

Chapter Three

The Spectrum Of Druidry

The majority of those who study and work within the faith do so with an acceptance of its drifting origins and evolution, in a land which has been washed by so many cultural tides. The uncertainty is smoothed by the understanding that Druidry has always continued, evolving through the millennia, existing on inner planes of the human collective psyche and in the worlds of spirit beyond the mist.

Though many in the tradition study within a recognized structure, there is a strong belief that our deepest teaching comes directly from those inner worlds. In the process of becoming a Druid, we learn to access our teachers in spirit, those who hold the ageless wisdom, together with the stories of our people, the land and our heritage.

It is not surprising then that within modern Druidry there is such a wide spectrum of belief and practice. For the newcomer to the faith, any personal inkling about what Druidry is might be entirely thwarted by encountering one Druid and warmly affirmed in meeting another.

With the understanding that each individual, with his own sources of inspiration, his own archetype of 'Druid', his own inner teachers and guides, will hold an independent view of the faith, it is a difficult task to divide the spectrum into larger groups. Yet the desire to find others who share similar perspectives, with its potential for spiritual kinship and the intimacy of common experience, does bring people together.

By looking at these shared perspectives we can define some distinct groups, though it must be understood that individuals are likely to meander across any boundaries I may suggest.

The Strength Of The Celtic

Though the Iron Age Celtic people may be the first culture of these lands that left enough evidence for us to grasp any idea of their ways of life, it is the medieval Irish and Welsh texts that have had the most direct influence on wide areas of modern Druidry.

To understand these stories and poems we must go to the texts themselves. Nowadays there is a good range in various translations. Another useful guide is to look back at the way in which the Bardic tradition may have developed.

As a part of the Druid caste, the Bards were supported by their communities. While the Druid held the power, performing ceremonies and rites as judge and magician, the role of the Bard was quite different. It was his task to know by heart the histories of the people and the land, and to recite these for the tribal king or chief, or any who would pay according to skill and status. He would remind the community of oaths made, commitments declared, battles won, triumphant quests. He would affirm

through the stories the connection of the tribe with the sacred nature of its land, its mountains and springs, tombs, rivers and mounds, the animals and earth spirits, and, most importantly perhaps, the tribes' connection with the gods, through genealogies which took the bloodline of the king back to the old gods themselves. The Bard was the force that gave the people their identity.

As the power of the Druids was diminishing under the repression of the new order, some of their old wisdom was robed in the Bardic tradition, held in the stories, the myths of the people and their land.

For some modern Druids these tales are a source of profound guidance and spiritual inspiration. In many ways they act as a link between this eve of the twenty first century and the pre-Christian Druids. They are rich with intriguing clues. In the Irish stories in particular, there are many tales of Druids, though whether these are drawn from an authentic memory of Druidry or are an expression of a medieval fantasy of Druids we cannot tell. The Graeco-Roman influence is certainly underlying, the Christianity often an obvious overlay. The earliest surviving Irish manuscripts are from the twelfth century, though these contain clues that the stories were written a few hundred years before.

The earlier Welsh poems, rather than the stories, contain references to Druids, though in a vaguer, less specific way than the Irish, as if alluding to an older, more distant memory. Here the Bards who tell the tales are working on what feels more like a romantic reconstruction.

Find and read some of the old Irish and Welsh stories (suggestions can be found in Chapter Nine), getting a feel for both cultures and the differences and similarities between them. If the opportunity arises, hear a modern Bard telling the stories, perhaps in a traditional way, accompanied by a harp. Do they awake some part of your soul with a deep familiarity? Does the Irish feel more comfortable or the Welsh?

Choose one story and read it again and again. What does this story say to you, what does it teach you? How? Recite it aloud. Take it to a place that seems appropriate to the story, perhaps by a river, a hazel tree, a well, and tell it there again. Allow it to slip into your memory. How does it feel to hold it now inside you?

