying the old Irish Brehon Laws and by studying their navels. But there is simply no sacred scripture which all Druids can refer to. There is no one God, or even one pantheon, which all Druids revere as the divine guiding force. There are no prophets who have laid down great truths together with ritual obligations – just mixtures of historical and mythical heroes.

In many ways, Druidry is even more complex than Paganism or another broad spirituality such as Hinduism. It is a truly polytheistic faith, within which can be found space and honour for any deity or any concept of deity, together with their priests, devotees and philosophers. There are many within the tradition who call themselves Christian, while some assert that Druidry is not a religion at all, not even necessarily a spirituality, but simply a philosophy of living.

The majority of Druids, however, are in one way or another Pagan. In making that statement, though, it is necessary to clarify Paganism as it is most widely used within the tradition.

The notion that a Pagan is anyone who does not subscribe to one of the three monotheistic Middle Eastern religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam is now disregarded, even though it is still found in many dictionaries. The idea that a Pagan is a rural (as opposed to urban) dweller is closer, but still a little narrow and misleading. The more accurate definition is that a Pagan is someone who reveres the spirits and deities of his local environment – of the earth beneath his feet, of his spring or source

of water, his woodland and rivers, his fields and buildings, his sun and moon and rain, and more; of everything that makes up the world that exists immediately around him.

The majority of Druids, whoever their gods may be, would accept that this is a key aspect of their practice. While some might, for example, worship the spirit of a spring as a deity, one of many gods, and others would understand the spirit to be an aspect of a higher god or a creative force, any practising Druid would be sure to make offerings and prayers of thanks each time they visited that sacred place.

An Earth – Ancestor Spirituality

It is also possible to describe Druidry as an Earth Ancestor spirituality. Even if we accept the ideas that Druidry was brought to Britain by ancient Egyptians whose knowledge was given them by refugee Atlanteans, which to many seems rather a wild soul dream, the essence of the faith is still the honouring of the fertile Earth and the father/mother bringers of life and wisdom.

The more widely accepted possible origins of the faith take us back into the primitive cultures of Neolithic Europe and to the motivating drive behind any religion: the need to understand the world around us in our search for survival, together with some way of assuring the future through the fertility of the land and tribe. In this, Druidry connects with all the other Earth – ancestor traditions around the globe, such as the Native American, the Maori and Huna, the Aboriginal, the Romany and the indigenous spiritualities of Africa and Asia.

Science may have given us answers to many of our forebears' questions and crises, but honouring the mysteries and manifestations of life is still a profoundly sacred and rewarding act, and it lies deep within the heart of modern Druidry.

Good Boots and a Compass

Understanding Druidry in this way clarifies the honouring of the ancestors and honouring of the land as the two fundamental points of the tradition.

The ancestors begin with our parents and go back as far as we can imagine. Many of us know little or nothing of our forebears, our lineage blurring beyond our grandparents and disappearing into mud with the turn of the last century, but to the Druid this is not a constraint. The ancestors exist as a people in spirit and include not only our bloodline, but also those who have lived and died on the land beneath us, however long or short a time we ourselves (or our bloodline) have been living there too. Our spiritual ancestry is also honoured; that is, all those who have practised within the spiritual tradition, our teachers and guides, both living and dead.

Furthermore, there are Druids whose blood is not of these islands, whose ancestors worshipped different gods in different lands and different climates, and it is understood that this must influence the practice of those Druids.

The gods of our ancestors are also honoured, as they too are a part of what has made us who we are.

As within Druidry there is a general acceptance of the transmigration of souls, without limitation of one's bloodline or indeed one species, the act of giving to the ancestors is done with a conscious understanding that in doing so the Druid is also giving to, and honouring, the spirits of his descendants, through his blood, the Earth and the tradition.

The practice of the faith is also affected by the immediate environment, for Druids will respond to the Earth around them, listening to its needs and the songs and stories of the spirits within it. So, a Druid born and brought up on the Lancashire moors will have a different practice from one who was born in the heat of Florida and now lives in Kent, or, indeed, a Druid from north Wales who now lives in Japan.

The way in which Druids consider the Earth sacred varies according to their concept of deity. Most Druids are animists, understanding that all aspects of nature are vibrant with spirit, yet while many Druids acknowledge some spirits to be divine or embodied by a deity, such as river spirits, the moon, a forest and so on, others understand them as simply a creative expression or an aspect of a higher god or goddess. All Druids honour the Earth, though for many their work is confined to their spiritual practise and their locality, while others are involved in global environmentalism.

Two effects, which in themselves are an important part of defining Druidry, emerge from the practice of honouring the ancestors and the land. The Druid will accept without reservation another person's individual experience, their perspective, their gods and their spiritual practice (so long as this does not dishonour the Earth or the ancestors): perfect tolerance. And the Druid relates to every creature, of rock or wood or leaf, the finned and feathered folk, the winged ones and the four legged, the crawlers and slitherers, the hairy and smooth-skinned ones, as well as human folk, primarily as spirit and therefore with an equal right to life, respect and dignity: perfect equality.

