

PLENARY ADDRESS

THE NEW DRUIDS

Ronald Hutton

“The Gods have returned to Ireland and have centred themselves in the sacred mountains and blow the fires through the country. They will awaken the magical instinct everywhere and the universal heart of the people will return to the old Druidic beliefs.”

So wrote one of the main figures of the nineteenth-century Irish literary revival, George Russell, to another, William Butler Yeats, in 1896.¹ In one sense, this was, and is, poppycock, the emotional outpouring of an overexcited young man. Ireland did not undergo a Druidic revival around 1900, and no country on earth has done so to the extent that the “universal heart of the people” has returned to pagan Celtic beliefs. In another, it was merely premature, for exactly a hundred years after he wrote, people calling themselves Druids *had* appeared in the British Isles, numerous and determined enough to make a significant impact upon the public imagination. They had not done so in Ireland, however, but in England. It is these Druids who are the subject of this paper.

To set them in context, it is necessary to take a quick look at what is known of the “original” Iron Age, Druids, and at the manner in which these have been perceived in Britain during the past two hundred years. In doing so, I make a self-conscious and deliberate reversal of the priorities manifested by most books on Druids published by academic authors during the past forty years. Such authors have typically been either archaeologists or experts in medieval Celtic literature. They have devoted most of their space to assembling the evidence for the Iron Age Druids and, sometimes, added a section at the end to deal with people who have called themselves Druids since 1700. The latter have generally been characterized as lunatics, charlatans, or dupes.¹ A

collection devoted to studies of medievalism is probably one of the few places in the world in which I can be assured of a relatively sympathetic reception when I declare my opinion that this format should be reversed. The Iron Age Druids should be dismissed in the first chapter of a book devoted to Druidry, and the rest devoted to its modern manifestations. The reason for this is simple: that we have a lot of good data for modern Druids, while their ancient equivalents are so shadowy as almost to possess the status of legendary beings.

To establish this point it is only necessary to repeat some obvious facts: that no written records, and not a single artifact recovered by archaeology, can be associated beyond any doubt with the Iron Age Druids. All our evidence for them is either suppositional or second-hand. The main group of relevant literary sources is Græco-Roman, and here there is a clear division of opinion. Authors in the Latin-speaking west of the Mediterranean world, and a few in the Greek-speaking east, tended to represent them as savage priests or soothsayers, implicated in a barbaric tribal religion which included human sacrifice. There was, however, a rival tradition, associated with the great Hellenistic metropolis of Alexandria, which portrayed them instead as noble-hearted philosophers who had communicated wisdom to the world. There was a division by time as well as by space, in that writers in the century before the Common Era, when the lands in which Druids operated were just becoming known to the Græco-Roman world, tended to be more respectful of them. Those of the first century of the Common Era itself, when those lands had been conquered and added to the Roman Empire, were much more unequivocally hostile.

All of these authorities have been suspected of distorting reality to serve their own ends. The Alexandrian tradition has been accused of romanticizing and sentimentalizing the Druids as a mirror for its own society. Conversely, the writers who condemned the Druids have been denounced for demonizing them, in

order to claim superiority for their own cultures and justify the conquest of the lands where Druids had existed. Classicists have become familiar with the ancient cultural game of the “invention of the barbarian.” None of the writers concerned can be proved to have had any first-hand experience of Druids as operating in their own tribal setting; all of them have been accused of deriving their information from earlier authors.³ All may be correct or none; it is likely that we shall never know. Our only other literary sources are from medieval Ireland, and here there is a similar problem. Some texts characterize the Irish Druids as having been evil heathen priests or magicians, opposed to Christian saints and defeated by them. Others take a respectful view of them as wise councillors and mentors, and forerunners of Christianity.⁴ Again, it is impossible now to conclude with certainty which, if any, provide a true picture. Taking the Irish, Greek, and Roman authors together, it is possible to state that the Druids were the religious and magical experts of the Iron Age tribes of northwestern Europe, and that they made a vivid impression on the imagination of the other Europeans of their time. That is all that can be said with any confidence.