There is an element within modern Druidry which craves this sense of Celtic identity. In the search for self, for belonging, for roots, there are many who seek the Celtic and do so in the most part through the medieval literature. Finding inner strength through a personal connection with an ancient heritage can be an important part of the journey, offering that intimacy of shared experience and community of spirit which is felt to be deeply rooted, whether the individual has a blood link to a modern Celtic land or merely a soul allegiance.

The nature of the texts offers a great deal of scope. The images in the stories and poems can be interpreted in many ways and, if taken together with snatches of art, inscriptions, temples and ancient monuments, offer the seeker a wealth of information from which each soul can find inspiration, beauty, strength, social equality and tribal cohesion - whatever we are searching for as individuals - to regain and re-inject into our world.

There are areas of modern Druidry where the process is an active assertion to protect the Celtic identity, and energy is invested in reinvigorating the Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic languages, their folklore and traditions, their old magical arts and medicines, the stories and poems of the old tribes and their lands, as an assertion against the spread of what is seen to be the monochrome global culture of the English/American.

There are also those within the faith for whom the journey is an intellectual quest to discover the authentic nature of Druidry. These Druids mainly reject any work later than the medieval texts, which they use very specifically, extracting what is useful and relevant to our era and creating a modern Druidry which is deemed to have an authentic ancient base. Needless to say, a great deal of the darker side, the elements of sorcery and sacrifice particularly evident in the Irish stories, is left behind.

A greater proportion of those within the Druid tradition relate to the Celtic literature as works of creativity, not potential sources of authenticity, content that modern Druidry needs no validation from the past, having evolved naturally into its present state, always existing on the inner planes.

There is an understanding that the Celtic soul dwells within all who live in lands where the Celts settled, and is not restricted to the farthest reaches of Europe's western seaboard which the Romans, Christians, Jutes and Danes, Angles and Saxons barely touched. It also dwells within all those who have blood and soul connections to these lands, though they might live elsewhere. With the understanding that Celtic was a culture and not a race, the majority of Druids find no valid base for exclusivity.

With the medieval texts, together with all that is understood to be of the ancient Celts, are found qualities that inspire courage and equality, creativity and respect, the profound connection to the Earth and to the tribal ancestors. It is through the search for these qualities that many modern Druids walk a path that leads them to the spirit of the Celtic people, or what is felt to be the embodiment of all that is Celtic, and that is the Celtic deities.

Not all Druids hold Celtic gods as their principal deities and not all Pagans who revere Celtic gods are Druids. Wiccans, traditional Witches and those who follow shamanic paths may all work with Celtic gods, vitalising their connections to the land and their ancestry. What makes them other than Druids may simply be their archetypes, definitions and guides – or their tradition, energy and practice, which may be very different indeed.

Yet even amongst those Druids who do not hold Celtic gods as their main deities, the Celtic is widely acknowledged and honoured as a key influence in the evolution of these lands and the development of the faith.

The Christian Angle

A significant proportion of Druids do not identify themselves as primarily Pagan. There are those who declare Druidry is not a spirituality or religion, and many hold that it is a path of mysticism, a wisdom school, within which one can hold any religious belief. This allows for Druids who are purely searching through the mind,

without an acknowledgement of spirit other than as life force energy. A good number of these non-pagans blend the philosophies of Druidry with those of Christianity.

For a Druid Christian, the Earth and all creation is an expression of the deity as presence, and therefore deeply sacred. While there are Christians who acknowledge this without moving into Druidry, others find that the philosophy significantly strengthens and broadens their faith. Deepening the acceptance, within the framework of Christianity, of the power and Beauty of the divine gift of the physical, there is opened up also the respect for sexuality, for birth, our genetic inheritance and with it reverence for our ancestors. The Earth, its flora and fauna, humanity and all creation become an altar to God. In an age when environmentalism, the importance of family and community, interest in folk traditions and natural medicine are all increasing, the point at which Druidry and Christianity meet becomes clearer.

