

 **Master Poets and Their Kings in Late Celtic Society** 

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"When man created language with wisdom,
As if winnowing cornflower through a sieve,
Friends acknowledged the signs of friendship,
And their speech retained its touch." Rg Veda 10.71

"Whatever is happening is happening for good...."

Krsna to Arjuna in the Bhagvad Gita

August 1, 2004

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On the Nature of ‘Mythical’

Mythical is too often taken to mean ‘fantasy’ or fairy tale. Such is the fate to which our society consigns mytho-poetics, that true poetry by which men and women of former times communicated with the gods. Let us take the words of Robert Graves seriously, for he was an historical novelist, poet, and mythographer of great depth who lamented the crass cynicism and materialism of our times as destructive of the human soul. If mythology literally structured societies during most of human history, what do we really know?

“It is unfortunate that, despite the strong mythical element in Christianity, ‘mythical’ has come to mean ‘fanciful, absurd, unhistorical’; for fancy played a negligible part in the development of the Greek, Latin and Palestinian myths, or of the Celtic myths until the Norman-French *trouvères* worked them up into irresponsible romances of chivalry. They are all grave records of ancient religious customs or events, and reliable enough as history once their language is understood and allowance has been made for errors in transcription, misunderstandings of obsolete ritual, and deliberate changes introduced for moral or political reasons. Some myths of course have survived in a far purer form than others; for example the *Fables* of Hyginus, the *Library* of Apollodorus and the earlier tales of the Welsh *Mabinogion* make easy reading compared with the deceptive simple chronicles of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Judges* and *Samuel*. Perhaps the greatest difficulty in solving mythological problems is that:

Conquering gods their titles take
From the foes they captive make,

and that to know the name of the deity at any given place or period, is far less important than to know the nature of the sacrifices that he or she was then offered. The powers of the gods were continuously being redefined. The Greek god, Apollo, for instance seems to have begun as the Demon of a Mouse fraternity in pre-Aryan totemistic Europe: he gradually rose in divine rank by force of arms, blackmail and fraud until he became the patron of Music, Poetry and the Arts and finally, in some regions at least, ousted his ‘father’ Zeus from the Sovereignty of the Universe by identifying himself with Belinus the intellectual God of Light. Jehovah, the God of the Jews has still more complex history” (Graves 1960: 13-14).



The Royal Court, Celtic Poets and Poetry

Celtic kings were literate to an amazing degree and demanded the finest poetry in their courts. But such poetry had to serve the honour of the king and the relationship between the gods and royalty. On that relationship depended the welfare of the entire kingdom; no free form expression of personal emotion could even be imagined yet alone articulated. When the poet touched upon mythic truth, your gut would tighten and tears would come to your eye for those words reached the divine in mankind and thus sparked a brief connection with divinity.

“... The elements of the single, infinitely variable Theme are to be found in certain ancient poetic myths which though manipulated to conform with each epoch of religious change-yet remain constant in general outline. Perfect faithfulness to the Theme affects the reader of a poem with a strange feeling, between delight and horror, of which the purely physical effect is that the hair literally stands on end. A.E. Houseman's test of a true poem was simple and practical: does it make the hairs of one's chin bristle if one repeats it silently while shaving? But he did not explain *why* the hairs should bristle.

“The ancient Celts carefully distinguished the poet, who was originally a priest and a judge as well and whose person was sacrosanct, from the mere gleeman. He was in Irish call *fili*, a seer; in Welsh *drwydd*, or oak-seer, which is the probable derivation of ‘Druid’. Even kings came under moral tutelage. When two armies engaged in battle, the poets of both sides would withdraw together to a hill and there judiciously discuss the fighting. In a sixth century Welsh poem, the *Golodin*, it is remarked that ‘the poets of the world assess the men of valour’; and the combatants - whom they often parted by a sudden intervention - would afterwards accept their version of the fight, if worth commemorating in a poem with reverence as well as pleasure. The gleeman, on the other hand, was a *joculator*, or entertainer, not a priest; a mere client of the military oligarchs and without the poet's professional training. He would often make a variety turn of his performance, with mime and tumbling. In Wales, he was styled an *eirchiad*. or suppliant, one who does not belong to an endowed profession but is dependent for his living upon the occasional generosity of chieftains. As early as the first century B.C., we hear from Poseidonius the Stoic of a bag of gold flung to a Celtic gleeman in Gaul, and this at a time when the Druidic system was at its strongest there. If the gleeman's flattery of his patrons were handsome enough and his son sweetly attuned to their mead-sodden minds, they would load him with gold torques and honey cakes; if not, they would pelt him with beef bones. But let a man offer the least indignity to an Irish poet, even centuries after he had forfeited his priestly functions to the Christian cleric, and he would compose a satire on his assailant which would bring out black blotches on his face and turn his bowels to water, or throw a ‘madman's wisp’ in his face and drive him insane; and surviving examples of the cursing poems of Welsh minstrels

show that they were also to be reckoned with. The court poets of Wales, on the other hand, were forbidden to use curses or satire, and had to depend on legal redress for any insult to their dignity; according to a tenth century digest of laws affecting the Welsh 'household bard' they could demand an *eric*¹ of 'nine cows, and nine score pence of money besides'. The figure nine recalls the nine-fold Muse, their former patroness.

"In ancient Ireland, the *ollav*, or master poet, sat next to the king at table and was privileged, as none else but the queen was, to wear six different colours in his clothes. The word 'bard', which in medieval Wales stood for a master-poet, had a different sense in Ireland, where it meant an inferior poet who had not passed through the 'seven degrees of wisdom' which made him an *ollav* after a very difficult twelve year course. The position of the Irish bard is defined in the seventh century *Sequel to the Crith Gabhlach Law*: 'A bard is one without lawful learning but his own intellect'; but in the later *Book of Ollavs* (bound up in the fourteenth century *Book of Ballymore*) it is made clear that to have got as far as the seventh year of his poetic education entitled a student to the 'failed B.A.' dignity of bardism. He had memorized only half the prescribed tales and poems, had not studied advanced prosody and metrical composition and was deficient in knowledge of Old Goidelic. However, the seven year's course that he had taken was a great deal more severe than that insisted upon in the poetic schools of Wales, where the bards had proportionately lower status. According to Welsh Laws, the *Penkerdd*, or Chief Bard, was only the tenth dignitary at Court and sat on the left of the Heir Apparent, being reckoned equal in honour with the Chief Smith.²

"The Irish *ollav*'s chief interest was the refinement of complex poetic truth to exact statement. He knew the history and mythic value of every word he used and can have cared nothing for the ordinary man's appreciation of his work; he valued only the judgement of his colleagues, whom he seldom met without a lively exchange of poetic wit in contemporary verse. Yet it cannot be pretended that he was always true to the Theme. His education, which was a very good one, including history, music, law, science and divination, encourage him to versify in all these departments of knowledge so that often Ogma the God of Eloquence seemed more important than Brigit, the Three-fold Muse. And it is a paradox that in medieval Wales the admired court poet had become a client of the prince to whom he addressed formal begging odes and forgotten the Theme almost entirely; while the despised and unendowed minstrel who seemed to be a mere gleeman showed greater poetic integrity, even though his verse was not so highly polished" (Graves 1966: 21-23).

Nikolai Tolstoy is the grandnephew of the famous Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and has researched the legendary Merlin exhaustively.

"A very great poet would be much in demand, with kings vying for his services. Equally the bard might miscalculate, and sue for reconciliation with a monarch he had rashly deserted.

¹*The Oxford English Dictionary* derives 'eric' from the Irish 'civic' and illustrates its usage by reference to a blood fine or recompense for a violent crime. In medieval Wales, 'eric' was the compensation demanded by a bard.

² In the early Middle Ages in Wales, smiths still had such an exalted status which reflected their former mythic rank.

Taliesin's surviving poems principally extol Urien of Rheged and his son Owain, but others believed to be authentic are panegyrics on Cynan of Pwys, whose court lay by the Severn, possibly on the site of Shrewsbury, and Gwallawg of Elmet in Yorkshire. This or another 'desertion' probably inspired the poem *Dadolwch Uryen, Eulogy of Urien*, in which Taliesin eloquently pleads to be received at the court of Rheged: 'There was none I loved better before I knew him/ Now that I see how much I obtain,/I will no more foreswear him than the most high God.'

"However, it no more paid a powerful prince to refuse a great poet than it did for the bard to neglect his patron. As Taliesin's words hint none too subtly, the rewards could be prodigious. From Cynan Garwyn at Pengwern, Taliesin received a hundred racehorses with rich accoutrements, a hundred purple cloaks, a hundred bracelets, fifty brooches, and a magnificent sword. His return to Urien was rewarded by 'mead out of horns and good things without stint', 'and gold and gifts unnumbered.' Another poem from *The Book of Taliesin* specifies *largesse* of horses, cattle, wine, oil and serfs" (Tolstoy 1985: 41).

There were several grades of poets in Celtic Ireland and Wales with strict boundaries set upon each class. The highest, and presumably most literate and visionary, worked for the king and his court as you would expect. The lowest were accessible to the society at large and were often scoffed at as mere storytellers. We have nothing of their work but then Homer was not just a 'mere teller of tales'. One of the monuments in the scholarship about Celtic poets, druids and bards is the Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture of 1971 read by J.E. Caewyn Williams from which I shall quote extensively (Williams 1972).

"The bardic profession [in medieval Ireland] was built upon the ruins of - or perhaps we might say was a protective metamorphosis of - the ancient druidic order, and was always a craft with its own dues, privileges, and prerogatives, decided by itself."³ The extent to which master poets continued to be trained and were able to practice in post medieval Christian Ireland is striking! Eochaid Ó hEoghusa was a great ollav who held the position of court poet to three successive Maguirs: Cú Chonnacht, Lord of Fermanagh, who died in 1589, his more famous son, Hugh, who was killed in 1600, and Hugh's half-brother Cú Chonnacht Maguire who fled Ireland with the Earls in 1607. "In a poem addressed to Hugh, beginning *Mór in t-ainm ollamhflatha*, 'A Chief's Ollav is a Great Title', Ó hEoghusa claims to be nothing less than 'his partner in the government of Clan Colla' ... For Ó hEoghusa, a king, a bishop, and an ollav or court poet are the three whose titles are the noblest, because they have the same *eric* and the same honour price, and they also have other equal rights and privileges. Accordingly he expected Maguire to show him the greatest respect and the most lavish generosity. In particular, he insists on his right to the place of honour by his side, to be the first to give him advice, and to act for him in negotiations. He also strongly asserts his claim to an estate of land of the best kind and to an abode near his chief's court, otherwise he will not be immune to enemy attacks, and he will not be readily available to give his advice when it is most needed.

³ Knott, E. 1928.

However, he is careful to point out that he is not making any claim which has not been granted to other ollavs by their lords in the past; he quotes the ancient practice of kings of the various provinces of Ireland, and, of course, he does not forget to mention his own superb qualifications: he has been educated in bardic schools in the south as well as the north of Ireland; his erudition is like the choicest product of the true honey-bee...

“Ó hEoghusa does not touch expressly upon the duties and services to be rendered by him to his lord but he leaves it to be inferred that they are such as to deserve all the substantial benefits of his office. In this he is not alone among Irish court poets; they make much of the learning which they put at the service of their lords and much of the subtle art which goes into the making of their songs for them, but they do not explain why either of these qualifications should earn them such great rewards. Thus Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn, whose ‘fairly prosperous’ career ended with his death in 1591, tells Cormac Ó hEadhra that in return for his protection and patronage he will compose for him ‘the artistic well-wrought lay, the laboriously wrought poem, and another time the single stanza’ (Knott 1928 in Williams 1972), give him knowledge of the ‘geneological branches’ of his ancestors and of the tributes taken by them, the course of their triumphs and their exploits. ‘I shall tell you ... of your nobility transcending that of the rest of the men of Ireland.’ All this suggests that if Tadhg Dall and Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa were pressed to give a *raison d’être* for their professional activities, their answer would be that they were needed to uphold the claims and preserve the rights of the nobility in Ireland, or in the words of a poem composed c.1260: ‘Should poetry be suppressed, men; if there is to be no historic lore, no ancient lays - save the name of each man's father - none will be heard of ... Should the historic lore of the children of Conn, and thy poems, Donal, be suppressed - then would the children of your dog-keepers be equally noble or equally servile with the children of your nobility.’

“However, ... the bardic order did not come into existence and did not maintain itself for more than a thousand years merely to give noblemen a good name and to preserve its memory, it was certainly not required to make the distinction between noblemen and their servants” (Williams 1972: 1-5). The profession of ollav was largely hereditary in Ireland. “The importance of these bardic families can hardly be overestimated. Representatives of the Ó Dálaigh family, it has been estimated, have thirty six entries in the *Annals of the Four Masters*⁴ between 1139 and 1589, the Ó hUiginn have thirty three entries up to 1536, and the Mac an Bhaird twenty two entries between 1173 and 1609” (Williams 1972: 2, footnote 7).

“In Wales, for example, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the court poets were as much part and parcel of the social structure as they were in Ireland: they formed a well organized and a highly trained literary order whose duties and privileges and social status were defined in the Laws...Like their Irish counterparts, they had bardic schools. The fully trained poet could look forward to obtaining an official post in the royal court, a post symbolized by a chair which he had to win in competition with another poet. Once he had gained such a chair he was called a *pencerdd* and had the right to sing two songs in the court hall, on a song to God, the other a song to a king, and in addition he was permitted to teach his craft to others. For all

⁴ John O'Donovan, J. ed., vols. i-vii, 1848-1851.

this he was well rewarded in gifts, including grants of land. Next to the *pencerdd* in rank was the *bardd teulu*. As the name implies he was primarily the bard of the king's retinue (*teulu*): according to one source it was his duty to sing 'Unbeiniaeth Prydein' to them before they set out for battle. Although there are a few traces of bardic families, the profession was not hereditary as it was in Ireland. Both *pencerdd* and *bardd teulu* sang or chanted their compositions to their own musical accompaniment or the harp. They were genealogists, historians, and storytellers. Although their primary duty was to eulogize, they could on occasion satirize and prophesy: several vaticinations have survived and Giraldus Cambrensis⁵ tells us that there were *awenyddion*, inspired men who fell into a trance in order to get answers to the questions put to them; both *pencerdd* and *bardd teulu* fought beside their king whenever the occasion demanded.

"In the ninth century court poets called skalds appeared in the Scandinavian countries. The earliest were Norwegians, but from the end of the tenth century most of them were Icelanders and they were in their heyday in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although their craft demanded great skill there is no evidence that they were trained in special schools or that their profession was hereditary. ... It is certain they were not tied to the court: in addition to undertaking responsible missions for their sovereigns they accompanied them to battle and to sea. They declaimed or chanted their poetry but, unlike the Irish ollav or the Welsh *pencerdd* not to the accompaniment of music. They knew the legendary lore of their race, including the geneologies. They composed satires and maledictions as well as eulogies: satires strung together in answer to compositions of the same king were called *flytings* and resembled the man-matching in the sagas. Their role in the composition of the prose sagas is not obvious although many of the sagas recount their doings. However, they must have had a part in the preservation of the lays of the gods and heroes, called the Eddas, some of which are very ancient, with their origins outside Iceland.

"It is reasonable to look on the skald as the literary successor of the Anglo-Saxon *scop* or rather of his counterpart in early Teutonic society, although evidence for the latter's existence, as the adjective 'Anglo-Saxon' suggests, is mainly derived from the early national poems of England, especially *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, and *Deor's Lament*. All these poems are anterior to the unification of England under Alfred, all seem to draw exclusively on story material concerning the Continent, and all seem to be the work of minstrels or *scops*.⁶

"Like the ollav, the *pencerdd*, and the skald, the *scop* had at court an important post which he might lose to another, or leave to take up a similar post elsewhere. His primary function was to compose and sing to the accompaniment of his harp songs which would spread

⁵ Giraldus or Gerald de Barri (?1146 - ?1220), a Welsh ecclesiastical scholar, geographer and historian is best known by his literary name of Giraldus Cambrensis. He was the son of William de Barri (Norman) and a princess of the Welsh royal family. After election to succeed his uncle as bishop of St. David's, he was rejected by Henry II (1176). He described the natural history and people of Ireland in *Topographia Hibernica* and, after a journey with Prince John (1185), did the same for Wales in *Itinerarium Cambriae*. After once more being rejected as bishop of St. David's, this time by the archbishop of Canterbury (1198), Giraldus de Barri devoted the rest of his life to study (Webster 1965: 597).

