

Appendix 2

The Druids: From Past to Present

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Today, modern Druids comprise three distinct groups. The first two groups belong to a system of thought and activity I have named the 'closed school of Druidry' due to rules governing the admittance of individuals seeking initiation. The third group I have called the 'open school'.

In *The Book of Druidry* (1992: 114-118), Ross Nichols describes several Druid groups having, as their focus, ritual sentiments that can be thought of as local or nationalist. They include the Welsh Gorsedd (formed in 1792) and the Cornish-based Bards of Cernow (founded 1928). Seeking to promote a sense of independence from mainstream government, these groups understand individual identity and their collective culture to reside in their local landscapes and languages as 'traditions that have always existed'. Expressions of autonomy are perhaps most noticeable through the promotion of their own, non-English languages. In *Listening People, Speaking Earth* (1997) Graham Harvey notices a similar pattern of self-assertiveness among French Orders attempting to retain a sense of individuality amid political collectivisation:

Druids remained powerfully emotive figures for cultural and linguistic traditions, especially those threatened by dominant and hostile foreign powers. They were recruited into movements aimed at strengthening cultural and national identities, particularly in Brittany and Wales... For some, Druids inspired revolutionary zeal against English or French cultural, administrative and religious control (ibid: 18).

Throughout the annually held Welsh Gorsedd's Eisteddfod, Welsh speakers compete for poetic, artistic and literary prizes. Such expressions of self-determinism compare well with the ceremonial practices of the Bards of Cernow. Rituals using the Cornish language, revived in 1928 (Nichols 1992), are held in Cornish churches or other secretive locations. A number of years ago, while attending a Bardic church service near Penzance, a Cornish Bard informed me that close links with the Welsh Gorsedd were maintained, along with similar ceremonies held near local stone circles. She referred to a Druid prayer written by the scholarly Iolo Morganwg, an active force in Welsh nationalism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Cornish language is, the Bard informed me, a cross between the Breton and Welsh dialects. Strangely, this Cornish ceremony was advertised in a local tourist column, yet attending this service seemed to me an expression of local identity for local Cornishmen and women rather than a church service available for tourists. I couldn't understand a word, but quickly understood the symbolism of the performance. Harvey comments upon the connections between Druidry, the poetics of the nationally loyal Bard and the church:

Welsh, Cornish, Breton and other Celtic cultural Druidries could stress the Bardic arts without compromising the predominant Christianity of their members. Most [modern] Druids until recently have in fact been good Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists or whatever form of Christianity was most culturally vibrant in any particular area. In some areas today, Druidry is largely cultural and not religious, let alone Pagan (ibid).

In the *Eye of the Sun*, Amy Hale agrees and, by emphasising the distinctions between the esoteric neo-Pagan movement and the Cornish Gorsyth, clearly demonstrates the complexities that exist today among groups with a penchant for Bardism.

‘The Cornish Gorsyth is not’, Hale stresses, ‘a Neo-Pagan organisation. It never has been. In fact, the ceremony is, in essence, quite Christian (Hale 2000: 182)... They have different ritual foci (one religious and one, in theory, secular), and for the most part different constituencies. The uncomfortable coexistence of the two groups indicates a great deal about the multi-faceted nature of Celticity’ (Ibid: 197).

Many Druids of the open school claim that the closed schools of English Druidry comprise fraternally focused groups, with an open attitude to Christianity. My own ceremonial encounters with two groups of the closed school certainly bear testimony to this claim of a male bias. Ross Nichols (1992) briefly documents some of these, including the Ancient Druid Order formed in 1717 by John Toland (the acorn of modern Druidry), and the splinter group, the Most Ancient Order of Druids, formed in 1781 to promote God, Queen, and the mysteries of mistletoe and oak. Relationships between Druids and nature have always been important with the open schools tending to shed their social and fraternal focus exploring and re-focussing upon nature as deity. The historic roots of such modern animism may, I suggest, be seen in Toland's 18th century intellectual study of motion and matter in nature (Nichols, Ross 1992 *The Book of Druidry*: 99). Also essential in rooting spirituality within nature was the antiquarian Stukeley's much admired works *Stonehenge Restored* 1740 and *Avebury* 1743, or Blake's vision of *Jerusalem* 1804.

In 1833 The United Ancient Order of Druids separated from the Ancient Order of Druids, operating as a charitable fraternity with lodges in Australia and America (ibid: 103). The Welsh, Cornish and Breton groups veil their inner-ceremonies in linguistic exclusivity, while the closed schools of the English exclude through fraternal secrecy. Yet the English groups seem to focus their activities through maintaining a ritual relationship with an imagined Druidic past within which English society has its roots firmly set. It is these same identities from which the Welsh and Cornish seek independence.