Understanding these elements, the land and the ancestors, as two powerful basics of modern Druidry, perhaps we can stop for a moment. Think about them. How much do you honour your parents? What do you know of your blood ancestors and of the ancestors of the Earth beneath your feet? In what way do you or could you honour them, acknowledging their spirit, their experience, their gifts? And what of the teachers who have been your guides, with the lessons that were hard as well as those where you succeeded?

What too of your attitude towards the Earth? Think about how you have received from the Earth and in what way you have given thanks for that, in what way have you consciously reciprocated, giving back.

Then slide those basics on as if they were sturdy walking boots, and tie the laces well. As you travel into the tradition, they will give you sure footing. And looking up at the road ahead, take as a compass the tenets of tolerance and equality. They will bring you back to the path, should doubt cloud your way.

The Journey

My first suggestion was to stop reading, to get out and walk the land, leaving behind our civilised world to find the world of nature where the vibrations of humanity are not omnipresent, wild spaces where, no longer distracted by the threat of others' judgment, or by our inhibitions and the things we feel we ought to do, we can better feel ourselves, beneath the masks and the roles we play, spaces where we are strong enough to consider how we can change and flow.

In your wilderness you gave an offering of yourself, both to the earth in thanks and to those Druids who are the ancestors and guardians of the tradition, expressing your desire and commitment to discover more. Such offerings blend our celebration of who we are and what we have been given with our willingness to sacrifice something of ourselves, a part of our strength and abundance, and they help us to see more clearly both what we have and how we are willing to change.

It is in the art of nature, in the colours of the sunset, in the dragonfly's dance, in the thoughts that glide through us as we watch the horizon through the grass, feeling the Earth beneath our body, listening, awake, that the spirit of Druidry glows. The Earth itself, with the tides and cycles of nature, is the holy scripture of the tradition and the source of our understanding of it. These words are no more than a rough map and field guide, with suggestions and ideas about what might be seen along the way.

There is no need to struggle to believe in anything, nor to love and follow blindly. Druidry is a spiritual journey of the individual's soul, one that honours each unique vision and expression. It inspires ideas which are understood to be simply ideas, until experience forms them into knowing.

Whom Might We Meet Along The Way?

Any path into Druidry will at some stage lead the traveller to encounter other Druids and seekers. Treading the path alone is often a necessary stage of the journey, but to join others can be both rewarding and instructive.

While those the traveller might meet may come from any part of the spectrum of Druidic expression, they may also be working on very different levels within the tradition. The mystical spirituality at the core of Druidry is a place of profound personal dedication which inspires the Druid to focus his whole life into his faith. Around the core exists the wider community of Druidry where the intensity and discipline are not so demanding. This outer body has emerged over the past ten years with the huge growth in interest in Druidry and the greater accessibility offered by open and public ceremonies. This has allowed many to get involved who would not be ready or interested in the mystical journey, preferring to leave that to the priesthood, yet who want to learn a little more, to gather together to celebrate the festivals and rites, and strive to live by Druidic principles.

Some of the Druids we may meet along the way, however, are not part of the new and growing body of modern Druidry. They are guides and teachers that we reach through the subtle senses of our minds. They exist in the inner worlds, through the mists. The offering you gave at the beginning of your journey, if sincerely given, will have

inspired such a teacher to take an interest in you and your path of discovery, on whatever level of curiosity or commitment you choose to travel. If you are willing to be open, of heart and mind, to listen and to hear, to see a different world through a Druidic perspective, that guide will remain with you. You may be aware of them – either already or in a time to come.

Whoever we meet, it is worth remembering that any individual, in body or in spirit, does not represent any other part of the tradition or the community other than themselves.

Where Does The Path Go?

Druidry is a sacred journey of discovering the beauty and sanctity of all life, both physical and spiritual. Yet it is not enough for the Druid simply to know that all creation is sacred: the path leads beyond that point to a place where they can reach into that divine reality. The journey of the Druid is to feel the touch of the gods, in whatever way they perceive them, by reaching – as body and spirit – into the spirit that vitalises the world.

One of the keys of the tradition is the awen. This is an old Welsh word which can be translated as ‘flowing spirit’ and is understood to mean the flow of divine inspiration which comes at that point of exquisite contact, pouring out from deity and into a Druid. With the inspiration comes the energy, the empowerment needed for the Druid to allow that sacred inspiration to pour through them into creativity. The endless task of the Druid is to perfect this process.

The nature of the creativity inspired by this blissful connection with the divine comes in many forms, according to the skills of the individual, his own needs or those of the person or people for whom he is working. Poetry and music, the telling of stories and magical myths, are the most commonly associated works of creative expressions that emerge out of Druidry. Others’ inspiration comes through art, healing, teaching, divination, gardening, politics and indeed any aspect of modern life where there is the potential for the freeing of the souls true and full creativity.