Two examples may be cited to close these preliminary thoughts, and to illustrate the difficulties which attend the matter. One concerns the most extensive of all pieces of ancient literature which deals with Druids, the section on them in Julius Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*. This provides a detailed description of the institutions and functions of Druids in Gaul.⁵ Most of the same work, however, is an extended account of his conquest of that region. Had Druids existed as Caesar described them, they would have had to have played an important part in that war, but instead they are totally invisible. How do we reconcile his information on them with that in the rest of the book? Nobody is sure. It has been suggested that he was borrowing information which portrayed a situation which had obtained at an earlier time but ceased to exist by Caesar's own one.⁶ If so, this still begs

the question of why he entered up the borrowed data in the present tense, and makes him even less reliable as an authority.

The other example is taken from material evidence. One of the most sensational discoveries of British archaeology during the 1980s was the well-preserved upper part of the body of a man, found by peat-cutters at the bog of Lindow Moss in Cheshire. Dated to the beginning of the Roman period, the corpse was declared by specialists in the Iron Age to be one of the most convincing proofs ever obtained of the practice of human sacrifice among the British of the age, as attested by the more hostile Græco-Roman authors. The man was naked, and appeared to have suffered a triple death of the sort which features in early Irish literature; his skull had been fractured by a blow and his throat cut with a sharp blade, while he had been strangled with a cord which was still around his neck. Such a degree of overkill, coupled with his nudity and the dating, powerfully suggested a ritual act of slaughter, and “Lindow Man” duly became the textbook example of one. The much loved and greatly respected pioneer of research into pagan Celtic Britain, Anne Ross, co-authored a book which hailed him as a “Druid prince” and suggested a specific context in which he might have been sacrificed.⁷

It was therefore extremely embarrassing when, in 1998, a television series devoted to scientific issues chose to make a programme about the find,⁸ in which a professional pathologist was commissioned to examine the body. He found no sign of the normal trauma caused by strangulation in neck muscles, and concluded that the cord around the neck had not been a garotte but a simple necklace. He did not consider that the gash in the throat was either ancient or deliberate, and suggested that it had been made by peat-cutting before the corpse was noticed. That left the blow to the head as the sole possible cause of fatality; the evidence for a “triple death” had apparently evaporated, and it was now arguable that the man was a victim of mugging, who had been thrown into

the bog after being banged on the head and stripped. It was no longer certain, moreover, if he was even ancient. The date attributed to him, of the first century, had itself been a piece of guesswork after three different laboratories had come up with three widely divergent results.⁹ The programme now raised the possibility that the acidic properties of peat bogs might in fact render the carbon upon which current dating techniques depend, unstable enough to make even approximately accurate results unobtainable. Before the male torso was found at Lindow Moss, peat extraction there had turned up a female head, which bore a striking resemblance to a woman called Malika Reyn-Bardt who had vanished in the area in the 1960s. On being confronted with this evidence, her husband had confessed to murdering her and dumping her body in the bog. Carbon-dating, however, had declared the head to be about two thousand years old and so it was dropped from the case-file. Now there is again a real possibility that an Iron Age relic may turn out to be a modern piece of forensic evidence after all. An apologist may fairly retort that the remains from Lindow Moss can be fitted into a context of bodies recovered from peat bogs across northern Europe which have been claimed without controversy to be evidence for human sacrifice. A sceptic can now make the reply that all of these finds are in fact equally controversial, for at least one scholar has recently argued the case that every one can be explained by other means.¹⁰

Historians of modern Druids, and of modern attitudes to Druids, are on much sounder ground, and their subject may be argued to have considerable importance as a study of themes in British culture since 1700. The British began to take a sustained interest in Druids from the seventeenth century, when they commenced a systematic and continuous study of their ancient past. I would propose that during the past three hundred years at least five different conceptions of Druidry have circulated in Britain, serving different functions and meeting different needs, and would briefly

characterize them as follows. The first is the Demonic Druid, a character based on the hostile ancient texts, but also on the Old Testament with its blanket condemnation of pagan religions. This Druid is a barbarian priest associated with ignorance, superstition, and human sacrifice, intent on keeping the people in subjection to false gods and needless fears for the sake of his own power and profit.