⁶ Robert Graves did not believe that master poets existed in Anglo-Saxon society (Graves 1960: 23).

the fame of his royal patron. He could also sing songs which celebrated the mighty deeds of ancient heroes: indeed, his mind was full of the traditional and heroic lore which he needed as court genealogist and historian. Like the skald, he was not instructed at a bardic school. His rewards were substantial, gifts of clothes, of gold and silver, and grants of land.

“The songs which the scop sang of ancient heroes remind us of the Icelandic Eddas, but as the latter were not characteristic of the skald, and to some extent anterior to him, one must regard the *Heldenlieder*⁷ as peculiar to the scop, in contrast to the *Preislieder*⁸ which he sang in common with the skald, the *pencerdd*, and the ollav (Williams 1972: 2-8).

“It is known that the Irish court poet in early times could and often did discharge the duties of the *senchaid* (historian) and the *scélaige* (story-teller)⁹ just as the Welsh *pencerdd* could act the part of *cyfarwydd* (story-teller), but as the traditional medium for the heroic tale, the kind of story under discussion, in Ireland and Wales, was not verse epic but prose narrative interspersed with verse or rhythmic prose to express dramatic or heightened emotion; these [poets] were not like the Greek *aoidoi*,¹⁰ composing tales in verse. It has been pointed out that the narrative form composed of prose with interposed verse is the first to appear in India, and it has even been suggested that it is the earliest form of epic literature known to the Indo-Europeans, and that we have here an interesting case of parallel survival in Hindu and Celtic literatures. ...

“Most of the verse composed by the skald, *pencerdd*, and ollav is praise or celebration poetry and its underlying assumption is that fame and honour are the supreme values.¹¹ ... Thus the skald sings: ... ‘there is nought but Fame which never dies for him who wins it worthily.’ The scop had expressed the same conviction before him: ‘Let him who can win for himself glory before he dies: that is the best thing which can come to a knight in after times when he is no more.’ The Welsh *pencerdd* and the Irish ollav are equally convinced that ‘praise’ is the only thing that will never die. ... ‘Wealth vanishes, praise (fame) does not’. That is why the hero desires fame above everything.

“Secondly, these poems are essentially aristocratic. They celebrate a hero before an audience of heroes, and they are composed by heroes, for, even if we did not know that skald, *pencerdd*, and ollav fought side by side with their lords and that they acted frequently as if they were their peers, we should have to deduce from their poems that they arrogated to themselves

⁷ *Heldenlieder* refers to songs recounting the deeds of heroes.

⁸ *Preislieder* refers to songs of praise, no doubt especially in honor of the patron lord..

⁹ The Irish storyteller is more commonly known as *fili*.

¹⁰ The most famous *aoidoi* is, of course, Homer.

¹¹ Although many goddesses were prominent in Celtic and Teutonic myth, and in Ireland often had pre-eminent rank, the role of the Celtic/Teutonic master poet is typically Indo-European as is the heroic value system which is embedded in their epic literature. Celtic origins lie in the first half of the first millenium B.C. in central Europe and are Indo-European. The presence of the Goddess indicates the influence of the earlier cultures of Old Europe with whom they fought and intermingled.

the right to confer honour and fame. ... as the Irish poet tells us, ‘No man can be famous without an ollav.

“Thirdly, these poems originally had a social and religious significance, even when that significance had been almost completely lost, they continued to form an important part of court ceremonial. ...originally they were declaimed before an assembled audience, and the intricacy of their metres, the richness of their diction, the wealth of their allusion, and the comparative simplicity of their themes, **all show that their composers were well aware that part at least of their function was to demonstrate they were Lords of the Word in a world in which words had not yet lost their magic power** [emphasis mine]. ... Moreover, their complex metrical structure was mnemonic and made them easy to remember. Hundreds of skaldic verses were handed down by word of mouth before they were finally fixed on parchment, and the fact that they were remembered implies that they were appreciated and more than partially understood. ... their peculiar sonorous quality, their internal harmony of alliteration and rhyme make it certain that their appeal was first and foremost to the ear.

“Of their effect on the audience who assembled to hear them declaimed we can only guess, but it must have been like that produced by the Iliad or the Odyssey which Dr. Grönbech describes in these words: When the singing begins the hall is filled with *kleos* (fame); the great deeds of the past are conjured up and are present before the mind's eye; joy and strength at the same time. The hall fills with friends and relations; the dead as well as the living; the man who hears his own ancestor praised feels flattered; he knows that, when his own life and deeds sound in song and legend, he will not be dead.¹² ... we have here something deeper than vague hankering for after the good old days. Formerly, as Mircea Eliade (1961: 72) reminds us, **man refused to live in what we should call the historic present: he attempted to regain a sacred time that from our point of view could be homologized to eternity**” (Williams 1972: 8-12, emphasis mine).

Williams choice (be it consciously designed or not) of the verb ‘refused’ is profound! Whether human beings can admit to it or not, be mature and responsible or not, they choose at any moment of historic time whether or not to simply acquiesce to the secular time of the ‘real world’ or make the profound attempt to integrate with the sacred. Modern, western ‘man’ has refused as a culture to confront the sacred and the price paid is global psychic and ecological catastrophe; individuals who still trod the sacred path keep the doorway into the Dreamtime ajar for us all. Would that more would enter.

An attempt to convey in words what follows from a refusal to live in the historic present is very difficult; the experience, after all, is not intellectual but a holistic spiritual state of being. However, one aspect of ‘homologizing to eternity’ is amenable to linguistic explication because it manifests in the use of deep tradition. The great master poets were the intellectual giants of their time, let us not forget that central to their training was a deep education in all the available knowledge about the world and man's works, and the development of great mental acuity. Unlike today's university

¹² DeVries, J.D. 1963: 169.

researchers, such knowledge was not acquired for its own sake to be then further dissected, analyzed and elaborated upon, perhaps for the joy of discovery, perhaps for the material benefits of applied technology. The druid and later master poets utilized this vast education as the first stepping stone on a spiritual journey that was fused with mixed motives: power, status, and sincere integration with the sacred for the benefit of the court and people. The deliberate use of deep tradition in the construction of epic literature renews the bond with the past, brings it closer to the present and thereby defies a commitment to linear time. The power of genius-level epic prose or verse could shrink the ‘distance’ between great heroes and events of the past and the present. If the power of poetry can make the past live in the present, then there is no ‘past’ separate from the present. All time is conflated, all time is one, historic time is rejected and sacred time has been made manifest.

Welsh poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries composed poems of appeasement (*dadolwch*) in the same style as the sixth century legendary Taliesin when he had offended his patron Urien Rheged. These high medieval Welsh poets also referred “to the English, their traditional enemy, as *Bryneich*, long after *Bernicea* had been swallowed up in Northumbria and long after Northumbria had been engulfed in England” (Williams 1972: 13). In the fourteenth century we find Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh addressing a poem to the patron saint of the Ó Dálaigh family, Colmán mac Lénéni, who lived in the second half of the sixth century (ob. 604), and touching on an old controversy between the poets and the church, except that for him it is Colmán and not Colum Cille who is the champion of the Muse. In the beginning of the seventeenth century Tadhg mac Daire mac Bruaideadha, chief poet of Thomond, composed a poem in which he criticized statements made in two poems attributed to Torna, for him a historical, for us a legendary, poet of the fifth century, and thereby aroused poets in all the land to debate the respective merits of the north and south of Ireland in poems which are now collectively called The Contention of the Bards (Williams 1972: 14).

“The fact is that though the Anglo-Saxons broke the power of the ancient British chieftains and poets they did not exterminate the peasants, so that the continuity of the ancient British festal system remained unaffected even when the Anglo-Saxons professed Christianity, English social life was based on agriculture, grazing and hunting, not on industry, and the Theme was still everywhere implicit in the popular celebration of the festivals now known as Candlemas, Lady Day, May Day, Midsummer Day, Lammas, Michaelmas, All-Hallowe'en and Christmas; it was also secretly preserved as religious doctrine in the covens of the anti-Christian witch cult. Thus the English, though with no traditional respect for the poet, have a traditional awareness of the Theme” (Graves 1960: 23-24).

“The Irish and Welsh distinguished carefully between poets and satirists: the poets task was creative or curative, that of the satirist was destructive or noxious. An Irish poet could compose an *aer*, or satire, which would blight crops, dry up milk, raise blotches on his victim's face and ruin his character forever. According to *The Hearings of the Scholars*, one synonym for satire was ‘*Brimón smetrach*’, that is, word-feat-ear-tweaking: A brotherly trick used to be played by poets when they recited satire, namely to tweak the ear-lobe of their victim who,

since there is no bone there, could claim no compensation for loss of honor- - as he would have been able to do if the poet had tweaked his nose. Nor might he forcibly resist, since the poet was sacrosanct; however, if he was satirized undeservedly, the blotches would rise on the poet's own face and kill him at once, ... Edmund Spenser [1552-1599] in his *View of the Present State of Ireland* writes of the Irish poets of his own day: 'None dare displeas them for feare to runne into reproach thorough their offence, and to be made infamous in the mouthes of men'. And Shakespeare mentions their power of 'rhyming rats to death', having somewhere heard of the seventh-century Seanchan Torpest, the master ollav of Ireland who, one day finding that rats had eaten his dinner, uttered the vindictive *aer*: 'Rats have sharp snouts/Yet are poor fighters...' which killed ten of them on the spot.¹³ ... But, there is nothing in language to match the Irish poets in vindicativeness, except what has been written by the Anglo-Irish. The technique of parody is the same as that employed by Russian witches: they walk quietly behind their victim, exactly mimicking his gait; then when in perfect sympathy with him suddenly stumble and fall, taking care to fall soft when he falls hard. ..." (Graves 1960: 444-445).¹⁴

¹³ "In Greece, the metres allotted to the satirist were the poetic metres in reverse. Satire can be called left-handed poetry. The Moon travels from left to right, the same way as the Sun, but as she grows older and weaker rises every night a little farther to the left; then, since the rate of plant growth under a waxing moon is greater than under a waning moon, the right hand has always been associated with growth and strength but the left with weakness and decay. Thus the word 'left' itself means, in Old Germanic, 'weak, old, palsied'. Lucky dances by devotees of the Moon were therefore made right-handed or clockwise, to induce prosperity; unlucky ones to cause damage or death were made left handed, or 'widdershins'. Similarly, the right-handed fire wheel, or swastika, was lucky; the left-handed (adopted by the Nazis) unlucky. There are two sides to the worship of the Indian Goddess Kali: her right side as benefactress and universal mother, her left side as fury and ogress. The word 'sinister' has come to mean more than left handed because in Classical augury birds seen on the left hand portended ill luck" (Graves 1960: 445).

¹⁴ "The purpose of satire is to destroy whatever is overblown, faded and dull, and clear the soil for a new sowing. So the Cypriots understood the mystery of the God of the Year describing him as *amphidexios*, which includes the sense of 'ambidextrous', 'ambiguous', and 'ambivalent', and putting a weapon in each of his hands. He is himself and his other self at the same time, king and supplanter, victim and murderer, poet and satirist- and his right hand does not know what his left hand does. In Mesopotamia, as Nergal, he was both the Sower who brought wealth to the fields and the Reaper, the God of the Dead; but elsewhere, in order to simplify the myth, he was represented as twins. This simplification has led, through dualistic theology, to the theory that death, evil, decay and destruction are erroneous concepts which God, the Good, the Right Hand will disprove. Ascetic theologians try to paralyze or lop off the left hand in honour of the right; but the poets are aware that each twin must conquer in turn, in an agelong and chivalrous war fought for the favours of the White Goddess, as the heroes Gwyn and Greidawl fought for the favours of Creiddylad, or the heroes Mot and Aleyn for those of Anatha of Ugarit. The war between Good and Evil has been waged in so indecent and painful a way during the past two millenia because the theologians, not being poets, have forbidden the Goddess to umpire it, and made God impose on the Devil impossible terms of unconditional surrender" (Graves 1960: 446). If there ever was a succinct critique of the grand philosophical/mytho-political 'mistake' of Christianity, this is it! The history of the Vatican certainly establishes that the cardinals and popes must be politicized and thus the terms imposed upon the Devil had to be 'unconditional surrender'. But then, the Devil is only the left hand of god, isn't he? Wars can only remain mythic when they do not end.



The Celtic Goddess as Druidess and Poet

Gimbutas (1989) believes the Goddess as Weaver of Fate to be a primary epiphany. In Celtic realms, however, archeological evidence for this aspect of her domain is very sparse. “During the Hallstatt period, we find the earliest depictions of Celtic women, for example on the group of pots from Sopron-Vrheliv, Hungary ... dating from the seventh century B.C. which show women weaving on vertical looms...” (Doan 1987:1). Nonetheless, the historical record of Roman times and the medieval epics confirm the presence of the Goddess as Weaver of Fate in an important and significant manifestation, that of the druidess and prophetess.

“The Roman geographer Pomponius Mela writing in the first century A.D. describes a community of nine virgins living on the island of Sena (Sein) off the coast of Brittany to whom he attributed magical and prophetic powers, such as arousing the waves of the sea by their singing, changing animals into whatever they wished, curing incurable sicknesses and predicting the future for the benefit of the mariners who came to consult them. We do not know if these women were actual druidesses, or whether this account was influenced by the Greek legend of Circe. However, they do bear a striking resemblance to the nine witches of Gloucester in the medieval Welsh tale of Peredur and the thrice nine women who welcome the voyagers in the Irish *Immram Brain* (‘The Voyage of Bran’), as pointed out by Proinsias Mac Cana (1976: 112). We also find witches or sorceresses in the medieval Welsh tales of Culhwch and Owen and Gwion Bach and Taliesin (Ford 1977: 119-181), perhaps distant echoes of the earlier Celtic tradition.

“In Tacitus’ *Germania*, written before 98 A.D. and dealing with the various Germanic and Celtic tribes beyond the Rhine, we read that the ‘Germans’ believe that an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy reside in women, so that they do not hesitate to ask their advice or lightly disregard their replies. Among these Women Tacitus mentions Veleda, a prophetess of the Bructeri, one of the probably Celtic speaking tribes beyond the Rhine that took part in the Revolt of Civilis (68-69 A.D.). Tacitus implies that Veleda, whose name may be derived from the Celtic word for ‘seeress’, encouraged the Bructeri to revolt (*Germania* VIII; Mattingly and Handford 1970: 108).

“In the *Annals of Imperial Rome*, Tacitus describes the Roman attack on the druidic stronghold on the island of Mona (Anglesey) in northwest Wales in 61 A.D., in which he notes the presence of ‘black-robed women with dishevelled hair ... brandishing torches’ along with the druids ‘raising their hands to heaven and screaming dreadful curses’. He continues: ‘The weird spectacle awed the Roman soldiers into a sort of paralysis. They stood still -- and presented themselves as a target. But then they urged each other (and were urged by the general (Suetonius Paulinus) not to fear a horde of fanatical women. Onward pressed their standards and they bore down their opponents, enveloping them in the flames of their own torches (*Annals of Imperial Rome* XIV, 28; Grant 1956: 327).

“Despite Roman opposition to the druidic religion in Gaul as in Britain, the name druid, if not the actual institution, continued in use as late as the fourth century A.D. when the poet Ausonius traced the ancestry of the professors of rhetoric in Bordeaux to the druids of Armorica (Chadwick 1972:46). In *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, also dating from the fourth century, we find references to female druids, actually prophets like Veleda. According to this collection, one of these women speaking in Gaulish predicted to the Emperor Alexander Severus his imminent death (in 235 A.D.). The Emperor Aurelian supposedly consulted Gaulish druidesses on the future of his offspring (between 270 and 275). Like Macbeth on a later occasion, he was told that none would have a name more illustrious than the descendants of Claudius. Diocletian himself was supposed to have told the story of a Gaulish prophetess/innkeeper in Tongres (eastern Belgium) who chided him for being too stingy while he was still in a minor post (before 284). He replied in jest, ‘I shall be generous enough when I become emperor,’ to which she replied, ‘Do not jest, Diocletian, for you will become emperor’ (Magie III, 1968:439).