Exclusivity unites these disparate groups as initiation into them is largely dependent upon a command of the appropriate language, or in the case of the English groups, requires initiates to be male. Hence for most people in England and Wales, and all women in England, these groups remain closed and inaccessible. (Occasional lodges for women are known). Access to these groups is difficult, and when access is granted, ritual vows of secrecy ensure that knowledge is contained within the membership, although it is true to state that these groups serve both a social and esoteric purpose. Socially, individuals assist each other in obtaining employment, or promoting ideas that support a social hierarchy. Individuals from these groups therefore reflect these concerns and the groups may, for example, attend war memorial services, or local street parades. Members tend to be older than the modern New Age Pagan individuals of the open school who, privately, prefer to have their social visions fixed within political alternatives to war, or Christianity. These group members therefore tend to be younger, more dissident or generally disillusioned with mainstream society. The 1960s symbolised a period when social movements and alternative ideals, developing amid the music, fashion and psychedelia of the time, encouraged new ways of thinking at both social and spiritual levels. It was at this time that the OBOD emerged as an alternative to the closed schools. In 1964, the Ancient Druid Order experienced internal anxieties during the election of a new Chief Druid, and after narrowly losing a vote to become the next Chosen Chief, Ross Nichols formed the separatist Order of Bards Ovates and Druids. A marked shift in modern Druidry then occurred as animism replaced nationalism as the focus for ritual activity. Nichols took notes and teachings written by past Chief Druids of the ADO, appropriating these past Chiefs as the collective ancestors of Druidry (Nichols 1992: 99).

Today, Nichols is credited as being the catalyst for re-introducing the full cycle of eight seasonal ceremonies into modern Paganism, as well as lifting the veils of secrecy surrounding modern Druidry. But it was OBOD's present Chief Druid Philip Carr-Gomm who, after the death of Nichols in 1975, collected together papers belonging to Nichols in order to present Druidry as a mail order catalogue.

As a result of this action, individuals interested in Druidry were no longer required to be collectively present at a meeting, as the focus for ritual activity switched from gatherings in Masonic-style arenas held in church halls toward a more private form of contemplation at home, or ritual expression in the countryside. These *Gwersu* (lessons) take the form of a postal course permitting thousands more people access to the esoteric teachings of three grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid. Encouraging ritual journeys into the inner (visualised) realities, and physical pilgrimages into nature (considered a deity), Druidry today reaches out for people as its members reach out for landscapes. Thus the split from the Ancient Druid Order served as a catalyst for a seismic change in ritual processes and gender politics, allowing the Druidry of OBOD to move away from its once fraternal form, toward paradigms based upon the idea of a maternal deity more Pagan in nature than had been previously expressed within the closed schools.

The sudden availability of Druidry in textual form encourages men and women to perform self-initiations and consider a political empathy with groups championing the ecological protection of the Druid's Goddess. Linking politics of the Green Left with esoteric ritual, Druidry became critical of society's treatment of nature through its association with the radical activists of popular eco-groups. *Gwers* 11 gives the postal addresses of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace. However, political sentiment remains mostly symbolic as the individuals' performances of the *Gwersu* serve the required purpose of the OBOD's Druidry - the re-discovery of the inner-spiritual self through meditation, and the unity of this self with an external deity located in nature. The OBOD have not developed a serious radical base from which mainstream society can be challenged, as any socio-religious sentiment/dissidence is lost within ceremonial symbology. Hence, any political resonance within the social mainstream remains general and implicit. It is therefore true to state that the structure of the OBOD encourages initiates to consider nature, and does not promote social dissent.

With the death of Ross Nichols and the re-emergence of the OBOD under the leadership of Philip Carr-Gomm, other Druid groups formed to express their own definitive ideas of Druidry. 1979 saw the formation of the British Druid Order by Philip Shallcrass - a group expressing a deeply nature-based Paganism. In 1993, Dylan ap Thuinn brought into the Druidic fold a group of people he had met while running a tattoo shop in Portsmouth - brightly coloured individuals - naming the group the Insular Order of Druids. Rollo Maughfling led the Glastonbury Order of Druids and, Arthur Pendragon, alongside Dylan and leaders of various other groups, worked within Tim Sebastian's collective of the Council of British Druid Orders, promoting Druidry and the interests of Druids at Stonehenge.

Druidry has now, within 30 years, diversified from its fraternal/linguistic/Christian beginnings toward a Goddess-focused Paganism culminating in the socio-ritual focus of the Council of British Druid Orders. My involvement with Druidry over the last fifteen years has revealed many smaller groups loosely bound together by general beliefs that are passionately promoted and imaginatively performed through ritual journeys expressive of a cultural need. Through pilgrimage, an imagined past is brought into the present, projected upon landscapes, and used to effect social change, whether the political intent of pilgrimage is implied in text and ceremony, or forcefully asserted as ritual protest. Pilgrimage, and the multitude of meanings inherent within becomes, all at once, a genesis of culture. Nowhere is this cultural genesis more clearly seen than in the Council of British Druid Orders socio-ritual associations with ancestral remains at Avebury. Hence the growth of modern Druidry may be mapped as a processual development from the secretive beginnings of the ADO in 1717 through to modern Druidry's focus within nature and the post-processual operations of the Council of British Druid Orders.

Davies, P 2002. *The Ritual Play of Power*, Durham: 10-15 (revised Autumn Equinox 2008).