As said, this image has very old roots, but it was greatly enhanced by particular tendencies in British culture between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. One was the vogue for Gothic fiction, which fastened on its potential for evoking shadowy groves, bloodstained altars, and horrid rites. Another was the partnership of imperialism and the Evangelical Revival, which sold itself on the potential of the British to redeem tribal peoples from savagery by conquering, educating, and converting them. Portraits of tribal barbarism in the modern world and the ancient world could easily be assimilated to each other, especially when infused with the third force, the acceptance of the model of evolution in human and planetary development. This could make the Druids a convenient base-line in a story of national improvement. Two illustrations of such a base-line may stand as typical, in their different ways, of many. The first is a mural painted in 1843 to decorate the newly-restored Houses of Parliament, as one of a series depicting the "progress of Britain." The initial part of the work showed an ancient British Druid performing a human sacrifice. The second displayed a nineteenth-century British official saving a Hindu widow from being burned upon her husband's funeral pyre. It was a triumphant celebration of "then" and "now." The second example consists of one of the best-known and most frequently produced of Victorian paintings, uniting one of the most ponderous titles with some of the worst history: Holman Hunt's *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Priest from the Persecution of the Druids*.¹¹

The second concept may be termed that of the Confessional Druid, and consisted of attempts by writers to use an imagined ancient Druidry to defend a modern theological position. The most celebrated example is William Stukeley, usually acknowledged as the most important of the pioneers of field archaeology but also a parson who pressed his researches into defending the basis of Anglican Christianity. He had some predecessors and many successors.¹² The standard modern picture of a Druid, as a bearded man in a robe and sandals, carrying a staff, has no grounding in the classical texts. He is a transplanted Old Testament patriarch, associated with attempts to trace the literal and ideological lineage of the Iron Age British from Noah. The Confessional Druid overlapped with a third conceptualization, the Patriotic Druid, the focus of ancient British nationalism and of resistance to the invading Romans. For much of the eighteenth century, this figure was put to the service of a generalized loyalty to the newly-unified state of Great Britain, but towards its end he was more particularly associated with the Welsh cultural revival. During the nineteenth century, Druidry became a prominent element in the ceremonial attending *eisteddfodau*, and was transplanted to Cornwall as a nationalist movement began there in the early twentieth, drawing upon a similar Celticist identity.¹³

A fourth reimagining was the Masonic Druid, represented initially by the Ancient Druid Order which was founded in London in 1781. The direct inspiration for this came from Freemasonry, and it represented only one of a number of international orders set up around this time to copy the Masons' achievement of comradeship, mutual support and free discussion of ideas within a bonding framework of ritual. Identification with Druidry allowed this particular one to compete with the others in advancing ever more ambitious claims to descent in unbroken succession from the remote past. It also gave its members the edge in ceremonial costume; whereas the others all used robes or regalia, the Ancient

Order had both, and donned false beards as well. In the nineteenth century, it gave birth to several other orders.¹⁴ The fifth and last characterization of Druidry to emerge between 1700 and 1900 may be termed the Theosophical Druid. This was based on the notion that Druidry had preserved a portion of a universal system of ancient wisdom, other remnants of which were found in Indian, Hebrew, and ancient Egyptian religion. The work of the modern Druid was to recover it, and according to this mode of thought, it was entirely legitimate to characterize Augustine of Hippo, Pythagoras, William Blake, and Sufi masters (for example), as sharing portions of Druid wisdom. Orders were founded to nurture this work, based on the model of the Masonic Druid but with a more mystical cast. The most long-lived was The Universal Bond, which celebrated public rites at Stonehenge through most of the twentieth century and became the best known of the public faces of Druidry.¹⁵

By the mid-twentieth century, the Confessional Druid had more or less vanished, but all the rest were still around. The Ancient Order and The Universal Bond continued to flourish, the Demonic Druid occasionally reappeared in films and novels as an ingrained part of popular romantic culture, and the Patriotic Druid remained prominent in the bardic assemblies of Wales and Cornwall. None, however, had much dynamism left in them, and they increasingly gave the impression of relics from an earlier age. All this was to be changed, and the revival of the present time precipitated, by the sudden appearance of two new forms of British Druidry in the late 1980s: the New Age Druid and the Counter-Cultural Druid.