“In early Irish literature we find this tradition of the *babdruí* (‘druidess’), as well as the *banfhile* or *banfháith* (‘poetess, prophetess’) who, like the *file*, was both poet and prophet at the same time. [See also Dillon 1963.] In addition, we find references to the *bancháinte* (‘female satirist’), which indicates that well into the Christian period women in Irish society were considered to have certain powers, which could be used for good or for ill. In fact, St. Patrick’s Lorica (‘Breast-plate’) invokes the powers of God and His Universe against, among other things, ‘the enchantments of women (*brichtu ban*) and smiths and druids’ (Henry 1984:146).

“Two recently discovered Gaulish inscriptions greatly expand our knowledge of Gaulish sorceress. The first was discovered at Chamalières, near Clermont-Ferrand, on a leaden tablet found among thousands of wooden tablets at the ritual thermal site of Source des Roches. The charm, placed in the spring by a group of men, seeks the intercession of Maponos (‘Divine Youth’), the Celtic god of healing waters sometimes equated with Graeco-Roman Apollo, specifically asking that their request be expedited ‘through the incantation of women’, (*brixtia anderon*), a Gaulish expression closely corresponding to the Old Irish *brichtu ban*, found in St. Patrick’s Lorica (Henry 1984: 145). The second inscription found on a lead tablet from Larzac, also contains a Gaulish expression parallel to *brichtu ban*, and appears to represent ‘a statement from an indigenous sisterhood of enchantresses’ (Hamp 1986). A translation and interpretation of the tablet has been recently published” (Lejeune et al., 1985): See Doan (1987: 19-21).

The conclusion is unavoidable that Celtic and Germanic druidess’ and prophetess’ are manifestations of the White Goddess as Weaver of Fate and, no doubt, in exceptional instances were epiphanies as well.

“[In *The Tain*] Medb reviews her troops from her chariot before setting off on the cattle raid. It is at this point that Medb encounters the *banfháith* (‘prophetess’) Feidelm, also riding in a chariot. According to the description of Feidelm found in the *Book of Leinster* version of *The Tain*: ‘The girl was weaving a fringe, holding a weaver’s beam of white bronze in her right hand with seven strips of red gold on its point (i.e. weaving threads in a magical manner, to enable her to prophesy the coming battles). She wore a spotted, green-speckled cloak, with a

round, heavy-handed brooch in the cloak above her breast. She had a crimson, rich-blooded countenance, a bright laughing eye, thin, red lips. She had shining pearly teeth; you would have thought they were showers of fair pearls which were displayed in her head. Like new *partaing* (Parthian leather) were her lips. The sweet sound of her voice and speech were melodious as the strings of harps plucked by the hands of masters. As white as snow falling in one night was the lustre of her skin and body (shining) through her garments. She had a long and very white feet with pink, even, round and sharp nails. She had long fair yellow, golden hair; three tresses of her hair round her head, another tress (falling behind) which touched the calves of her legs (C. O'Rahilly 1967: 143).

“When Medb questions her who she is, she responds: I am Feidelm the prophetess from Síd Chruachna (the *síd* in Connacht). Each time that Medb questions her as to how she sees their army, Feidelm replies, ‘I see red on them. I see crimson.’ Since Medb remains incredulous, Feidelm recites a poem in which she prophesies the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn's destruction of the army ...” (Doan 1987: 66)

If the Great Goddess retained much of her strength and vitality in medieval Ireland, it seems only natural that the druidess and prophetess should be prominent for they are her epiphany as the Weaver of Fate.

The Goddess as Muse was the all consuming passion of Robert Graves and thus draped upon his shoulders the responsibility to comment upon the rarity of women poets in antiquity and subsequent medieval times as well.

“A woman who concerns herself with poetry should, I believe, either be a silent Muse and inspire poets by her womanly presence, as Queen Elizabeth and the Countess of Derby did, or she should be the Muse in a complete sense: she should in be in turn Arianrhod, Blodeuwedd and the Old Sow of Maenawr Penardd who eats her farrow, and should write in each of these capacities with antique authority. She should be visible moon: impartial, loving, severe, wise. ...

“Sappho undertook this responsibility: ... The sixteenth century Welsh woman poet, Gwerfyl Mechain, also seems to have played the part of Cerridwen: ‘I am the hostess of the irreproachable Ferry Tavern, a white gowned moon welcoming any man who comes to me with silver’” (Graves 1960: 447).

“... The White Goddess is anti-domestic; she is the perpetual ‘other woman’, and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years, because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart.

“An unhappy solution to this difficult problem was attempted in Connaught in the seventh century A.D. by Liadan of Corkaguiney, a noblewoman and also an ollav-poet. She went with her train of twenty four poet pupils, as the immemorial custom was, on a poetic *cuairt*, or circuit of visits where, among others, the poet Curithir made an ale feast for her and she fell in love with him. He felt an answering love and asked her ‘Why should we not marry? A son born to us would be famous.’ She answered: ‘Not now, it would spoil my round of poetic visits. Come to me later at Corkaguiney and I will go with you’. Then she began to brood on his words, and the more she brooded the less she liked them: he had spoken not of their love but only of their fame and of a famous son who might one day be born to them. Why a son? Why not a daughter? Was he rating his gifts above hers? Why was Curithir not content to be a

poet himself and live in her poetic company? To bear children to such a man would be a sin against herself; yet she loved him with all her heart and had solemnly promised to go with him.

“So when Liadan had finished her circuit of visits to the kings’ and chieftains’ houses of Connaught, exchanging poetic lore with the poets she found there, and receiving gifts from her hosts, she took a religious vow of chastity which it would be death to break; and did this not for any religious motive but because she was a poet and realized that to marry Curithir would destroy the poetic bond between them. He came to fetch her presently and true to her promise, she went with him; but, true to her vow, she would not sleep with him. Overwhelmed with grief, he took a similar vow. The two then placed themselves under the direction of the suspicious St. Cummine, who gave Curithir the choice of seeing Liadan without speaking to her, or speaking to her without seeing her. As a poet, he chose speech. Alternately, each would wander around the other's wattled cell in Cummine's monastic settlement, never being allowed to meet. When Curithir finally persuaded Cummine to relax the severity of this rule, he at once accused them of unchastity and banished Curithir from the settlement. Curithir renounced love, became a pilgrim, and Liadan died of remorse for the barren victory that she had won over him” (Graves 1960: 449-450).

O’Brien (1981: 247) notes a tradition in Munster Gaeltacht (Scotland) that when the gift of the poet, which is believed to be hereditary, comes to reside in a woman that will be the end of poets in that family lineage: the ‘gift’ dies with the female poet, children notwithstanding. I wonder if this belief reflects strong Christian influence even though female druids and poets were rare in pre-Christian and early Christian Celtic society.



Continuity With Early Poets

The critical problem for today’s Celtic revival, which is rarely confronted with historical maturity or integrity, is to *determine via a rigorous reading of the literary and historical record* (as opposed to utilizing blind intuition aided only by fantasy) the extent to which druidic practice and the poetry forms of pre-Christian bards survived after Celtic lands had been Christianized. This determination is essential for any attempt to reconstruct druidic and poetic practice by backward extrapolation and it also lays the foundation with which to judge claims of authenticity by contemporary practitioners within the Celtic revival of this century. Druids and filids may have written in Ogham but no poetry survives in either Ireland or Wales which predates the coming of Christ’s church. Once again, Williams research proves invaluable.

“To what extent did the Welsh pencerdd and the Irish ollav inherit and continue the tradition of the [pre-Christian] Celtic poets? ...

“There were court poets in the court of Maelgwn Gwynedd in north-west Wales in the second quarter of the sixth century and they were panegyrists. Of that, Gildas does not leave us in any doubt. Unfortunately, none of their poems survives; we would give much to be able to study the language in which they were chanted. In the third quarter of the same century, if we are to believe the tradition, Taliesin sang the praises of King Cynan Garwyn in the court of Powys before he went to the court of Rheged to eulogize King Urien. Of the few surviving poems which have any claim to be regarded as the genuine work of Taliesin, one is a lament, the others are panegyrics, if we include the *dadolwch* already mentioned.¹⁵ To the north-east of Rheged lay the kingdom of Gododdin, Ptolemy's *Uotadini*. About A.D. 600 its ruler Mynddawg Mwynfawr dispatched from his court in the vicinity of Edinburgh a band of warriors to win back from the English a strategically situated Catraeth (Richmond, Catterick). They fought almost literally to the last man but failed in their purpose. However, their praise was sung in a series of elegaic odes by Aneirin and some of these have survived.

“... (T)he extraordinary fact is that is that for more than a thousand years after them [Welsh poets] the vast bulk of Welsh poetry is cast in the same mould as theirs, praise of the living and of the dead. Of course there have been other types of poetry but until the loss of independence in 1282 most poets in Wales were court poets and if we allow ourselves the same liberty as they did, to call a mansion a court and a nobleman a prince, there were court poets of a kind well into the seventeenth century.¹⁶

“According to tradition, Taliesin's earliest surviving poem is the eulogy addressed to Cynan Garwyn. It is in three parts: the first enumerates his gifts to the poet, the second his victories, the third tells of the fame which he has and will have.

“If we could regard the first part as an independent poem, it would be a Welsh counterpart to the Vedic ‘*Dānastutis*’ or ‘Praises of Gifts’, panegyrics commemorating the liberality of princes towards the priestly singers employed by them, and to the Irish *Amra Chonroi*, a composition devoted almost exclusively to the gifts which *Cúroi* is said to have bestowed on his *fili* Ferchertne.

“However, the first part is not independent, and the poem as a whole seems to have a definite structure. Indeed, its tripartite nature recalls Dumézil's analysis of the mechanism of early Vedic praise poetry, a mechanism which can be expressed as two variations of the formula *do ut des*, namely *laudo ut des* and *dedisti, laudau* (or *laudaerunt*), *da*. Perhaps the second variation is not so very far removed from the structure of the poem. Is Taliesin telling his patron: ‘You have bestowed great gifts upon me, [but I have also bestowed great *kleos*, *kudos*, or *menes* on you by my poems]. Your victories testify to that. Your *kleos*, will continue and increase [because of my poems]. [I need not tell you, but continue to show your generosity to me]?’ ...

“In the beginning the lament or the dirge served the same purpose as the panegyric. It belongs to the same world of ideas as that which gave rise to the hero cults. In this world the

¹⁵ “Taliesin sang of of his greatest patron, Urien of Rheged: ‘And until I perish in old age/In my death's sore need,/I shall not be happy/If I praise not Urien’, ... (Tolstoy 1985: 34).

¹⁶ Another point on which Robert Graves (1960) would assuredly have disagreed.

dead are still powerful. That is why the possession of the hero's remains and his grave is a matter of great importance. That is why the hero's goodwill has to be retained and secured by sacrifices at his tomb. In this world too, the family is a living corporate entity. The solidarity of the primitive family is a fact too well known to call for emphasis here, but it should be remembered that it included not only the living but also the dead members, and that the living felt that they needed the help of the dead and especially of those who could contribute greatly to their well-being and that of their descendants.¹⁷

“... I have invoked the Welsh evidence because it provides a corrective to the traditional view of the early activities of the *fili*. According to that view, the *fili* was primarily a man of learning: he was an expert in the mysteries of law and religion, he knew the lore of the past and could foretell the future. ... What the *fili* did not do or did very rarely, according to some scholars, was to compose praise poetry. This work he left to the *bard*, a minor figure in the Irish poetic hierarchy. Later, however, he took upon himself the duties of the *bard* with the result that most of the poems composed between 1250 and 1650 are eulogies. Professor Gerard Murphy sums up at the end of his important article on ‘Bards and Filidh’: Under the stress of circumstances the filidh of the end of the twelfth century seem to have turned what had hitherto been a secondary function into a primary function, so that the once neglected praise-poems (originally doubtless considered typical only of bards, or of filidh assuming bardic functions) began to be preserved and held in honour.’¹⁸ ...

“In his collection of fragments of Old Irish Poetry, *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands*, Kuno Myer lists 131 pieces of poems which could be regarded as typical products of the court poet, ... (i)ndeed, some of them have all the appearance of authenticity and all the characteristics of the typical product of the court poet. ...”¹⁹ ²⁰(Williams 1972: 26-30).

¹⁷“Although Aeschylus was a dramatist and not a theologian, there can be no doubt he touches the nerve of a living belief among the Greeks when he makes Electra in his *Choephoroi* (*The Libation-Bearers*) call to her dead father in her tomb: Be thou the channel of blessings up from thy grave to us, aided by the gods, by Earth, and by victorious Justice (II. 147-8)” (Williams 1972: 28).

¹⁸ “The honour price of a *bard* was half that of a *fili*; he could not claim anything on the grounds of being a learned man, and in the *Book of Rights* it is expressly stated that he cannot claim what was proper to the *fili*, namely, knowledge about kings and their privileges” (Williams 1972: 29, footnote 3).

¹⁹ “One name for a eulogy in Old Irish was *amra*. ... an *amra* composed on Cú Roi has been preserved: that he was a legendary figure does not deprive it of its value as an example of the genre. Another is the famous *Amra Cholium (b) Chille*, a poem of extraordinary obscurity, which, according to Thurneysen, ‘can with certainty be ascribed to the time it was composed, namely the death of St. Columcille in the year 597’ [Binchy 1961: 18], and as such **is the oldest definitely datable work of Irish literature**. The language is difficult, perhaps intentionally so, and if the poem is typical of the work of the *filid* in this genre, it is no wonder if many an *amra* has been lost, and it would occasion no surprise to learn that there has been a powerful reaction against their artificial obscurity” (Williams 1972: 31).

²⁰ “ I should like to suggest that we are too ready to assume that because the court poet was called *bardos* among the continental Celts, he must have been the so-called *bard* in Ireland, and that because the *bard* was overshadowed by the *fili*, the essential function of the court poet, eulogy, must have been a minor one in Ireland. We should remember that our knowledge of the continental *bardos* is at best fragmentary - the

“Professor Binchy [1961: 7-8, 11] is in no doubt that the the *filid* were court poets among other things: ‘These *filid* were the custodians of what was called in Old Irish *senchas*, the ancient lore, the tradition of the race. They had various functions: they had to compose praise-poems for their royal patrons, and also elegies after their death. Some of these court poems survive ... and they include some of the oldest Irish in existence. They show, incidentally, that there was a native school of poetry with its own system of metrics before the syllabic meters, which afterwards developed into Dán Díreach, had been taken over from the Latin hymn sequences: ...’ (Williams 1972: 30-31, footnote 3). A further proof that the *filid* was the court poet in early Ireland is to be found in the fact that he is traditionally the Irish satirist, for satirizing in the Indo-European tradition is the obverse side of eulogizing. Professor Renou [1939: 177-178] has shown that the Vedic root *sans-* can denote an action designed to create a baleful effect, a fact reflected in the meaning of Lat. *cens-or*, *cens-us*, and Professor Dumézil [:230ff] has made brilliant use of the story of Bres in the *Second Battle of Moytura* to show how the king who does not provide subsistence for his people, is to be contrasted with the king who provides abundance, and how the former is satirized, the latter eulogized. After Corpre mac Etaine, the poet of the Tuatha Dé had composed a satire, the first of its kind in Ireland, on Bres, ‘there was nought save decay on him from that hour’.

“There are numerous stories to show the effectiveness of the *filís*’ satire in early times, but satire can only be understood as the counterpart of eulogy. If the latter could establish and strengthen a man’s fame and honour, the former could diminish and destroy it, and there have been societies in which life without honour was not only worthless but intolerable. ...” (Williams 1972: 30-32).

Rees and Rees (1961: 140-141) see each social class within pre-Christian Celtic society reflecting the tripartite social organization which was characteristic of all Indo-European peoples: priest, warrior and farmer. Thus the learned class in Celtic Ireland was composed of druids, *filids* and bards. The druids and *filids* were both known as philosophers with the druids presiding at sacrifices and acting as judges in both public and private disputes, a role that merged into that of diplomat when war threatened. The *filids* were probably specialists in foretelling the future by augury and sacrifice; it is certainly controversial whether these functions were held by a distinct class or part of the druidic repertoire. Bards specialized in praise songs accompanied by a harp. Druids obviously can be called priests. The pre-occupation of *filids* with inspiration and prophecy connects them with that warrior group known as *débordant* - beserk - who gave themselves over to the divine empowerment and rushed naked and screaming into battle to do terrible deeds that demanded almost divine strength. The praises of the bard to his king can be considered analogous to the food gifts of the farmers to royalty.

possibility must not be overlooked that originally he may have been the reciter, not the composer, of court poetry-and it is to be noted that even in Wales it looked at one time as if the court poet would abandon the title *bard* in favor of *pencerdd*. It is not impossible either that the learning and knowledge on which the early *filid* prided themselves may have been given the greater prominence than they had originally, partly because the *filid* inherited the functions of the druids and partly because they had to compete with the ecclesiastical scholars, the *sapientes* mentioned in the Annals. ... However, there can be no doubt that much of the early poetry produced in Ireland has been lost and much of the early court poetry may have been lost precisely because it was too learned, too recondite” (Williams 1972: 29-30).