The openness of the Druidic language, which allows for any colour and mixture of god and ceremony within its essential philosophy, invites the Christian to relate his own imagery into Druidry. There are many points of meeting; for instance, the Mabon. The sacred child, the sun reborn in the darkness of Midwinter, is comfortably woven with the birth of Jesus. The importance of divine sacrifice is also shared, acknowledged in Druidry at the harvest with the death of the corn god, the cycle of decay and regeneration through the seasons of the year, and the process of dying to the self in the mystical journey to inner peace.

Christians within Druidry come from many different churches, from the simplicity of Quakerism to the highly ritualistic, from the focus on Jesus to the honouring of a thousand saints, and each interacts with the Druid philosophy in a different way, each creating a different Druidic practice. Some strands of Christianity are easily plaited with Druidry, such as those where particular saints act as spirit guardians at, for example, healing springs.

There are some Druid orders who only accept Christians into their membership, while others would accept non-pagans. The vast majority, however, are not restrictive in this way and, indeed, many Druids actively work on the borders where the traditions meet, bridging the gaps and addressing the issues where misunderstandings have arisen. Interfaith conferences held over the last five years have inspired an increasing tolerance and understanding, not only at the border points but also more deeply within each tradition.

A number of those who blend the two do so from a point outside the Christian Church, although remaining within its faith. These Christians or Christic Druids retain a clear understanding of the Christian deity, honouring Jesus Christ as the saviour, the key and the gateway in whichever way they are most accustomed to or inspired by, yet stepping away from the structure of the religion which they regard as political.

For the wider Pagan and polytheistic Druid community, these Christic Druids are acknowledged and respected simply as revering another of the numerous gods.

Some Christians within Druidry describe themselves as of the Celtic Church.

The concept that a unified and peaceful Celtic Christianity existed in these islands long before the arrival of Roman Catholicism is one that was contrived in the sixteenth century by those seeking to justify the Reformation. The Protestant reformers claimed that the older church, which had been overwhelmed by Rome, was a simpler and purer form of Christianity, and therefore by rejecting Catholicism they were simply embracing an older native version of the faith.

It is understood now that this was a political argument with no foundation. The Christianity that did reach Britain and Ireland from the fifth century CE and before the spread of the Holy Roman Empire was a chaotic and fractious affair, filled with evangelical fervour and a horror of Paganism, of nature and sexuality. The idea that many Druids and Pagans were naturally and easily drawn to the faith because it resembled their own is an extension of the myth of the purer, peaceful Celtic Church. The conversion of kings took place as an acknowledgement of a more powerful god of battle, not a move to a god of love.

For those eager to find inspiration within Christianity and through the earliest texts, the tale of the Celtic saints, men and women who struggled and succeeded in finding peace and harmony in this era of intense violence and uncertainty, are a rich source of inspiration.

The notion of Celtic Christianity is nowadays an issue quite separate from the imaginary ideal of a romantic pre-Catholicism. For many it is that part of the liberal Church which stands on the borderline with Druidry and Earth spirituality, acknowledging the history of these islands, bringing to the fore the saints whose faith influenced our ancestors, honouring the power and beauty of the land and seas.

Many enter into Paganism and Druidry because of a negative attitude towards Christianity. Others avoid Druidry, believing it to be a Pagan religion. Before continuing your reading, consider where you stand on this. Where are you coming from, in terms of childhood and social conditioning, experience and beliefs? Spend some time becoming aware of your perspective.

The Next Wave Of Influences

For some modern Druids the old Celtic culture and the medieval literature have no direct influence on their faith whatsoever. Instead of moving back to the Celtic as a source of their Druidry, they acknowledge the later Anglo-Saxon settlers, studying their Germanic language, deities, myths and poems, and their magical tradition, with its philosophies and tools, such as the runic alphabet.

The understanding is that, if Druids were the priesthood of the Celtic people - who were the Iron Age Europeans – then the Saxons were simply a later version of the Celts. The Saxons who invaded Britain from the fifth century were still Pagan, while the Celtic kings had been Christianised, giving another reason for those who take this path to work within it. The battle between the ‘red dragon’ of the British Celts and the ‘white dragon’ of the Saxons was also one between Christianity and Paganism.