The New Age Movement may be crudely defined for present purposes as an American phenomenon of the 1970s, which spread across most of the Western world and was based on three premises. The first was that the modern world suffers from an unhealthy predominance of materialist values, destructive alike to individuals and to the planet. Second, that it is therefore necessary to

foster an enhanced spirituality in order to restore the health of our culture, or even to save the world. Third, that such a spirituality may be developed by individuals, according to personal needs and tastes, drawing upon the full range of models which history and ethnography offer. In practice, as the movement was promoted chiefly from the United States, the greatest influences upon it were native American traditions, and esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism filtered through American transcendentalism. The result was a very effective mixture, and one which had a considerable impact on Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. As such, it acted as an inspiration and provocation to two young Londoners, a wife and husband called Caitlin and John Matthews. Both fully endorsed the call for an enhanced spirituality in modern culture, but both felt that the models offered by American writers and teachers were less appropriate to Britain, which had its own rich native tradition of mysticism, rooted ultimately in Celtic paganism. Caitlin also faced a challenge relatively common in our civilization and peculiar to it; that she received apparent visits and communications from spiritual beings. Every culture apart from our own, across space and time, has provided a framework of support and explanation for people who undergo this experience. Our tendency to pretend that it does not exist, leaving those who have to live with it, and are aware that they are perfectly sane in every demonstrable respect, to find their own means of coming to terms with it. Caitlin did so by reference to the ancient tradition of the Otherworld, and of human interaction with it, which is such a major theme of early Welsh and Irish literature and of the Arthurian romances which are partly based upon it.¹⁶

The result was that from 1985 onward the two of them published a very large number of books; Caitlin alone wrote or co-authored 25 in the ten years following that date. They added up to a systematic attempt to present the world with a coherent native British mysticism, based mainly upon medieval Welsh and Irish

texts. This was linked directly to Druidry by a friend of the Matthews, Philip Carr-Gomm, who had been initiated into the 1960s into one of the “Theosophical” orders which had split away from the Universal Bond, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD). In 1984, Carr-Gomm had a visionary communication of his own, from his former chief and mentor in OBOD who had died nine years before, directing him to revive Druidry in a form which would reunite human beings with the natural world and their own imaginations. This direction addressed one of the main preoccupations of the age, with the apparent disorientation implicit for many in an urbanized and industrialized existence dependent on mass media. It also, however, addressed the professional preoccupations of Carr-Gomm himself, as a psychologist with a very successful practice dedicated to making people feel at peace with themselves and the world. In 1988, he and his wife Stephanie refounded OBOD, and co-operated with the Matthews in writing a series of teachings which would enable those who received them to embark upon a process of personal growth and self-revelation under the label of Druidry.¹⁷ To convey them to people, he adopted one of the most effective magical tools evolved by the esoteric societies of the Western world; the correspondence course.

This simple device meant that participants could rise through the three grades of OBOD over a minimum period of three years, at their own pace and in their own homes, by easy steps made available to them through their letter-boxes for a small fee. It built the order within ten years into one of the largest Druid organizations in the world, with over 6000 members in the United Kingdom and many more in North America and Australia. As it has carried on growing at the same rate since, it may well now be the largest, and two other orders have been created out of its members, operating the same notion of Druidry. People taking the course had the option of meeting others within the same locality, and discussing its ideas and working its rituals together. In

this way, regional groups or “groves” grew up within the order, with two particularly significant features. The first was that whereas until now women had played only a supporting role in the story of modern British Druids, they commonly ran the local groves of OBOD and became the most dynamic force in the order; some of these groups are the closest thing which I have ever encountered in the modern world to primitive matriarchies. The second was that whereas the official philosophy of the order followed that of the older Theosophical Druidry, in presenting itself as a system of thought which could be embraced by adherents of any religion, the local groves commonly had a strongly pagan identity. They were reaching instinctively for deities which were rooted deep in the land and in its past. In the era of rampant nationalism, imperialism, and militarism, Theosophical Druidry had sought for a system which could bring the world together. In the age of the global village, the Internet, and Coca-Cola culture, the new Druids were increasingly drawn to goddesses and gods which belonged to their own back garden.¹⁸