With the coming of Christianity, the druids lose their function and either become priests (many did) or continue as *filids* (which may have been part of their persona in any case). “ However, ‘The Book of Rights’, compiled or edited in the eleventh century, states that ‘knowledge about kings and their privileges is proper to the *fili* and not to the bard’. According to other texts, the honour price of a bard was but half that of a *fili*, and moreover, a bard could claim nothing on the ground of being a man of learning and should be satisfied with what his native wit might win him” (Rees and Rees 1961: 141). Later the *filid* and bard become indistinguishable and by the thirteenth century the *filid*’s primary role was to compose praise poetry.

In pre-Christian Wales, druids are rarely mentioned. Corresponding to the Irish *filid* or ollav (ollamh) was the *pencerdd*, the chief poet. Beneath him was the poet of the household, the *bard teulu*, who was one of the twenty four court officers and, when taking office, he received a harp from the king from which he was never to be parted. Before and during battle he sang for warriors. The *cerddorion* were a class of minstrels who recognized the *pencerdd* as their lord and there are references to a lowly class called the *croesaniaid*. By medieval times, the terms had changed. *Prydydd* referred to a ‘poet’, the *teuluwr* was the ‘poet of the household or house/troop’, and the minstrel was a *clerwr*. The *teulwr* was a disciple of the *prydydd*, yet ‘their arts are opposed to one another.’ The *teulwr* composed love poems and were charged with ‘gladdening the company, generosity and courteous supplication’ (Rees and Rees 1961: 181).

The c. 900 A.D. *Cormac’s Glossary* describes one process of druidic incantation. A bit of raw flesh from a pig, dog or cat is chewed and then behind closed doors, the druid pronounces an invocation over it and offers it his idols, which were images of the druid himself. These idols are then invoked and if the desired insight is not obtained before the next day, the druid uttered incantations against his palms and then took his idols to bed with him. He placed his two hands upon his cheeks and fell asleep, all the while being watched over so that he would not be disturbed until the revelation occurred. This ritual was known as Imbas and was prohibited by St. Patrick; anyone practicing it would be consigned to purgatory (Hyde 1910: 84).



The Training of a Poet

I am privileged to own a copy of *A Literary History of Ireland* by Douglas Hyde published in London in 1910. This study is invaluable for a project such as this and the book is nearly unobtainable. Hyde was scholar and lover of Celtic Irish poetry even though his own ancestry was Anglo-Norman. Outraged at the cultural genocide perpetrated upon Ireland by his ancestors, he was determined to ‘set the record straight’ and demonstrate the magnificence of Irish literature through the ages. His study does more than that for it is a first class history of the rise and fall of the poets and bards. Furthermore, Hyde not only had a personal collection of

family manuscripts, he gained access to many a private family library and was able to take notes about matters bardic and geneological which had never, and will never, see the light of publication for the general public. He had the mind of a good historian and was well aware the bottom line is the establishment of a dated chronology. Convinced that most Irish mythic events after 1,000 B.C. were based in real history, he rigorously attempted to identify the historical personages behind the myths and date them wherever possible. His scholarship is certainly up to modern standards and it serves to provide a wealth of detail on matters usually given only a sentence or two in modern books about Irish druids and early Celtic poetry. The identification of the archeological site of Navan hill fort (c. 250 B.C.) as the legendary Emain Macha, seat of the mythical king Conchobor Mac Nessa who forced the Horse Goddess Macha to foot race while pregnant (Ross 1981), serves to validate Hyde's convictions about the nature of historical reality and re-affirm the intuition of all of us who view the mythological process as often proceeding via an historical process. I will quote extensively from Hyde (1910) because of the rarity of the book, the high level of scholarship and the near uniqueness of much of the material which is so important to this project.

“It was probably only after the country had become Christianized and full of schools of learning that the bards experienced the desire of writing down their sagas, with as much as they could recapture of the ancient poetry upon which they were built. In the Book of Leinster, a manuscript of the twelfth century, we find an extraordinary list of no less than 187 of those romances with three hundred and fifty of which an ollamh had to be acquainted. The ollamh was the highest dignitary amongst the bards, and it took him from nine to twelve years' training to learn the two hundred and fifty prime stories and the one hundred and secondary ones along with the other things which were required of him. The prime stories - combinations of epic and novel, prose and poetry - are divided in the manuscripts into the following catalogue: Destructions of fortified places, Cow spoils (i.e. cattle raiding expeditions), Courtships and wooings, Battles, Cave stories, Navigations, Tragical deaths, Feasts, Sieges, Adventures, Elopements, Slaughters, Water eruptions, Expeditions, Progresses and Visions. ‘He is not poet,’ says the Book of Leinster, ‘who does not synchronise and harmonise all the stories.’ We possess, as I have said, the names of 187 such stories in the Book of Leinster, and the names of many more are given in the tenth- or eleventh century tale of Mac Coisè; and all the known ones, with the exception of one tale added later on, and one which, evidently through an error in transcription refers to Arthur instead of Aithirne, are about events prior to the year 650 or thereabouts. We may take it, then, that this list was drawn up in the seventh century. ‘Now who were the authors of these couple of hundred romances? It is a natural question, but one which cannot be answered. There is not a trace of their authorship remaining, if authorship be the right word for what I suspect to have been the gradual growth of race, tribal, and family history, and of Celtic mythology, told and retold, and polished up, and added to; some of them, especially such as are the descendants of a pagan mythology, must have been handed down for perhaps countless generations; others recounted historical, tribal, or family doings, magnified during the course of time, others again of more recent date, are perhaps fairly accurate accounts of actual events, but all prior to about the year 650. I take it that as soon as bardic schools and colleges began to be formed, there was no class of learning more popular than that which taught

the great traditional stories of the various tribes and families of the great Gaelic race, and the intercommunication between the bardic colleges propagated local tradition throughout all Ireland' (Hyde 1910: 277-279).

"A preamble to List A in the *Book of Leinster* indicates that the poets memorized the tales under these headings:

'Of the qualifications of a Poet in Stories and in Deeds, here follows, to be related to kings and chiefs, viz.: Seven times Fifty stories, i.e. Five times Fifty Prime Stories, and Twice Fifty Secondary Stories; and these Secondary Stories are not permitted (assigned) but to four grades only, viz., an *Ollamh*, an *Anrath*, a *Cli*, and a *Cano*. And these are the Prime Stories: Destructions, and Cattle-raids, and Violent Deaths, and Feasts, and Sieges, and Adventures, and Elopements, and Slaughters.'

"After listing the tales under these twelve headings, five more headings are introduced with the statements that: 'It is as Prime Stories these below are estimated; namely Irruptions, and Visions, and Loves, and Expeditions and Invasions.' While the preamble asserts that there were 250 Prime Stories and 100 Secondary Stories, less than 200 of the Prime Stories, and none of the Secondary Stories, are listed. It is possible that certain categories of Prime Stories are missing from both lists. ... In any case, the absence of any reference to the nature of the hundred 'Secondary Stories' (*foscéla*) constitutes a serious gap in our knowledge. The omission of these tales from the lists, together with the fact that they were the prerogative of the first four grades of poets, suggests that it may not have been proper to tell them to the public generally, and there seems to have been no justification for regarding them as 'secondary' in any perjorative sense.

"Again the body of traditional lore recounted at the Assembly of Carmun includes such subjects as Assemblies, Annals, Prohibitions, and Divisions, which do not seem to be fully covered by the headings in the Lists. It also mentions the important class of tales known as *Dindsenchas*, stories of places, to which there is no reference in the lists. Thus, important as they are as an indication of the way in which poets organized their material, the lists as we have them cannot be regarded as a complete canon of the traditional literature, though evidence we have considered ... suggests that List A with its seventeen types made of twelve plus five may be an attempt to arrange the tales in accordance with a cosmological pattern" (Rees and Rees 1916: 208-209).

Hyde (1910) describes the later bardic schools drawing upon the account in the *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Clanricarde* (London, 1722, Dublin, 1744). "The session of the bardic schools began about Michaelmas, and the youthful aspirants to bardic glory came trooping, about that season, from all quarters of the four provinces to offer with trembling hearts their gifts to the ollamh of the bardic college, and to take possession of their new quarters. Very extraordinary these quarters were; for the college usually consisted of a long low group of whitewashed buildings, excessively warmly thatched and lying in the hollow of some secluded valley, or shut in by a sheltering wood, far removed from noise of human traffic and from the bustle of the great world. But what most struck the curious beholder was the entire absence of windows or partitions over the greater portion of the house.

"According as each student arrived he was assigned a windowless room to himself, with no other furniture in it than a couple of chairs, a clothes rail, and a bed. When all the students

had arrived, a general examination of them was held by the professors and ollamhs, and all who could not read and write Irish well, or who appeared to have an indifferent memory, were usually sent away. The others were divided into classes, and the mode procedure was as follows: The students were called together into the great hall or sitting room, amply illuminated by candles and bog torches, and we may imagine the head ollamh, perhaps the venerable and patriotic O'Gnive himself, addressing them upon their chosen profession, and finally proposing some burning topic such as O'Neill's abrogation of the title of O'Neill, for the higher class to compose a poem on, in perhaps the Great or Little Rannaigheacht (Ran-ee-acht) metre, while for the second class he sets one more commonplace, to be done into Deibhidh (D'yevvee) or Séadna (Shayna), or some other classic measure, and any student who does not know all about syllabification, quartans, concord, correspondence, termination, and union, which go to the various metres, is turned over to an inferior professor.

“The students retired after their breakfasts, to their own warm but perfectly dark compartments, to throw themselves each upon his bed, and there think and compose till supper hour, when a servant came round to all the rooms with candles, for each to write down what he had composed. They were then called together into the great hall, and handed in their written compositions to the professors, after which they chatted and amused themselves until bedtime.

“On every Saturday and the eve of every holiday the schools broke up, and the students dispersed themselves over the country. They were always gladly received by the land owners of the neighborhood, and treated hospitably until their return on Monday morning. The people of the district never failed to send in, each in turn, large supplies to the college, so that, what between this and the presents brought by the students at the beginning of the year, the professors are said to have been fairly rich.

“The schools always broke up on the 25th of March, and the holidays lasted for six months, it not being considered judicious to spend the warm half of the year in the close college, from which all light and draughts had been so carefully excluded.

“I can hardly believe, however, that the students of law, history and the classics - all the educated classes could speak Latin which was their means of communication with the English - were treated as here described, or enjoyed such long holidays. It was probably only a special class of candidates for bardic degrees who were thus dealt with, and the account given above may be somewhat exaggerated; the students probably composed in their dark compartments only on certain days.

“In the seventeenth century we find that the three or four hundred metres taught in the schools of the tenth century had been practically restricted to a couple of dozen, and these nearly all heptasyllabic. It is quite probable, as Thurneysen asserts, that the metres of the early Roman hymns - themselves probably largely affected by Celtic models - exercised in their turn a reflex influence upon Irish poetry, and especially on that of the bards, in contradistinction to that of the *filés*. Indeed it is pretty certain that if the Roman metres had not before existed in Irish the bards would have made no scruple about copying them; and they may thus have come by these octosyllabic and heptasyllabic lines about which they were in after times so particular. Of the metres chiefly in vogue in the schools of the later centuries, the most popular was the Deibhidh ... It was, as it were, the official metre - the hexameter of the Gael. All the seven

thousand lines and odd lines of the *Contention of the Bards*, for instance, are written in it. ...²¹ (Hyde 1910: 528-530).

“There is the system [word-building to create the setting of poetic thought] of the Greeks and Romans, according to which every syllable of every word is, as it were, hall-marked with its own ‘quantity’, counted, that is, (often almost independently of pronunciation) to be in itself either short or long, and their verse was made by special collocations of these short or long syllables - a form highly artistic and beautiful.

“Then there is the principle of the Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and Teutonic peoples, which prevailed in England even down to the time of Chaucer, in which verse is marked only by accent and staff-rhyme, in other words is alliterative as in the the *Book of Piers Ploughman*.

“Lastly there is the rhymed poetry of the later Middle Ages, of which outside of Wales and Ireland there probably exists no example in a European vernacular language older than the ninth century. This system, apparently invented by the Celts assumed in Ireland a most extraordinary and artificial form of its own, the essence of which was that they divided the consonants into *groups*, and any consonant belonging to a particular group was allowed to rhyme with any other consonant belonging to the same [group].²² Thus a word ending in *t* could rhyme with a word ending in *p* or *c*, but with no other; a word ending in *b* could rhyme with one ending in *g* or *d*, but with no other, and so on. Thus ‘rap’ would have been considered by the Irish to make perfect rhyme with with ‘sat’ or ‘mac’ but not with ‘rag’; and ‘rag’ to make perfect rhyme with ‘slab’ or ‘mad’ but not with ‘cap’, ‘sat’ or ‘mac’” (Hyde 1910: 539-540).

“...(T)he only full account we have of an Irish bardic school, [is] that in the *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Clanricarde* (London, 1722, Dublin, 1744). In it we read that the pupils were required to work at their poems, ‘each by himself on his own Bed, the whole next Day in the Dark, till at a certain Hour in the Night, Lights being brought in, they committed it to writing.’ Apparently this reflects the general custom in Ireland; when he wished to compose a poem, the fully trained poet withdrew to his bed and enclosed himself in darkness. In Scotland, he resorted to a still more complicated process, if we are to believe the rather hostile account in Martin's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1703, 116). ‘They shut their Doors and Windows for a Days time, and lie on their Backs with

²¹ “.. there has been on the part of Irish Continental scholars an extraordinary amount of discordant theories as to the scansion of the Irish classical metres”. Hyde (1910: 531-533) gives a favorite 17th century poem, which is in Great Rannaigheacht (heptasyllabic) metre as usually presented thus: ‘To Hear Handsome Women WEEP,/In DEEP distress Sobbing Sore,/Or Gangs of Greece scream for FAR,/They sweeter ARE than Arts snore.’ However he does not believe there was any real metrical accent with each verse separately scanned and words pronounced as if one were speaking prose. If true this poem would look like this on the printed page: ‘To hear handsome Women *weep*/In *deep* distress,/Sobbing sore,/Or gangs of geese/Scream from *far*,/They sweeter *are*/Than Arts snore.’

²² “Their classification was as follows: S stood by itself because of the peculiar phonetic laws which it obeys. P.C.T. called soft consonants ... B.G.D. called hard consonants ... F. CH. TH. called rough consonants ... LL. M. NN. NG. RR. called strong consonants. Bh. Dh. Ch. Mh. L.N.R. called light consonants” (Hyde 1910: 540) .

a Stone upon their Belly, and Plads upon their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick.'

“There can be no doubt that the ritual described in these accounts had been handed down from ancient times and that it implied a belief that the poet was seeking literal inspiration, perhaps by gods or spirits, perhaps even by the spirits of the dead. That such a belief existed in early times we have already demonstrated, and it could be further confirmed by a detailed examination of the use made of dreams, trances, and invocations of the dead as sources of literature within the Irish traditon.

“We do not know to what extent the traditions of the later bardic schools have shaped and distorted our information regarding the earlier educational system of the *filid*, but the conservative character of those traditions makes it probable there is a great deal of truth in the information we have regarding it. Whereas the *Clanricarde Memoirs* mention six or seven years as the normal period of bardic training, earlier accounts stipulate a longer period, although there is no consensus as to the precise number of years. One treatise tells us that the *bard* and *fili* shared the first seven years of training and that the *fili* was instructed for a further period. Apparently it took twelve years to become a fully qualified ollav. The course provided instruction on the sagas as well as poetry; indeed we are told how many tales every grade of pupil had to learn. Theoretically there were special metres for the *fili* and he could claim greater reward for poems in some metres than for poems in others. In the early period *fili* tended to despise the *bairdne* metres as *nuachrutha* or *óig-recta*, but he made them his own at a later stage. Perhaps it was during his last years of training that he was introduced to those metres which were regarded as proper to his art, and to the arts of sorcery and magic, ...