The Anglo Saxon influence was not the only one which spread into these lands during the medieval period. The Nordic religions of the Danes, the Vikings, also made its

impact, and though most who revere the Nordic gods do so through the Icelandic Asatru or Odinistic Religions, there are also Druids whose principal inspiration comes through these threads.

Again, it must be understood that this is not seen as the faith of an invading source so much as simply another strand of a pan-European culture that was constantly evolving, adapting and changing with the movement of peoples. A bloodline does not remain in one location, the tribe moving on to different lands, taking its ancestral knowing, its gods and traditions with it, and – if Pagan – interweaving these forces with those of the land in which it settles.

The Romantic Revival

From the sixteenth century there came an increasing interest in antiquarianism, with a growing number of books being printed, including those of Classical writers. Images were being bought back to Britain from the colonies about indigenous peoples of Africa and the Americas, and people were becoming interested in discovering more of their own roots.

Curiosity in the past was further generated by such as John Aubrey, who in the late seventeenth century made a detailed study of stone monuments such as Avebury and Stonehenge. He was the first to realise that the circles were pre-Roman and, with no scientific dating system, made the connection between these sites and the Druids mentioned in Classical texts. As the eighteenth century dawned, a romantic ideal of our ancient roots was being nurtured on every level, adorned with art, poetry and music.

It was 20 years after John Aubrey's death that another antiquarian, John Toland, is said to have gathered together Druids and Bards from across Britain, Ireland and Brittany for what is asserted to be the rite of inauguration of the Mother Grove of the oldest Order still in existence. Though probably mythical, this ceremony was said to have taken place on Primrose Hill, London, at the Autumn Equinox of 1717. Toland was a friend of Aubrey, who was said to be in contact with a 'Grove of Mount Haemus' in Oxford, which may also be mythical.

The successor to Toland as a key figure of the revival was William Stukeley, whose work on stone circles was influential in the development of modern archaeology, and after him came a series of eccentric men, all of whom expressed clearly the intellect of their time. Their attitude to Druidry was Christian, if Non-conformist, with a strong sense that ancient Druidry had been sent by God to prepare that ground for the coming of Christianity. The barbarianism of human sacrifice was forgiven the bearded patriarchs: their faith was, after all, monotheistic, centred on the one God through the highest light, embodied in the sun.

A large swathe of modern Druidry is still influenced by the Druid revival of the eighteenth century; while for some this is an underlying influence, for others it is a core philosophy.

In 1781, in the King's Arms public house in Poland Street, London, Toland's mythical Grove was developed into a defined Druid Order by a man called Henry

Hurle. In 1834 this order was split into the United Ancient Order of Druids (which became the Ancient Druid Order) and the Ancient Order of Druids, both of which are still in existence.

Culture and Politics

By this time Scotland had lost its independence and famine crises in Ireland were inciting hatred against the English, stirring up a new Celtic spirit, while enthusiasm about ancient and cultural history was evoking an interest in all things Welsh in intellectual circles across England and Wales. It was during the eighteenth century that the modern Welsh language was created, a language which could be more easily spoken, the old Middle Welsh having been by now all but lost.

The medieval literature was also becoming more widely available. Though at this time it was mainly Welsh poetry and in poor translation, it was enough for one man, a Welsh stonemason working in London, to find the inspiration he needed.

This fellow was Edward Williams who later took the Bardic name Iolo Morgannwg, and, returning to Wales, began to piece together all he could find about the ancient tradition. Only he didn't quite find enough to recreate the Druidry he was searching for, so with great genius and plenty of laudanum, he forged documents and poetry to validate and amplify his research. His forgeries were accepted as genuine right into this century.

In 1792, at Primrose Hill, Morgannwg assembled the first *gorsedd* (or gathering) of Bards of the Isle of Britain. Following the old Welsh tradition of *eisteddfod* (Welsh for a 'session' or 'sitting'), the earliest record of which is from the twelfth century, he took the gorsedd to Wales early in the nineteenth century.