They were, however, only one of two significant new faces of Druidry in the Britain of the 1990s. The other is what I have termed Counter-Cultural, and drew like the New Age Movement itself upon the critique of contemporary society mounted during the 1960s and 1970s, but with a harder and more radical edge.¹⁹ It arose directly from a particular manifestation of the “alternative” youth culture of those years, the free festival, and especially out of the most celebrated and long-lived of those festivals, the one held each midsummer between 1974 and 1985 at Stonehenge. The people who gathered there were attracted by the aura of antiquity and mystery which surrounded the stones, perhaps the most famous prehistoric monument in the whole world, and the spiritual centrepiece of the event was the rite still held at sunrise on the longest day by the Order of the Universal Bond. As the years passed, many of the festival-goers began to stage ceremonies of their own in the centre of

the circle, later in the day, including weddings, namings of children, and blessings. Creeping into these activities was a sense that Stonehenge was becoming a national shrine, a true temple of all the people of the land of Britain at which any who chose could worship, in their own way, at the apex of each year. The very lack of evidence as to the nature of the original religion and society for which the monument had been built, and the likelihood that none would ever be provided, set free the imaginations of the new worshippers to construct as many different perceptions of it as there were people to hold them.

This state of affairs ended abruptly and brutally in 1985. The official body which cared for the stones, English Heritage, was prodded by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government into suppressing the festival. In doing so, it was eradicating an especially flamboyant and provocative manifestation of left-wing culture, but to make the policing operation more effective, it also banned the century-old gathering of the Universal Bond. Both the festival-goers and the Druids immediately began to lobby to regain access, and the former soon discovered that the Universal Bond, reasonably enough, refused to argue any more than its own case. This meant that, for the first time, those who had attended the festivals and acquired a personal spiritual relationship with Stonehenge had to identify themselves as a separate religious interest group, with the label of "Druid" which had become so closely associated with the monument. In this fashion, three closely-connected organizations crystallized out of the festival goers between 1986 and 1992: the Secular Order of Druids, the Glastonbury Order of Druids, and the Loyal Arthurian Warband. They swiftly broadened their interests beyond the single issue of access to Stonehenge, promoting local festivals of the arts and campaigning against perceived threats to the environment and to civil liberties.

In taking on the identity of Druid, these new groups faced a problem: that the tenets of their counter-culture

involved a rejection of structures of hierarchy and authority associated with the parent society, and a stress upon individuality, playfulness, and decision-sharing in their place. There seemed to be a real risk that to take on the offices and trappings of the older Druid orders would entail succumbing to the very habits of mind to which the new three were opposed. They faced the dilemma of how to make themselves be taken seriously enough by the national authorities to win a bargaining position, without taking themselves too seriously. To prevent this latter development, they trod a delicate tightrope. On the one hand, they were committed to a genuine mysticism, increasingly identified with the land itself, as a (or rather The) Goddess, a living being requiring protection from human greed and selfishness, upon which prehistoric monuments represented the holy places of people who had possessed different and better values. On the other, they retained something of the atmosphere of pranksters. The very titles of their orders embodied jokes. The Secular Order abbreviated to SOD and the Glastonbury Order to GOD (so that its members could indeed claim to represent a high moral authority), while the Loyal Arthurian Warband became LAW, a significant label for an organization which was to cause severe headaches to police and security forces. The first degree of initiation into the Secular Order was that of Jester.