“The fully trained *fili* or ollav in olden times had the outer emblems of his dignified office. He could wear peculiar dress, partly or wholly made of feathers. He had a right to an escort of thirty men. Attached to a court, he could claim a special chair (*cathair ollaman*). He usually followed his father into the profession, sometimes after competition. Thus in The Contention of the Two Sagas we are told how Néde had to concede that Ferchertne was superior to him. The language they used - and the *filid* specialized in an obscure language called *Bélre na Filed* - was so difficult from that day on, we are told, it was decided to separate the office of brehon [jurist] from that of *fili*.

“It is more than probable that the early *filid* schools were supported by the kings. According to the *Clanricarde Memoirs* the pupils at bardic schools were entertained ‘every Saturday and on the Eves of Festival Days by the gentlemen and the farmers of the locality who also furnished them with provisions during their stay at school’ so that the chief Poet was at little or no Charges, but on the contrary, got very well by it. This tradition of hospitality was probably the remnant of another, of hospitality provided by the king of the district. Fear Feasa ón Cháinte describes how the students at the Ó Dálaigh bardic school called on Ó Caoimh and received presents from him at the beginning of the session. In another poem a teacher poet, probably one of the Í Uiginn, describes a visit paid to him and his pupils to a castle and the welcome they received there from the lady. ...

“After St. Patrick came to Ireland, we are told, public utterance was allowed to only three, to the historian to recount events and tells stories, to the *fili* to eulogize and satirize, and to the brehon to deliver judgement. In other words, these three public officials, if indeed they

were three and not one acting in three capacities, were able to retain their posts, and it is no doubt due to them in part that the native culture was not suppressed. The story of Cenn Faelad shows how they succeeded in taking advantage of some of the new techniques introduced by the Church, and the first Irish manuscript of which we know something, *Cin Dromma Snechtai*, shows how they were able to either use those techniques themselves or to get other to use them on their behalf. They probably encountered more than a little opposition from some ecclesiastics, but there were others who supported them strongly, some of these supporters had once been *filid* or pupils of *filid* themselves, like Colum Cille, or Fiacc who when it was suggested to him that his old master Dubthach, ‘chief poet of Ireland’, might follow him and be ordained, exclaimed: ‘That is folly, for there is not a poet in Ireland who is his equal.’ ...

“Later in the Middle Ages they enlarged their field of interest. Not only did they study their language to produce poetic grammar but they also succeeded in evolving a standard literary language which was used throughout Ireland and Gaelic Scotland for more than four centuries virtually unchanged. Not only were they authorities on all kinds of native learning, the legendary and historical as well as the poetic lore, but they absorbed a great deal of the Latin culture of the period with the result that their poems are studded with apologues drawn from continental as well as from native literature. ...” (Williams 1972: 35-40).

Hyde provides additional fascinating detail concerning the *filids* and bards who initially were divided into several classes and grades. “The real poet of the early [medieval] Gaels was the *filé* [filla]. The bard was nothing thought of in comparison with him, and the legal price of his poems was quite small compared with the remuneration of the *filé*. It was the bard who seemed most affected by Latin influence, and the metres which he used seem to have been of relatively new importation. Where the *filé* received his three milch cows for a poem the bard only bore away a calf. The bards were divided into two classes, the Saor and Daor bards, or the patrician and plebian.²³ There were eight grades in each class ... Each of these sixteen classes of bard has his own peculiar metre or framework for his verses, and the lower bard was not allowed to encroach on the metres sacred to the bard next in rank.²⁴

²³ “The various Saor bards were called the *Anshruth-bairdne* (great stream of poetry ?), the *Sruth di aill* (stream down two cliffs ?), the *Tighearn-bhard* (lord bard), the *Admhall*, the *Tuath-bhard* (lay bard), the *bo-bhard* (cow bard) and the *Bard dine*. The highest of the Daor bards was called the *cúl-bhard* (back bard), and after him came the *Sruth-bhrad* (stream bard), the *Drisiuc*, the *cromluatha*, the *Sirti-uí*, the *Rindhaidh*, the *Long-bhard*, and the *bard Loirрге*” (Hyde 1910: 487).

²⁴ “Thus the head of the patrician bands was entitled to make use of the metres called *náth*, metres in which the end of each line makes a vowel rhyme or an alliteration with the beginning of the next, the number of syllables in the line and of lines in the verse being irregular. There were six kinds of *náth metres* called *Deachna*. All these the first bard practised with two honourable metres besides, called the great and little *Séadna*. The *Anshruth* used the two kinds of metre called *Ollbhairdne*, the *Sruth di aill* used *Casbhairdne*, the *Tighearn-bhard* used *Duan-bhairdne*, a generic metre of which there were six species called *Duan-faidesin*, *duan cenálach*, *fordhuan*, *taebh-chasadh*, *tui-chasadh*, and *sreth-bhairdne*. All the metres which these five employed were honourable ones, and went under the generic name of *príomhfódhla*. Then came the *Admhall* with seven measures for himself, *bairdne*, *faidessin*, *blogh-bhairdne*, *brac-bhairdne*, *snedhbhairdne*, *imard-bhairdne*, and *rathnuall*. The *Tuath-bhard* had all the *Rannai gheacht* metres and the *Bo-*

“ ... There were seven grades of Filé, the most exalted being called ollamh [ollav] ... ²⁵. They were so highly esteemed that the annalists gave the obituaries of the head ollamhs as if they were so many princes. The course of study was originally perhaps one of seven years. Afterwards it lasted for twelve years or more. When a poet had worked his way up after at least twelve, but perhaps sometimes twenty years of study, through all the lower degrees, and had at last attained the rank of ollamh, he knew, in addition to all his other knowledge, over three hundred and fifty different kinds of versification, and was able to recite two hundred and fifty prime stories and one hundred secondary ones. The ancient and fragmentary manuscripts from which these details are taken, not only give the name of the metres but have actually preserved examples of between two and three hundred of them taken from different ancient poems, almost all of which have perished to a line, but they give a hint of what once existed. Nearly all the text books used in the career of the poet during his twelve years course are lost ...

“The bardic schools were at no time an unixed blessing to Ireland. They were nonproductive in the economic sense, and as early as the seventh century the working classes felt that these idle multitudes constituted an intolerable drain upon the nation’s resources. Keating in his history says that at this time the bardic order contained a third of the men of Ireland, by which he means a third of the free clans or patricians. These quartered themselves from November to May upon the chiefs and farmers. They had also reached an intolerable pitch of insolence”²⁶ (Hyde 1910: 486-488). Their offensiveness reached such heights that Aed mac Ainmirech, the High King of Ireland who reigned in the late seventh century A.D. decided to banish the bards forever! This proposal was one of the major agenda items at a great convention convened at Drum Ceat near Limavaddy in the north of Ireland to discuss several matters of national concern. The bards were saved by none other than St. Columcille who came over from his monastery of Iona with 140 clerics and with great eloquence “checked the

bard all the *Deibhidh* metres, and these two, *Rannaigheacht* and *Deibhidh*, though thus lowly thought of in early - probably pre-Danish - days were destined in later times, like the cuckoo birds, to oust their fellows and reign in the forefront for many hundred years. The Tuath-bard had also two other metres *Seaghdha* and *Treochair*, and the Bo-bhard in addition to *Deibhidh* had long and short *deachubhaidh*. The classification of the Daor bards and their metres is just as minute” (Hyde 1910: 487).

²⁵ “The lowest grade of *filé* was called the *fucluc* (word maker ?). In his first year he had to learn fifty ogams and straight ogams amongst them. He had to learn the grammar called *Uraicept na n-éigsine*, and the preface to it, and that part of the book called *réimeanna*, or courses, with twenty *dréachts* (stories ?) six metres and other things. The six metres were the six *dians* called *air-sheang*, *midh-sheang*, *iar-sheang*, *air-throm*, *midh-throm* and *iar-throm*” (Hyde 1910: 487-488).

²⁶ “According to the account in the *Leabhar Breac* they went about the country in bands carrying with them a silver pot, which the populace named the ‘pot of avarice,’ which was attached by nine chains of bronze hung on golden hooks, and which was suspended on the spears of nine poets, thrust through links at the end of the chains. They then selected some unfortunate victim, and approached in state his homestead, having carefully composed a poem in laudation. the head poet entering chanted the first verse, and the last poet took it up, until each of the nine had recited his part, whilst all the time the nine best musicians played their sweetest music in unison with the verses, round the pot, into which the unfortunate listener was obliged to throw an ample guerdon of gold and silver. Woe to him indeed, if he refused; a scathing satire would be the result, and sooner than endure the disgrace of this, every one parted to them with a share of his wealth” (Hyde 1910: 488-489).

fury of the exasperated chieftains”, although their numbers were reduced. It was also decided the High King would retain one chief ollav in his retinue and the kings of the five provinces, the chiefs of each territory and the lords of each sub-district also would retain an ollav in their service. No other poets were to pursue the calling, unless especially sanctioned (Hyde 1910: 489-490). This event is extremely important for another reason because it adds considerable complexity to the often repeated conviction that the Church bore the bards an unremitting hatred. This simplistic conclusion is held by those who cannot differentiate between druids and poets. Druids were relentlessly persecuted by the Church because they controlled the gold trade that originated in Ireland (Ross and Robins 1989) and powerful estoeric pagan lore as well; primarily the sacred tree alphabet and calendar. The fact that druids composed poetry did not make them ‘poets’ per se. The poets although aware of some of the most powerful ritual, *did not control it*, and were often converted and then quite amenable to including Biblical metaphor in their verse. A Christian druid is obviously a contradiction in terms.

“If the bards lost severely in numbers and prestige on this occasion they were in the long run amply compensated for it by their acquiring a new and recognized status in the state. Their uncharted freedom and licentious wanderings were indeed checked, but, on the other hand, they became for the first time possessors of fixed property and of local stability. Distinct public estates in land were set apart for their maintenance, and they were obliged to in return to give public instruction to all comers in the learning of the day ... Rathkenry in Meath, and Masree in Cavan are particularly mentioned as bardic colleges then founded, where any of the youth of Ireland could acquire a knowledge of history and of the sciences. The High-king, the provincial kings, and the sub-kings were all obliged by law to set apart a certain portion of land for the poet of the territory, to be held by him and his successors free of rent, and a law was passed making the persons and the property of poets sacred, and giving them right of sanctuary in their own land from all the men of Ireland. From this time forward for nearly a thousand years the bardic colleges, as distinct from the ecclesiastical ones, taught poetry, law and history, and it was they who educated the lawyers, judges, and poets of Ireland.

“As far as we can judge the bards continued to flourish in equal power and position with the dignitaries of the Church, and their colleges must have been nearly as important institutions as the foundations of the religious orders, until the onslaught of the Northmen reduced the country [10th century] ... It was probably at this time that the carefully observed distinction between the bard and *filé* broke down, for in later times the words seem to have been regarded as synonymous.

“For some time after the Norman conquest [1167-1171] the bardic colleges seem to have again suffered eclipse ... But the great Anglo-Norman houses soon became Irishised and adopted Irish bards of their own. ... the importance of the bards as individuals could not have been much diminished ...

“The Anglo-Normans not only kept bards of their own, but some of themselves also became poets. ... After a few generations the Anglo-Normans had completely forgotten Norman-French, and as they never, with few exceptions learned English, they identified themselves completely with the Irish past so that amongst Irish poets we find numbers of Nugents, Englishes, Condons, Cusacks, Keatints, Comyns and other foreign names.

“It was only after the Anglo-Norman government had developed into an English one that the bards began to feel its weight [1272- 1307]. The slaying of the Welsh bards by Edward is now generally regarded as political fiction. There is no fiction, however, about the treatment meted out to the Irish ones. The severest acts were passed against them over and over again. The nobles were forbidden to entertain them, in the hope that they might die out or starve ... [The bards were accused of inciting the upper classes to extortion, rape, and rebellion.] Orders were taken, and taken so thoroughly that O’Brien, Earl of Thomond, obliged to enforce them against the bards, hanged three distinguished poets ‘for which abominable, treacherous act,’ say the ‘Four Masters,’ ‘the earl was satirized and denounced.’ ...

“Spencer the poet was not slow in finding out what a power his Irish rivals were in the land, and he at once set himself to malign and blacken them. ...

“It would be difficult to overrate the importance of the colleges of hereditary bards and the influence they exercised in the life of the sixteenth century. They fairly reflected public opinion and help make it what it was. ... for they traversed the island from end to end, were equally welcome north, south, east, and west, and had unrivalled opportunities for becoming acquainted with the trend of public affairs, and with political movements.

“Most people, owing to their comparative neglect of Irish history, seem to be of opinion that the bards were harpers, or at least musicians of some sort. ... They were verse makers, pure and simple ... when, as only sometimes happened - they wrote a eulogy or panegyric on a patron, and brought it to him, they introduced along with themselves a harper and possibly a singer to whom they had taught their poem, and in the presences of their patron to the sound of the harp, the only instrument allowed to be touched on such occasions, the poem was solemnly recited or sung. The real name of the musician was not *bard* - the bard was a verse maker - but *oirfideadh* (errh-fid-ya), and the musicians, though a numerous and honourable class, were absolutely distinct from the bards and *filés*. It was only after the break-up of the Gaelic polity, after the wars of Cromwell [1659] and of William [1690], that the verse maker merges in the musician, and the harper and the bard become fused in one ...” (Hyde 1910: 490-497).

Just before this further destruction of Irish culture and politics, there was a last outburst of classical poetry in the early 17th century. The most extraordinary poets of this period were Teig Dall O’Higinn of county Sligo and brother to the Archbishop of Tuam and Eochaidh (Yohy) O’Hussey, the chief bard of the Maguire of Fermanagh; much of their work survives. There is a poem by Teig Dall in which he describes a night spent in the house of Maolmordha Mac Sweeney, a night which might have been the last of its kind and harkens back to all the millenia in which druids and then bards were central to the governance and mytho-poetics of their times. Teig Dall met on that night Brian mac Namee, the chief poet to Torloch Luineach O’Neill; Brian mac Owen, the poet of Mac William of Clanrickard; and Conor O’Higinn, the bard of Mac William-Burke. The chieftain Mac Sweeney paid him homage, of course, but so did the other poets in recognition of his genius. Mac Sweeney gave him one of the best horses in Ireland; Brian mac Angus a matchless wolf dog; and from Brian mac Owen he received a priceless book in which was written ‘the cattle spoils, courtships, and sieges of the world, an explanation of their battles and progress, it was the flower of the King-books of Erin.’ Where, Teig Dall asked, have all the chiefs gone? Teig Dall O’Higgin came to tragic death which is testimony to the great power poetry still commanded and chilling metaphor for the final death of

timeless truth. “Six of the O’Haras of Sligo calling at his house, ate up his provisions, and in return he issued against them a special satire. This satire, consisting of twelve ranns in Deibhidh (D’yevvee) metre, stung them to such a pitch that they returned and cut out the tongue that could inflict such exquisite pain, and poor O’Higinn died of their barbarous treatment some time prior to the year 1617 (Hyde 1910: 520-521).²⁷

The poet O’Gnive wrote “The Stepping Down of the Gael” in Deibhidh metre in which he lamented the death of O’Higinn and the breakup of the Bardic schools which was already underway. [Capitalization indicates where stress was applied during recitation.]

‘Fallen the LAND of Learned men,
The Bardic BAND is fallen;
None now LEARN true SONG to Sing,
How LONG our FERN is Fading!

Fearful your Fates O’Higinn,
And Yohy Mac McLaughlinn,
Dark was the DAY through FEUD Fell
The GOOD, the GAY, the GENTLE.

Ye were Masters Made to please
O’Higinnses, O’Dalys;
GLOOMY ROCKS have Wrought your fates,
Ye PLUMY FLOCKS of Poets.’