It wasn't until 1861 that the annual national eisteddfod was again established in Wales, but it is acknowledged that Morgannwg was the reason behind its regeneration. Indeed, a great deal of his ritual is still used, not only within the Welsh Gorsedd, but also within many Druid Orders, both old and new.

If we look at the influence of this revival on some modern Orders, we see also the effects of attitudes which were strong around the turn of the century. The Druid groups which were prominent, most of which were all male urban societies, were by now deep into the mysticism of enlightenment. The pervading beliefs were of all religions being facets of the one religion, all gods aspects of the one God. Elements of Theosophy and the Qabala were slipping in. Sanskrit was used as freely as Welsh and Gaelic.

While these influences are for the majority of Druids unimportant or overridden, they remain hues in the spectrum of modern practice.

Wicca And Witchcraft

The process of moving Druidry back towards Paganism was helped by the friendship during the 1950s between one of the key characters of modern Wicca, Gerald Gardner, and the Druid Ross Nichols. After disputes over leadership on the death of

the previous chief of the Ancient Order of Druids, Nichols broke away to create the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids in 1964, becoming its chosen chief. As he built the framework of the new Order, ideas he had discussed with Gardner were put into practice. The shift in focus was significant, with many more ideas slipping in that predated the eighteenth-century revival with its Christian leaning.

Perhaps the most obvious point of contrast in the spectrum of modern Druidry is where the tradition has woven its edges with Wicca and where it remains entirely separate. Over the past 30 years, many of the newer Orders have emerged through Wiccans moving into Druidry, or individuals or Groves leaving larger Orders to establish themselves with a strong Pagan/Wiccan quality.

For some, the blend is a perfect mix of the darker, earthier energy that is felt to be Witchcraft with the lighter, clearer energy accessible through Druidry. While there are some for whom there can be no interaction, and some for whom the act of tying the two strands is seen as disrespectful to both, for many it is felt to be a natural balance between night and day, moonlight and sunshine.

There are distinct differences, however, between Wicca/Witchcraft and Druidry, though again there will be practitioners who stand in one or the other tradition yet cross the lines with which I separate them! It might be said, nonetheless, that while Wicca is a spirituality of magical practice, searching primarily for the power and energy to create change, Druidry reaches for divine inspiration, knowing that within the awen comes all the energy required for its expression.

The history of both traditions is equally thick with myth and fantasy, the definitions of both equally loose, enabling the seeker to create his own unique perspective and spiritual practice. However we perceive it, within the spectrum of Druidry there is a rich splash of Wiccan colour – and vice versa.

Mythical Heroes

For some in the tradition, history is a confusing mixture of fact and attitude, and felt to be best ignored in favour of the tales which appear to hold the true power of the land and the human soul.

While some dive back into the Celtic past for these tales, others prefer the kick and wit of the Arthurian sagas. To a lesser extent the other tales of our culture, such as those of Robin Hood, work within Druidry in the same way as the Arthurian.

In all these tales we can find examples of every aspect of human nature, and the Druid who walks into the inner worlds where the stories are played out in a thousand different colours and chords can merge into the characters, the landscape and the emotion, reworking the quests according to his own soul.

Not only do the stories allow a better understanding of ourselves through whatever type of psychoanalysis we naturally employ, they also offer to the Druid archetypes of strength, glory, salvation, integrity, pride, dedication, love and more. The kings, queens, warriors, knights, Bards, Witches and Druids, the mystical spirits and deities,

all express a devotion to the land, to the people, in a way which is easily accessible on many levels.

For most, the stories inspire transformation only on a personal level, the Arthurian Quest for the Grail, for example, being the inner search for perfect release, spiritual ecstasy, the touch of the gods: awen. There are others, however, on the edges of modern Druid society, for whom the figures and their quests are replayed more physically as a fight for spiritual freedom and the protection of the land, through front-line environmentalism and political protest. They are a small group but their drama does at times attract attention.