“Both these great poets and their contemporaries had been reared in the bardic colleges, which continued to exist, though with gradually diminishing prestige, until near the close of the seventeenth century. I doubt if a single college survived into the eighteenth ... In the seventeenth century, however, several famous colleges of poetry are still found. They are frequently alluded to by the poets of that century, both in Ireland and Scotland, and always under the generic name of ‘the schools’, by which they mean the bardic institutions. Few or none of the persons who did not of themselves come of a bardic tribe were admitted to them, which accounts for the prevalence of the same surnames among the poets for several centuries, O’Dalys, O’Higinnses, O’Coffeys, Macgraihths, Conmees, Wards, O’Mulconrys, etc. None of the students were allowed to come from the neighborhood of the college, but only from far away parts of Ireland, so as not to be distracted by the propinquity of friends and relations” (Hyde 1910: 522-523).

“We now come to the great breakup of and total disruption of the Irish prosody as employed for a thousand years by thousands of poets in the bardic schools and colleges. The principles of this great change may be summed up in two sentences; first, *the adoption of*

²⁷ This last poem of Taig Dall has survived: “I pray to God who poured his blood, since it is their death, to be in life, - they do not live whose living is that of theirs ! - may that crew of six never be slain” (Hyde 1910: 521).

vowel rhyme in place of consonantal rhyme; second the adoption of a certain number of accents in each line in place of a certain number of syllables. These were two of the most far-reaching changes that could overtake the poetry of any country, and they completely metamorphosed that of Ireland.

“It was only on the destruction of the great Milesian and Norman families in the seventeenth century, that the rules of poetry, so long and carefully guarded in the bardic schools, ceased to be taught; and it was the breakup of these schools which rendered the success of the new principles possible” (Hyde 1910: 545-546).

“As for the classical metres of the schools they were already completely lost by the middle of the eighteenth century, and the last specimen which I have found composed in Connacht is one by Father Patrick O’Curneen,²⁸ to the house of the O’Connors, of Belanagare, in 1734, which is in perfect Deibhidh metre. ‘She who rules the Race is one/SPrung from the SParring Ternon,/MARY MILD of MIEN O’Rorke,/Our FAIRY CHILD QUEEN bulwark.’” (Hyde 1910: 545).

“In Scotland, the Debihidh was not forgotten until after Sheriffmuir, in 1715.²⁹ There is an admirable elegy of 220 lines in the *Book of Clanranald* on Allan of Clanranald, who was there slain. It is in no way distinguishable from an Irish poem of the same period. There are other poems in this book in perfect classical metres, for in the kingdom of the Lord of the Isles the bards and their schools may be said to have almost found a last asylum. .. Irish bards and harpers found a second home in Scotland and the Isles, where such poems as those of Gerald, fourth Earl of Desmond, appear to have been as popular as they were in Munster. We may, then place the generation that lived between Sheriffmuir and Culloden³⁰ as that which witnessed the end of the classical metres in both countries” ... (Hyde 1910: 547).



The Poet and the King: the Nature of Sovereignty

²⁸ “The O’Curneens were, according to Mac Firbis’s great Book of Genealogies, the hereditary poets and ollamhs of the O’Rorkes, with whom the O’Conors were closely related” (Hyde 1910: 545).

²⁹ A battle on Nov. 13, 1715 between a vastly superior Jacobite army and Royalist forces proved indecisive although the Jacobites did retreat. 1,000 of the participating soldiers, out a combined total of 16,000 were killed.

³⁰The Battle of Culloden on April 15, 1746 saw the defeat of the ‘Bonnie Prince Charlie’ (Prince Charles Edward) by a superbly trained army under the Duke of Cumberland which undertook its mission with relentless brutality. So ended the last attempt of Scotland to regain its independence by arms. There is a rarely shown documentary recreation of this battle by the BBC which will give you nightmares for weeks should you ever have a chance to view it.

The was no high poetry without the king and there was no high poetry without the ollav or *pencerdd*. The bond was inseparable because the very soul of kingship depended upon a poet to praise royalty. By so doing, the king acquired the semi-divine qualities enumerated in the poems. Understand then that the act of reciting the poem was a ritual act, not an artistic or theatrical performance although the recitation no doubt partaked of the dramatic. The act of recitation in the presence of the king surrounded by his court re-affirmed his right to rule by virtue of his superior, nearly divine attributes held by no other present. The act of recitation was therefore a mythic ritual whose primary purpose was to enhance the strength and wisdom of the king; he was infused with mythic qualities as the recitation unfolded. Only the great poet could do this, only the great king could receive such gift. Remember that druids performed other roles, that of lawmaker and dispenser of justice, diplomat and secretary of state and holder of the sacred lore about trees and calendar. The druidic office could not survive Christianity, indeed it was persecuted much earlier by the Romans in Britain (see the study about Boudicca in this project) because druidic power conflicted directly with the basis of Roman political and economic power and likewise later for the same reasons with the Christian Church. The sacred relationship between king and poet did not so conflict and survived for many centuries after the adoption of Christianity. Only the specific religious references need by changed by the poet which was not much of a problem particularly if both he and the king were Christian.

Tradition records and Irish history confirms, that Comac mac Art (3rd century A.D.) was constantly attended by ten persons: a prince of noble blood, a druid, a physician, a brehon, a bard, a historian, a musician and three stewards. This arrangement persisted unchanged, except for the substitution of a Christian priest for the druid, until the death of Brain Boru in the 11th century (Hyde 1910: 127).

“ ... the oldest extant poems honor Urien of Reged, who emerged immediately thereafter [Battle of Arthuret in 573] as the most powerful of the northern princes. In verse, and in the brief entries of Nennius³¹, Urien stands out as the greatest and best loved prince of his age, chief of the thirteen kings of the north. He is said to have fought on the Clyde, and also to have captured Solomon of Powys, who lived on to die at Chester in 613; his cousin Llywarch is represented as his constant ally, and his arms threatened Calchvynydd ‘in the south’. These notices make Urien supreme in the west from Galloway to Shropshire; and his nephew Mouricus was installed as king in Glevissig, on the Severn Sea.

³¹ Nennius is a little known Welsh (Briton) scholar who wrote in Brecknock or Radnor. There are some thirty manuscripts attributed to him. The *Genealogiae Saxonum* of Nennius' *Historia Britonum* was composed by a Briton living in Strathclyde about 679. Along with the history of Gildas (c.516-570), the *Historia Britonum* presents the earliest information available about the English [i.e.Saxon] conquest of Britain and also contains what may be the earliest historical reference to King Arthur (Davis, 1911: 371). Marsh (1970: 69) dates the *Historia Britonum* to c.858, written when Nennius was in his sixties. He also believes the *Genealogiae Saxonum* to have been taken from a lost seventh century British-Roman account which was contemporary with the Saxon invasion under Hengist during the reign of Vortigern. Marsh believes later chapters of the *Historia Britonum* were based on an English chronicle of 685 which was completed at the time of collapse of the kingdom of Northumbria.

“Urien was more than a king who overawed his fellows; he is celebrated as the one British king who organised his neighbors against the English and beat them soundly. He is well remembered because his bard was Taliesin; and Taliesin acclaims him:

‘most liberal of Christianmen/to men in this world
so you dispense/so long as you live....
ruler all highest/strong champion in battle.
when they tell tales./rage and grief are theirs/bare are their bodies.’

“The poem, like most that Taliesin addressed to him, ends with a signature: ‘Till I am old and failing/In the grim doom of death/I shall have no delight/If my lips praise not Urien.’ **These words were probably written while Urien was still alive, and are the oldest surviving European literature** [emphasis mine].³² The idiom is impressionistic, altogether alien to the imagery of English, or of Greek or Latin poetry. It appeals to the ear and the emotions rather than the eye and understanding. A line of two or three long words outlines a figure that a Latin or Germanic poet describes in a stanza; and the resonance of the individual syllables observes a musical notation as strict as the harpist’s. The structure of the English language admits no comparable use of words; and translation cannot therefore do more than hint at the force of the original” (Morris 1973: 232-233).

Flann mac Lonáin, who was from Aughty in South Connacht and chief ollav of all Ireland, composed this poem on the death of King Aedh Finnliath in 877.

Long is the wintery night,
With fierce gusts of wind,
Under pressing grief we have to encounter it,
Since the red-speared king of the noble house lives no longer.

It is awful to observe
The waves from the bottom heaving,
To these may be compared
All those who with us lament him. (Hyde 1910: 427)

As in many ancient societies, one test of the fitness of the king in Ireland (i.e. his acceptance and empowerment by the Goddess) was that the land would be fertile and no droughts or other climatic catastrophes would destroy the year’s crops. “The ode which the ollav or head-bard is said to have chanted in the ears of the newly inaugurated prince took care to recall it to mind

Seven witnesses there be

³² In the literal sense, Taliesin's eulogy cannot be the oldest European literature for Greece and Rome are European. What Morris means, of course, is that Taliesin's poetry is the oldest surviving post-Classical European literature.

Of the broken faith of kings.
First - to trample on the free,
Next - to sully sacred things,
Next - to strain the law divine
(This defeat in battle brings)
Famine, slaughter, milkless kine,
And disease on flying wings
These seven-fold vivid lights
That light the perjury of kings! (Hyde 1910: 28)

“The connection between the Irish court poet and the king goes back to the coming of the Celts to Ireland, indeed they must have been connected on the Continent before the Celts could be distinguished from the other Indo-Europeans, and from the beginning the poet must have enjoyed special privileges with regard to the sovereign. In Ireland, according to one text, he had the same honour-price as the tribal king (*rí tuaithe*), a fact which is as eloquent as any to his outstanding importance in early Irish society.

“Perhaps his functions were such that he could not help being the court historian as well as the court poet. As Dual Mac Firbis expresses it, ‘The historians of Erin in the ancient times will scarcely be distinguished from those who are now called *aes-ddna* [poets], for it was often at one school they were all educated.’

“As court poet and historian the *fili* would be required to know all the royal geneologies: a king succeeded to the throne partly by heredity. It was both as historian and as brehon that he was required to know the perogatives and prohibitions of each king: indeed, he was expected, it appears to be able to repeat the whole statement from memory, ‘so that he will recount them all in every high assembly’.

“Perhaps the one occasion in the king's life on which the *fili* would take a very prominent, if not the most prominent, part in ancient times would be his inauguration to the kingship. Unfortunately, our information concerning inaugurations is scanty, and we know they varied from region to region.

“At the coronation of the last king of the direct Irish line in Scotland, Alexander III, ‘The ceremony was performed by the bishop of St.Andrews, who girded the king with a military belt. He then explained in Latin, and afterwards in Gaelic, the laws and oaths relating to the king ... After the ceremony was performed, a Highlander repeated on his knees before the throne, in his own language, the geneology of Alexander and his ancestors, up to the first king of Scotland’ (Mac Neill 1968: 210). That was in 1249. We should liked to have an account of the inauguration of that first king of Scotland: we can be sure the part played by the Highlander would have been much greater and would have given us an idea of the part played by the *fili* in earlier times. Even as it stands, the description suggests why the *fili* wrote so many geneological poems and why such poems were considered to be important.

“At the inauguration of the Ó Dubhda the poet Mac Firbis had an important part: ‘The privilege of the first drink (at all assemblies) was given to *O’Caomhain* by O’Dowda and *O’Caomhain* was not to drink until he first presented it (the drink) to the poet, that is. to Mac Firbis; also the arms and battle steed of O’Dowda, after his proclamation, were given to

O'Caomhain, and the arms and dress of *O'Caomhain* to Mac Firbis, and it is not competent ever to call him the O'Dowda until *O'Caomhain* and Mac Firbis have first called the name, and until Mac Firbis carries the body of the wand over O'Dowda; and every clergyman, and every representative of a church, and every bishop, and every chief of a terrible present, are all to pronounce the name after *O'Caomhain* and Mac Firbis [O'Donovan 1844: 425].³³

“It is probable that the detailed descriptions of the early inauguration rites have been suppressed because of their heathen character. **Giraldus Cambrensis describes an inauguration in Tyrconnell. ‘He who is to be inaugurated, not as chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, embares the animal (i.e. the white mare) before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up into pieces, and boiled in water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which brought to them’** [O'Meara 1951: 94]. ... It is, of course, a description of a fertility rite, an aspect of perhaps the one and only constant feature of the inauguration ceremonies, namely the symbolic marriage of the king to his land.

“All great Irish festivals owe their origin to this ritual. Thus the feast of Tara was originally a ritual marriage between the King of Tara and the goddess Medb. There were similar feasts at Emain and Cruachu. And as late an inauguration as that of Feidhlimidh Ó Conchobhair in 1310 is described as ‘the marriage of Fedihlimidh ... to the province of Connacht, with the comment that ‘this was the most splendid kingship marriage ever celebrated in Connacht down to that day’ (Williams 1972: 40-43).

Since Williams published in 1972, our understanding of this ceremony has broadened; something more than a literal fertility ceremony is operative although that issue is very important - the king certainly did marry the land which was the body of the Goddess. The White Goddess as Giver of Sovereignty is present in the epiphany of a mare and empowers the king, indeed sanctifies him and gives him the power to rule justly and wisely. By virtue of his relationship with the Goddess the king, in effect, becomes her consort and is transformed into a semi-divine being. His acquisition of divine fertility further enables him ‘simply’ by his presence to ensure the fecundity of his kingdom, specifically both that of his people - so they might multiply

³³“The wand referred to is the white rod of sovereignty given in token of sovereignty in the usual form of inauguration. Mac Firbis was obviously ollav to Ó Dubha. However, we are not to assume that Mac Firbis was the only *fili* present. Inauguration was the occasion on which other *filid* would wish to press their claims for attention on the new chieftain, the occasion for the writing of an inauguration ode and for presenting it through a *reacaire* or a *bard* at the court. Thus on the death of his father in 1432 Eogham Ó Néill went to Tulach Óg ‘and was crowned on the flag-stone of the kings there by the will of God and men, bishops and ollams’. We can be confident that after the feast that night Ó Néill's court rang with the chanting of many an ode to the accompaniment of the harp and that the next morning care would be taken to have the odes inscribed in the family *duanaire* and, of course, to reward their composers” (Williams 1972: 42).

and prosper, and that of the plants and beasts in both field and forest. His potency is transmitted to his kingdom and benefits all. It is demonstrated by the production of children; most preferred, of course, is a male heir. A sterile or impotent king could not be looked upon kindly because such a problem was not simply a private matter but indicated the displeasure of the Goddess and affected the entire mythic structuring of the kingdom with profound negative force. Apparently, all ancient Indo-Europeans practiced a royal inauguration ceremony which involved the Mare Goddess; I have dealt with this ritual extensively elsewhere.

“Royal succession was partly by kin-right, partly by election. When a new king was inaugurated, his successor (*tánaise*) was named, ‘selected by agreement between the new king and all the *rigdomnai* who were themselves eligible for office’ [Binchy 1970:29] with the choice subsequently ratified by acclamation in the assembly of notables. At some point there was the rite which symbolized the marriage of the king to the local earth goddess, and in the background the belief that only under the righteous rule of a rightful king would the land prosper, a belief originally implicit in the eulogies of the *filid*.³⁴

“As long ago as 1947 Professor Myles Dillon drew the attention of scholars to the ‘Act of Truth’ in Irish tradition [Dillon, 1947: 137-140.]. Although he himself was content to trace the Hindu ‘Act of Truth’ to the Hindu belief that the ‘truth’ was the highest power, the ultimate cause of all being, ... and Brown’s statement ‘that in many instances the basis of the Act of Truth is the fulfillment of one’s station in life. Someone recites the performance of a duty, and the true statement is potent: it is a blend of truth and justice.’ It [Brown’s statement] should be borne in mind in any consideration of ... such texts as *Auraiccept Moraind*, one, perhaps the oldest [Binchy 1970: 9-10], of the Irish collections of ‘Instructions to a Prince’, and it seems natural to believe that the words of the *Auraiccept* were not only composed by a *fili* in the service of a king but also recited by him on the appropriate occasion, perhaps on the most appropriate occasion of all occasions, the king’s inauguration. ‘Let him magnify Truth, it will magnify him. Let him strengthen Truth, it will strengthen him...’ The text continues: ‘By the prince’s truth (*fír flathemon*) fair weather comes in each fitting season, winter fine and frosty, spring dry and windy, summer warm with showers of rain, autumn with heavy dews and fruitful. For it is the prince’s falsehood (*gáu flatha*) that brings perverse weather upon wicked people, and dries up the fruit of the earth [Dillon 1947: 138-139]. **[What is being expressed, is the deep belief that Truth is not only right and good but is a power in its own right, not simply a personalized moral and philosophical attitude. He who possesses Truth possesses exceptional power. The issue of conscious motive were not beside the point. The king who possesses Truth does not have to decide to do good for his people, he**

³⁴ “Presented with these facts one would dearly like to find in the promotion of a candidate to kingship in Ireland an analogue to the promotion of Prthu to kingship in Vedic India—with the three acts, designation by the gods, recognition by the wise men, acceptance by the people, accompanied by eulogies of the bards and presentation of gifts. Unfortunately, but perhaps not unexpectedly, the analogue is not complete. However, there are a few common constituents, election to kingship, fertility springing from the marriage of the king to the local earth-goddess, the eulogies, and , of course, the gifts” (Williams 1972: 44).

cannot but help do it; Truth empowers him to do so and he will spontaneously do good for all.]

“The *filid* may have been influenced by their learning, their knowledge of *fír flathemon* and *gáu flathemon*, but throughout the Middle Ages they do not cease to give expression to the belief that the righteous rule of the rightful sovereign increases the prosperity of the land and that his death diminishes it. Thus Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh in the seventeenth century declare of three kings, ‘These three had the most glorious reigns. Not far did they outstep the bonds of right. They preserved the rights of the ancients and their rights to rule in the place of their forefathers. For them the land was most fruitful in riches of earth and waves. The corn and the fruit proved that it was right they got their power’ [McKenna Poem VI]. And Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn in the sixteenth century announces: ‘On the day he died he took with him the fish from the (water by the) bright warm strand. ... When Ó hEadhra had died, corn ceased to spring from the land, rivers burst their banks, fruit vanished from the vine’ [McKenna Poem 29].³⁵

“...Indeed there seems to have been a consciousness that there were mysterious obstacles in the way of every chieftain, and several poems give praise to them for overcoming a monster, an *aitheach*, a *péist*, or a *bodhbh* which lives in a cave or under the sea. .. The contest with the monster, one presumes, stands for the other battles which the Irish chief had to win before he could achieve his goal.

“In many of the poems there is an incitement to battle couched sometimes in covert, sometimes in overt terms. The hero is told not to rest on laurels, which he has already won but to be bold and ambitious. The prize which is set before him is the elusive ‘high kingship’ of Ireland and the glory of driving the foreigners out of the land.

“... But, as another poet said, the land of Ireland was forever sword-land, land conquered by the sword, and this was possibly truer than he thought, for local warfare was endemic to the condition of the country.

“One could adduce several reasons.

“First, the mode of succession to the kingship. This was partly by kin-right, partly by election. As Professor Binchy [1970: 25-26] has explained, there were always men within the *derbfine* and later the vaguer *sliocht* for whom the temptation to resort to force to assert their claim to the succession was always strong, and often too strong to resist.

“Secondly, the nature of social bonds. The allegiance which the ‘king’ (*rí*) gave to the over-king (*ruirí*) and the allegiance which the ‘over-king’ gave to the ‘king of over-kings’ (*rí ruirech*) was purely personal, and once one of these was abrogated, the suzerain had no redress but to invade the territory of the abrogator and to take a *crech* ‘a prey’ of sufficient stock to compensate him for the loss of fealty [Binchy 1970: 31-32].

“Thirdly, the invasions. The ‘old order’ passed away under the impact of the Norse invasions. The almost ritual pattern of previous wars, inter-tribal and inter-provincial alike, was succeeded by that of the invaders, the pattern of ‘total war’. Brian Boru defeated the

³⁵ “We are reminded of Odysseus’ description of the perfect king, ‘ruling a populous and mighty state with the fear of god in his heart, and upholding the right, so that the dark soil yields its wheat and barley, the trees are laden with ripe fruit, the sheep never fail to bring forth their lambs, nor the sea to provide its fish-all as a result of his good government-and his people prosper under him’ ” (Williams 1972: 46).

Norsemen but failed to establish the national monarchy.³⁶ His legacy, the idea of 'high kingship', as we have seen, became an important factor in Irish politics. Later, the Anglo-Normans failed in their design of conquest with the result that there was stalemate between the old and the new chieftain. ...

“There were, of course, other reasons why local warfare was chronic in medieval Ireland, and other reasons which made it necessary for the Irish king or chieftain to perform his traditional function of being leader in war and to assume personal responsibility for the well being of his people long after other kings and chieftains had ceased to do so. ...

“(T)here is more than a little truth in Quiggin's [1913: 98]observation that ‘an archaic type of society lingered on over the greater part of the island until the seventeenth century’.³⁷

“Finally, when the Irish chieftains had to flee Ireland when the court poets and their schools had been scattered and no hope remained except the forlorn hope of a Jacobite King, there appears a new literary genre in new metres. It is called *Asiling*-and it is a Vision of Éire as a Lady or Queen of radiant beauty in great distress awaiting deliverance at the hands of her true mate - the Old or Young Pretender, according to the date - in exile beyond the sea. The poet promises salvation but he is no longer the poet of a prince; he is concerned not with his patron but with Ireland, with his people and his native land’³⁸ (Williams 1972: 40-51).

The timeless mythic themes of relationship to sovereignty that dominated the works of ollavs in earlier times surface occasionally at strikingly late dates in Scotland (MacInnes 1981). These verses are from an elegy composed by a member of the Cathal MacMhuirich family for four chiefs of Clanranald who all died in 1636.

“Our rivers are without an abundance of fishing, there is no hunting in the devious glens, there is little crop in every tilth, the wave has gnawed to the very base of the peaks. For their sake the fury of the ocean never ceases, every sea lacks jetsam on its shore; drinking wine at the time of carousal, the warriors grieve more than the women ... Their survivors are gloomy and wrathful; the song of the cuckoos is not heard, the wind has taken on a senseless violence, the stream washes away its banks over the heather. Because the men of Clanranald have gone from us we poets cannot pursue our studies; it is time for the chief bard to depart after them, no that presents to poets will be abolished ...” (Jackson 1916: 116).

A confederation known as the Lordship of the Isles drew to itself Gaelic culture in Scotland when Ireland assumed a cultural role dominant after the close of the Middle Ages and ruled over much of northwest Scotland until the mid 16th century as a semi-independent state.

³⁶ More properly known in Irish as Brain Boramha (or Boraimhe b.926 - d.1014), he was King of Ireland from 1002 to 1014 and slain while defeating the Danes, near Dublin (Webster 1965: 191).

³⁷“There were not many countries in western Europe in the sixteenth century where a court poet would eulogize his patron in these words, ‘Stroke for stroke and wound for wound have for a time now been returned by Fiach; in this respect I see but a few arrears accumulated against him in the wondrous land of Finatan. Battle for battle, and cow for cow, and prey for prey stands in Fiach's record; with captive for captive (‘tis no prejudiced assertion) from every liss in Feradach's domain’ [McKenna :Poem 24]

³⁸ Corkey, D. 1967. *The Hidden Ireland*. Dublin, Melbourne: pp.126-154.

In the last quarter of the 15th century when the Lordship of the Isles from which Clanranald sprung was under attack, the following sentiment was expressed:

“It is no joy without Clan Donald; it is no strength to be without them; the best race in the round world; to them belongs every goodly man ... In the van of Clan Donald learning was commanded, and in their rear were service and honour and self respect ...” (Watson : 90-95).

MacInnes (1981: 274-275) sees poets as central to the long ideological struggle between the Campbells and MacDonalds. “In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the upper social reaches of vernacular poetry were inhabited by professional bards and members of leading clan families alike.”

“Especially declamatory are the ancient rhythmical metres which antedate the introduction of Christianity and Latin learning and which survived in a modified form, although patently native. The primary function of these particular forms lies in the clan panegyric, where the stress is on the survival of the group of aristocratic warrior hunters at the top of society. The diction is codified in sets of conventional images, most densely concentrated in the heroic elegy composed at the point of crisis brought about by the death of a leader - in other words, when it is most necessary to reaffirm the traditional values of the community. One of the stock conventions of this praise poetry to rehearse the allies - real or ideal of the clan. This is developed to the fullest possible extent in poems associated with the eighteenth century Jacobite Risings” (MacInnes 1981: 276).

Rees and Rees (1971: 162) believe that Connacht was the province in ancient Ireland that was druidic in character above all providing a counterbalance to Tara which was the center of political power, Uisnech was the prestigious center where druidic power was concentrated and where ceremonies were performed, not of the sacred marriage between the king and the Goddess as at Tara, but of a reunion of the people . Twelve chief rivers derive from a mythological event which occurred at Uisnech which gives it a powerful sacred character which suggests a ‘center of the world’. “According to the eleventh century *Book of Rights*, Meath, of which Uisnech is the centre, *contained* Brega, the province of Tara. Meath proper consisted of five free kingdoms and five tributary kingdoms: Brega consisted of six tributary kingdoms only, one of which was that of the Déssi. The two seem to have had complementary roles in national ritual. According to the *dindsenchas*, ‘when all were bidden by the king of Ireland to the feast to Tara, a feast used to be celebrated by the king of Meath’ on the hill of Slemain Mide. Unlike the other kings of Ireland, the king of Meath did not contribute to the feast of Tara, yet it was a calamity (a violation of *geis*) for the king of Ireland if the feast of Slemain were not celebrated by the king of Meath when he himself held the feast of Tara” (Rees and Rees 1961: 161). Legends about the Sons of Míl associate the Tuatha Dé Danaan and kingship with Tara but *queenship with West Munster and Uisnech*. Did Old European forms of queenship as the manifestation of the Great Goddess survive and prosper in West Munster and Uisnech?



Druidic Lore in the Poetry of early Medieval Ireland

What did the druids chant?
What did the druids sing?
What did the ollavs write?
How they make your mind ring!

Early medieval poetry from Ireland which appears to contain druidic symbolism is exceedingly rare. These poems presented here meet that qualification in the opinion of several scholars and represent a fairly complete collection from published sources.

As the druidic schools disintegrated in the 5th century, the several functions encapsulated by the druid separated and there slowly emerged the Brehon (jurist), historian and poet. "It appears that from the very earliest date the learned classes, especially the *filés*, had evolved a dialect of their own, which was perfectly dark and obscure to every one except themselves. This was the Bréarla Féni, in which so much of the Brehon law and many poems are written, and which continued to be used, to some extent, by poets down to the very beginning of the eighteenth century" (Hyde 1910: 240). However the beginning of separating the judge from the druid antedates the coming of Christianity. During the reign of Conor mac Nessa, which was some time before 0 A.D., Fercertné and Neidé contended for the position of arch-ollav of Erin. Their discourse, which still exists as the *The Dialogue of the Two Sages* in at least three manuscripts, was so obtuse that the chronicler in the *Book of Ballymote* noted that neither the king nor other poets could understand it. As a result, Conor made a law that poets should no longer of necessity be judges as well (Hyde 1910: 241).

"That the Bardic schools, which we know flourished as public institutions with scarcely a break from the Synod of Drumceat in 590 (where regular lands were set apart for their endowment) down to the seventeenth century, were really a continuation of the Druidic schools, and embodied much that was purely pagan in their curricula, is, I think amply shown by the curious fragments of metrical text books preserved in the Books of Leinster and Ballymote, in a M.S. in Trinity College, and in a M.S. in the Bodleian ... That they date from pre-Christian times seems to me certain from their prescribing amongst other things for the poet's course in one of his years of study a knowledge of the magical incantations called *Tenmlaida*, *Imbas forosnai*, and *Dichetal do chennaib no twaithe*, and making him in another year learn a certain poem or incantation called *Cétnad*, or which the text says that 'It is used for finding out a theft. One sings it, that is to say, through the right fist on the track of the stolen beast' [observe the antique assumption that the only kind of wealth to be stolen is cattle] or on the track of the thief, in case the beast is dead. And one sings it three times on the one [track] or the other. If, however, one does not find the track, one sings it through the right fist, and goes to sleep upon it, and in one's sleep the man who has brought it away is clearly shown and made known. And another virtue [of this lay]: one speaks it into the right palm and rubs with it the quarters of the horse before one mounts it, and the horse will not be overthrown, and the man will not be thrown off or wounded'.

“Another *Cétnad* to be learned by the poet, in which he desires length of life, is addressed to ‘the seven daughters of the sea, who shape the thread of the long lived children’”

“Another with which he had to make himself familiar was the *Glam dichinn*, intended to satirise and punish the prince who refused to a poet the reward of his poem. The poet - ‘was to fast upon the lands of the king for whom the poem was to be made, and the consent of thirty laymen, thirty bishops [a Christian touch to make the passage pass muster] and thirty poets should be had to compose the satire; *and it was a crime to them to prevent it when the reward of the poem was withheld* [a pagan touch to as a make-weight to on the other side!] The poet then, in a company of seven, that is, six others and himself, upon whom six poetic degrees had been conferred, namely a *focloc*, *madfuirmedh*, *doss*, *cana*, *clí*, *anradh*, and *ollamh*, went at the rising of the sun to a hill which should be situated on the boundary of seven lands, and each of them was to turn his face to a different land, and the *ollamh*’s (ollav’s) face was to be turned to the land of the king, who was to be satirised, and their backs should be turned to a hawthorn which should be growing on the top of a hill, and the wind should be blowing from the north, and each man was to hold a perforated stone and a thorn of the hawthorn in his hand, and each man was to sing a verse of this composition for the king - the *ollamh* or chief poet to take the lead with his own verse, and the others in concert after him with theirs; and each then should place his stone and his thorn under the stem of the hawthorn, and if it was they that were in the wrong in the case, the ground of the hill would swallow them, and if it was the king that was in the wrong, the ground would swallow him and his wife, and his son and his steed, and his robes and his hound. The satire of the *macfuirmedh* fell on the hound, the satire of the *focloc* on the robes, the satire of the *doss* on the arms, the satire of the *cana* on the wife, the satire of the *clí* on the son, the satire of the *anrad* on the steed, the satire of the *ollamh* on the king.’³⁹

“These instances that I have mentioned occurring in the books of the poets’ instruction, are evidently remains of magic incantations and terrifying magic ceremonies, taken over from the schools and times of the druids, and carried on into the Christian era, for nobody, I imagine, could contend that they had their origin after Ireland had been Christianized [emphasis mine] - ...

“The first poem written in Ireland by a Milesian is said to be the curious rhapsody of Amerigin, the brother of Eber, Ir, and Erimon, who on landing broke out in a strain of exultation :-

I am the wind which breathes upon the sea,
I am the wave of the ocean,
I am the murmur of the billows,
I am the vulture upon the rock,
I am a beam of the sun,

³⁹ Hyde (1910: 243, footnote 1) remarks how curious that the steed ranks next next to the king, above his wife and son, because the *anrad* who curses the horse ranks next to the ollav. The importance attached to the king’s horse is quite understandable when we remember that the king’s inauguration was a ceremony in which he was empowered as the consort of the Goddess in a ritual during which he symbolically mated with the Goddess of Sovereignty who had manifested as a mare.

I am the fairest of plants,
I am a wild boar in valour,
I am a lake in the plain,
I am the point of the lance of battle,
I and the god who creates in the head [i.e., of man] the fire [i.e., the thought]
Who is it who throws light into the meeting on the mountain?
Who announces the ages of the moon [if not I]?
Who teaches the place where crouches the sea [if not I]? (Hyde 1910: 241-244)

Cross and Slover (1969: 2ff) present longer version with considerable differences.

I am a wind on the sea,
I am a wave of the ocean,
I am the roar of the sea,
I am a powerful ox,
I am a hawk on a cliff,
I am a dewdrop in the sunshine,
I am a boar for valour,
I am a salmon in the pools,
I am a lake in a plain,
I am the strength of art,
I am a spear with spoils that wages battle,
I am a man that shapes fire for a head.

Who clears the stone-place of the mountain?
What the place in which the setting of the sun lies?
Who has sought peace without fear seven times?
Who names the waterfalls?
Who brings his cattle from the house of Tethra?
What person, what *god*,
Forms weapons in a fort?
In a fort that nourishes satirists,
Chants a petition, divides the Ogham letters,
Separates a fleet, has sung praises?
A wise satirist.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ It is, of course highly improbable that the legendary Amerigin, who may or may not have been historical as well, wrote this poem. Nonetheless, it possesses considerable antiquity. The references to cattle, forts and Ogham serve to place the historical context as late pre-Christian. Hill forts and the Ogham script are characteristic of late Iron Age Celts in Ireland and the second half of this poem could have been composed sometime after the second century A.D. As to the first half, which is all most authors quote, it possesses a mystical purity of great age and integrity.