Other Blends

Not to mention the other mixes of religion within the Druid philosophy would leave a gap. In America the Order blending Hasidic Judaism with Druidry is well documented. There are a number of Druids whose spiritual practice is closer to Taoism, Shinto and Buddhism, particularly Zen, than western Paganism. While the nature of their Druidry shifts according to the concept of deity or non-deity, still the principles are there: reverence for the land and the ancestors.

There are also Druids whose inspiration comes not from conventional sources of religious teachings, but is found – with a healthy dose of humour and irony – within the science fiction stories of Star Trek and its genre.

Psychologists And Shamans

Another distinction between Druids practising today lies within the understanding of the nature of reality.

There are an increasing number of Druids whose spiritual practice is shamanic. For these individuals there is no doubt in the existence of spirits and other planes of reality, or that the gods are existent in their own right and only vaguely affected by the desires of the human psyche. The shamanic Druid will slide between different planes of consciousness, interacting in the worlds of spirit and returning to shared reality bringing back information or having affected change.

However a greater number within the Druid tradition do not necessarily work on this level. Some are studying ways in which shifts in consciousness can be achieved, but there are also many who do not acknowledge the worlds of spirit and the gods to be externally existent.

Understanding Druidry to be the path of deep inner healing, the way in which we relate to the spirits of the land, the spirits of nature and the ancestors is not as important as the fact that we do it. Believing that the interaction happens only within the mind, reflecting and revealing the shades of our subconscious, is as powerful a journey for many as believing that these forces exist outside and without us.

The different attitude, nonetheless, does profoundly affect the energy and practice of the individual Druid.

Environmentalists

Those within the tradition who are passionately involved in the protection of the environment come in many shapes and sizes and colours, from the road protester living through the winter in a twigloo in the forest to the organizer of an environmental awareness group or lobby to those working directly within the law on issues of pollution or development.

All within Druidry do work for the environment. For some the focus is local, for some it is global. Some are happy on a protest march, others dancing a rite within their sacred circle. However the Druid is involved, the key tenets of his faith will always guide him: we are all spirit, equal and connected.

Folk Druidry

Over the past five years a number of Orders and Groves have worked to make Druidry more accessible to the wider public. With positive media coverage and more books being published on the subject, interest in Druidry has risen at an extraordinary rate. Not all those who get involved wish to study intensively the mysticism of the faith; many hope only to be part of a spiritual community which gathers to celebrate the cycles of the season and our rites of passage.

Public rituals are now increasingly being seen across the country. These are usually held during the day at sacred sites and city parks, and are open to the public, with families encouraged to attend, welcoming people of any religion (and none) to join in to whatever degree they feel comfortable.

And All Filled With *Awen*

The only kind of Druid not yet mentioned is the hereditary, one who claims to be of a family line through which the ancient wisdom was never lost. Whether these lines go back 40 generations or four it is usually impossible to validate. It would be disrespectful to try.

Within Druidry there is no sure way of knowing whether an individual is genuine, trained and true. Few colleges or teachers issue certificates of membership, of courses completed or validated genealogies, simply because these would mean so little anyway. Knowing 300 stories in Middle Welsh is an amazing achievement and a mark of powerful dedication, but does it make a Druid? The ability to heal using energy and herbs is a divine gift, but does it make a Druid?

Becoming a Druid is a life-long task. Indeed, many say that the work of becoming a Druid is a constant process of becoming, of reaching the archetype of strength, wisdom, clarity, invulnerability and gentle humanity, together with an understanding of nature at its rawest edges. We stretch through our souls to the essence of life, to the spirit that vitalizes, to the gods that empower us, in search of inspiration.

Perhaps the only clear measure of a Druid, accepting that there is honour for the Earth and the ancestors, is in the expression of his *awen*...

Having read of the many elements and influences within modern Druidry, it is an appropriate time to consider where your inspiration comes from.

Which nation holds your heart, which landscape your attention? Is there an era of history that inspires curiosity, one in which you feel you would fit perhaps better than the present?

As you ponder on this time and place, feel the images and emotions that arise. How close are they to your present reality? How similar are the people? How much does this vision affect your present, your attitudes, your search for spirituality?