R. A. S. Macalister's translation appears in Rees and Rees (1961: 98-99) and is different yet again. The difficulties of translating the old manuscripts are formidable and not reducible to a single lexicon upon which all scholars can agree.

I am Wind on Sea,
I am Ocean-wave,
I am Roar of Sea,
I am Bull of Seven Fights,
I am Vulture on Cliff,
I am Dewdrop,
I am Fairest of Flowers,
I am Boar for Boldness,
I am Salmon in Pool,
I am Lake on Plain ...
I am Word of Skill,
I am the Point of a Weapon (that poureth forth in combat),
I am God who fashioneth Fire for a Head.
Who smootheth the ruggedness of a mountain?
Who is He who announceth the ages of the Moon?
And who, the place where falleth the sunset?
Who calleth the cattle from the House of Tethra?
On whom do the cattle of Tethra smile?
Who is the troop, who the god fashioneth edges ... ?
Enchantments about a spear? Enchantments of Wind?

“The other pre-Christian poets of whom we hear most, and to whom certain surviving fragments are ascribed, are Feirceirtné, surnamed *filí*, or poet, who is usually credited with the authorship of the well known grammatical treatise called *Uraicept na n-Éigeas* or ‘Primer of the Learned’. It was he who contended with Neidé for the arch-poet’s robe, causing King Conor to decide that no poet should in the future be also of necessity a judge. The *Uraicept* begins with this preface or introduction: ‘The Book of Feirceirtné here. Its place Emania; its time the time of Conor mac Nessa; its person Feirceirtné the poet; its cause to bring ignorant people to knowledge.’ There is also a poem attributed to him on the death Cuchulain slew, and the Book of Invasions contains a valuable poem ascribed to him, recounting how Ollamh Fódha, a monarch who is said to have flourished many centuries before, established a college of professors at Tara.

“There was a poet called Adhna, the father of that Neidé with whom Feirceirtné contended for the poets’ robe, who also lived at the court of Conor mac Nessa, and his name is mentioned in connection with some fragments of laws.

“Athairné the overbearing insolent satirist from the Hill of Howth, who figures largely in Irish romance, was contemporaneous with these, though I do not know that any poem is attributed to him. But he and a poet called Forchen, with Feirceirtné and Neidé, are said to

have compiled a code of laws, now embodied with other under the title of *Breithe Neimhidh* in the Brehon Law Books.

“There was a poet Lughar at the Court of Oiloll and Mève in Connacht at about the same time ... “ (Hyde 1910: 244-245).

“One of the first poets of renown after St. Patrick’s time was Eochaidh [Yohy], better known as Dallán Forgaill. It is to him the celebrated ‘Amra,’ or elegy on [St.] Columcille, whose contemporary he was, is ascribed ... no doubt it derived half of its importance from being in the Fenian dialect, and hence incomprehensible to the ordinary reader. ...⁴¹ This obscure poem is not, so far as I can see, composed in any metre or rhythm.

[Selections:]

Came the foam which the plain filters,⁴²
Came the ox through fifty warriors;
So came the keen active lad
Whom brown cu Dinisc left.

fear fear / after long long /
Pains strong strong / without peace peace
Like each each / until doom doom
For gloom gloom / will not cease cease ...” (Hyde 1910: 405-407).⁴³

The commentator who glossed ‘Amra’ also quotes a mysterious poem of Finn mac Cúmhail’s.

A tale I have for you. Ox murmurs,
Winter roars, summer is gone
Wind high cold, sun low.
Cry is attacking, sea resounding.
Very red raying has concealed form.
Voice of geese [barnacles] has become usual,
Cold has caught the wings of birds,

⁴¹ The overbearing and ego-centric Dallán also wrote two other Amras, one on Senan of Innis Caithaigh and the other in praise of Conall of Inskel in Donegall (which is in perfect rhyme and metre) with whom he is buried (Hyde 1910: 410).

⁴² “This translation is evident nonsense, but I cannot better it” (Hyde 1910: 407). Hyde may be much too hard on himself. As Graves (1966) and others points out, bardic poetry of this age frequently contains druidic lore which will appear to read nonsensically, indeed it was designed for such an effect in order to conceal its esoteric meaning.

⁴³ “My translation is in the exact metre of the original, and conveys in English the manner in which the heptasyllabic Irish lines were pronounced in which ... there is, I believe, *no alternation of beat or stress*, and neither trochee nor iambus” (Hyde 1910: 407-408).

Ice frost time; wretched, very wretched.
A tale I have for you.

(Hyde 1910: 408-409).

Colmán mac Léníni (St. Colmán), who died in 604 as the Abott of Cloyne in County Cork began his professional life as a poet. Seven fragments of his verse survive and one is in praise of a sword given him by Domnall who later became King of Tara (High King of Ireland). “Blackbirds compared with swans, ounces with hundredweights, peasant women’s faces with great queens; king compared with Domnall, yodelling with a choir, a spark compared with a candle, is every sword compared with my sword” (Greene and O’Connor 1967: 3). Note that these authors present the poem as prose, which is how Hyde (1910) believes they were recited.

Cross and O’Connor (1967) believe this poem to be a thinly veiled druidic spell. They give no date and once again present the ‘poem’ as prose. “I call on the seven daughters of the sea, who shape the threads of long life. Three deaths be taken from me, three lives given to me, seven waves of plenty poured for me. May ghosts not injure me on my journey in my radiant breastplate without stain.⁴⁴ May my name not be pledged in vain; may death not come to me until I am old.

“I call on my Silver Champion, who has not died and will not die; may time be granted to me of the quality of bronze. May my form be exalted, may my law be ennobled, may my strength be increased, may my tomb not be readied, may I not die on my journey, may my return be ensured to me. May the two-headed serpent not attack me, nor the hard grey worm, nor the senseless beetle. May no thief attack me, nor a company of women, nor a company of warriors. May I have increase of time from the king of all.

“I call on Senach of the seven lives, whom fairy women suckled on the breasts of good fortune. May my seven candles not be quenched. I am an invincible fortress, I am an unshakable cliff. I am a precious stone, I am the symbol of seven riches. May I be the man of hundreds of possessions, hundreds of years, each hundred after another. I summon my good fortune to me; may the grace of the Holy Spirit be on me” (Cross and O’Connor 1967: 33-35).

Greene and O’Connor (1967) present the “The Voyage of Bran” by Bláthmac which they believe contains druidic doctrine because the relativity of time, matter and identity are recurring themes in the poem. I believe they are right; no such emphasis could occur in a literature focused upon Christian theology. We read here Manannán’s portrayal of the sea as flowery plain with unblemished crimson-headed flowers; the *absence* of original sin and the ever-present druidic vehicle of wisdom and immortality - the salmon.

“It seems to Bran a marvel of delight in his curragh⁴⁵ on a clear sea. To me in my own curragh it is a flowery plain that I ride about.

“It is clear sea to the beaked ship in which Bran is. In my two-wheeled chariot it is Mag Meall with many blossoms.

⁴⁴ Strongly reminiscent of the journeys taken by tribal shamans on their supernatural drums.

⁴⁵ A curragh is a very ancient form of boat made by stretching hides over a wooden frame. They were made in Ireland well into the twentieth century.

“Bran sees a mass of waves break over the clear sea. In Mag Mon I see crimson-headed flowers without blemish.

“Sea horses shine in summer as far as Bran’s eye stretches. Flowers - streams of honey gush forth in the land of Manannán, son of Ler.

“The glittering of the sea on which you are, the brightness of the sea on which you row, has poured for the yellow and blue - it is solid land.

“Salmon leap from the womb of the white sea you look on; they are calves, they are lambs of good colour, in peace without slaughter.

“Though you see but one charioteer in Mag Meall with its multitude of flowers, there are many horse on its breast, besides, which you do not see.

“The size of the plain and the number of the host shine triumphantly, a white stream of silver, a stair of gold, cause joy at every feast.

“A noble arrangement, they play pleasant games innocent conflict, men and gentle women, under the boughs, without blame, without original sin.

“It is along the top of a wood that your little boat has sailed across the ridges - a beautiful wood under its harvest beneath the prow of your small boat.

“A wood with blossom and fruit with the true smell of the vine on it; a wood without decay or death and with leaves of golden colour.

“From the beginning of creation we are without age, without corruption of the earth; we expect no loss of strength from decay for original sin has not touched us” (Greene and O’Connor 1967: 44- 47).

Tales of voyages to otherworld islands are known as *immrama* and apart from the famous *Voyage of Bran son of Febal*, only three have survived. “When Bran has passed through the paradoxical zone where sea and dry land are one and the same, and where men and women enjoy the pleasures of normal life without attendant griefs, he enters a world where our world as we know it seems to resolve itself into components. The people of the Island of Joy are not enjoying any particular pleasure; they are not laughing *at* anything. The island symbolizes joy in its elemental isolation. The Island of the Women is likewise the quintessence of femininity and erotic pleasure, separated from everything with which it is intermingled in normal experience. The longer *Voyage of Maeldúin* continues the process of disentangling the constituent elements. The separation of animals into species and natures is particularly striking ... Again forms, such as pillar, pedestal, arch, are singled out, and so are the contrasting attributes of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’. In *Snédgus* there is an island with two lakes in it, one of water, the other of fire. but for the prayers of the saints these two elements would have overwhelmed Ireland.

“Again, mankind is segregated into four classes, with kings, queens, warriors, and maidens in separate compartments. On a similar island in *The Voyage of Uí Chorra* they are classified differently into ‘sedate people’, lords, young men and servants (the four functions?). In *The Voyage of Maeldúin* there is again a land of Women; Brendan saw an Island of Strong Men divided into three age groups - boys, young men, and old men - and the Uí Chorra came to an island where Living Men and Dead Men were separate parts. To the Island of Laughter is added its opposite, an island of spontaneous and causeless grief. As things turned black or white in the contrasting halves of another island, so here everyone who landed wept irrespective

of cause. The metaphysical implication would appear to be that Whiteness, Blackness, Fire, Water, Joy, Sorrow, Femininity, Masculinity, Youth, Age, Life, Death, and so on, exist as abstract principles over and above the objects or people in which they are manifested. ... As though to emphasize further the detachment of principles from their usual vehicles in the manifest world, they are sometimes represented in combinations which have no earthly counterparts - a horse with dog claws, in 'Maeldúin,' and three islands inhabited, respectively, by cat-headed men, pig-headed man, and men with dog heads and bovine manes, in 'Snédgus'. Like the animal-masked mummers of seasonal rites and their hobby-horses (which can move round inside their skins), these monstrosities show that the principal ideas might have been combined to make quite a different world from the one we know.

"In addition to the elements that constitute the corporeal world, human attitudes and behaviour are depicted in the islands. There is an island symbolizing the true nature of niggardliness, another the sanctity of property and the sin of theft. The Island of the Bridge of Glass may represent Chastity ...

"In the religious systems of Egypt, India, and many other parts of the world, the priests have been the custodians of a body of doctrine concerning the progress of the soul after death. It was imperative that those at death's door should be conversant with the doctrine, and measures were taken to remind them of it. Even medieval Christendom produced its *Book of the Craft of Dying*. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in particular casts a glimmer of light on our Voyages. This book portrays the succession of states through which the spirit passes after death, states in which thoughts become things, and attitudes take form as objective entities. ... 'At first, the happy and glorious visions born of the seeds of the impulses and aspirations of the higher or divine nature awe the uninitiated; then, as they merge into visions born of the corresponding mental elements or the lower or animal nature, they terrify him, and he wishes to flee from them' - as did the Irish Voyagers from some of the islands they saw. Among the manifold connotations of the long succession of symbols in the Tibetan book, are the four elements (fire, water, earth, and air), the four colours, and other sets of four 'orders' (each set making *five* in its totality and union). There are 'Peaceful Deities' and 'Wrathful Deities' with frightful beastly heads, whose aspect and behavior recall the torture scenes in 'Uí Chorra'.

"In the 'Voyages', we submit, have been preserved the tattered remnants of an oral Celtic 'book of the dead', which proclaimed that the mysteries of the world beyond death had been at least partially explored and the stations of the soul's pilgrimage charted. The Plain of Delight and the Land of Women are but stages on the way. In Maeldúin's Voyage there are thirty three wonders to be seen, and the number may not be accidental. Thus, like the other types of tales we have described, the *immram* has its own function. It is to teach the 'craft' of dying and to pilot the departing spirit on a sea of perils and wonders" (Rees and Rees 1916: 314-325).



The Theme

We must close with Robert Graves. While this view may strike you as excessively romantic in a very old fashioned manner, deep historical scholarship and archeology do support it very well.

“...The poet was originally the *mystes*, or ecstatic devotee of the Muse; the women who took part in her rites were her representatives, like the nine dancers in the Cogul cave painting, or the nine women who armed the cauldron of Cerridwen with their breaths in Gwion’s *Preiddeu Annwm*. Poetry in its archaic setting, in fact, was either the moral and religious law laid down for man by the nine-fold Muse, or the ecstatic utterance of man in furtherance of this law and in glorification of the Muse” ... (Graves 1960: 447).

“The Theme, briefly, is the antique story, which falls into thirteen chapters and an epilogue, of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year; the central chapters concern the God's losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out. The poet identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess; the rival is blood brother, his other self, his weird. All true poetry - true by Houseman's practical test - celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story; and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but recur on occasions of emotional distress in the form of dreams, paranoiac visions and delusions. The weird, or rival, often appears in nightmares as the tall, lean, dark-faced bed-side spectre, or Prince of the Air, who tries to drag the dreamer out through the window, so that he looks back and sees his body still lying rigid in bed; but takes countless other malevolent or diabolic or serpent-like forms.⁴⁶

“The Goddess is a lovely, slender woman with a hooked nose, deathly pale face, lips red as rowan berries, startling blue eyes and long fair hair; she will suddenly transform herself into sow, mare, bitch, vixen, she-ass, weasel, serpent, owl, she-wolf, tigress, mermaid or loathsome hag. Her names and titles are innumerable. In ghost stories, she often figures as ‘The

⁴⁶ Although nowhere in any of his writings does Graves indicate that he was aware of Carl Jung's work, his description of how the three main characters of the Theme continuously re-assert themselves in our dreams and visions is nothing more or less but a poetic description of archetypes. Note also the remark about these three as part of ‘our racial inheritance’. Deeply embedded archetypes they are, avoidable they are not. The flight of contemporary humankind from them is unsuccessful and deep psychic illness results from this self inflicted wound. Grave's contempt for psychology and psychiatry rests upon their scientific reductionist logic and anti-poetic nature and would make the task of indentifying the one psychiatrist who practiced via mythic history nearly impossible for him.

White Lady', and in ancient religions, from the British Isles to the Caucasus, as the 'White Goddess'. I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and of the island over which she rules. The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust-the female spider or queen-bee whose embrace is death. Houseman offers a secondary test of true poetry; whether it matches a phrase of Keat's, 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear'. This is equally pertinent to the Theme. Keats was writing under the shadow of death about his Muse, Fanny Brawned; and the 'spear that roars for blood' is the traditional weapon of the dark executioner and supplanter.

"Sometime in reading a poem, the hairs will bristle at an apparently unpeopled and eventless scene described in it, if the elements bespeak her unseen presence clearly enough; for example: when owls hoot, the moon rides like a ship through scudding cloud, trees sway slowly together above a rushing waterfall, and a distant barking of dogs is heard; or when a peal of bells in frosty weather suddenly announces the birth of the New Year" (Graves 1960: 24-25).

"The main theme of poetry is, properly, the relations of man and woman, rather than those of man and man, as the Apollonian Classicists would have it. The true poet who goes to the tavern and pays the silver tribute to Blodeuwedd goes over the river to his death. ... For him there is no other woman but Cerridwen and he desires one thing above all else in the world: her love. As Blodeuwedd, she will gladly give him her love, but at only one price: his life. ...

"Cerridwen abides. Poetry began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon, not from the sun. No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of : 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!'

"Constant illiterate use of the phrase 'to woo the Muse' has obscured its poetic sense as the source of truth. Truth has been represented by poets as a naked woman divested of all garments or ornaments that will commit her to any particular position in time or space. The Syrian Moon goddess was also represented so, with a snake headdress to remind the devotee that she was Death in disguise, and a lion crouched watchfully at her feet. ..." (Graves 1960: 447-448).



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