This paradox, and the dynamic uses to which it could be put, was very well illustrated by the career of the personality who emerged as the most prominent member of these new orders in the eyes of the public, or at least of the mass media. He began as a biker, with an involvement in the free festivals, who was marked off from his fellows by the experience of vivid dreams and reveries which seemed to be set in the early Middle Ages. In 1987, a friend told him that these could have been memories of a past life as King Arthur. He put this notion to the test by going to Stonehenge to seek a sign. A bird flew out of the circle, brushing his face with its wings. Taking that for an affirmative, he formally changed his name to

Arthur Uther Pendragon. He then asked The Goddess to help him recover Excalibur by the next full moon, accepting that if he did he would commit himself to the defense of the land. On the day before the moon reached its fullness, he saw a sword offered for sale in a shop window, which had been made to represent Excalibur in a film. He bought it, and vowed from that moment to fight for civil liberties and environmental issues. Henceforth, he appeared on all public occasions in a surcoat embroidered with a red dragon, the sword hung about him. His powerful build, flowing beard, and equally luxuriant hair, caught in a head-band, made him an imposingly medieval (or medievalist) figure. Within five years, not only did he hold honorific office in both the SOD and the GOD, but had gathered the Loyal Arthurian Warband around himself, of friends and followers dedicated to fighting campaigns of non-direct action against construction projects which had become particularly controversial for destruction and pollution of the countryside, and demonstrating against new legislation which eroded civil liberties. It now numbers well over a thousand, although only some are active at any one time.

A few comments need to be made upon this sequence of developments. The first is that Arthur is perfectly sane. He is certainly a mystic, but also an earthy and mischievous man, and an adroit operator of political performance art. In August 1995, I watched him making a number of new knights (the initiation rite of the LAW) on a hilltop near Bath. A crazed admirer knelt before him and asked for leave to worship him. Arthur's reply was instant:

“No. I am your brother and your servant, but not your deity. In the Warband, we aid each other; we don't worship each other. Now get off your knees and stand proud.”

The second comment is that the fancy-dress aspect of the Warband, and the particular colour of the figure of Arthur as its head, fulfill a vital function in attracting the

attention of the media to the causes which it supports. A normal group of protestors would have no automatic claim upon the interest of television, radio, and newspaper journalists. The presence of the Warband, in full costume, has often been sufficient to guarantee coverage.

There are, however, some deeper resonances to its activities which should be of special interest to scholars of medievalism. One is the manner in which it appropriates and subverts a classic myth, of the sleeping hero who will awake when his country has need of him. In its specifically British form, this was attached to the figure of Arthur, and as such was activated at intervals earlier in the twentieth century. This happened, however, as part of a national and militarist rhetoric, directed against external enemies such as the Kaiser's or Hitler's Germany. This Arthur had redirected it against an internal enemy, an alliance of central government and big business which seemed to him to have betrayed land and people. A second consideration concerns the manner in which the LAW stood in a long tradition of British popular rebels who donned fancy dress and fancy titles while going into action. The seventeenth century gives us the figures of Captain Pouch and Lady Skimmington, while the nineteenth supplies Captain Swing, the Scotch Cattle, and The Hosts of Rebecca. These tactics had practical benefits in conferring some element of disguise, and that effect already noted, of attracting public attention. They also, however, very clearly had an emotional value in nerving ordinary people up to do extraordinary things, by turning them into emblematic heroes and heroines cut off from their everyday lives. So it is with the Loyal Arthurian Warband.

It does count for something, in addition, that England may well be the only state in the Western world to have no fixed date of origin. Thus, Ireland came into being in 1922, Scotland in 843, Switzerland in 1291, the USA (as the world knows) in 1776, France (depending on definitions) in 1789 or 1959, Germany in 1871 or 1945,

and so on. England, by contrast, gradually came together between the seventh and tenth centuries; it has an organic relationship between land, people, and government which is particularly closely related to the concerns of the new Druidry and may indeed have helped to shape it. Furthermore, England is very unusual among democracies in that its people have not traditionally regarded their liberties as reposing ultimately in representative institutions. Although their Parliament is clearly of immense emotional and symbolic importance, English freedoms have hitherto been seen as invested in a body of common law, descending from Anglo-Saxon antiquity and binding rich and poor, governors and governed, alike. It is precisely this body of common law and right which has been perceived to be undermined by recent government-sponsored legislation to control freedom of movement and assembly. Hence, the abbreviation of the name “Loyal Arthurian Warband” has a particularly loaded significance.

Finally, the counter-cultural Druidry is rooted firmly in some of the ancient images of Druids; the representation by Tacitus in particular of the latter as leaders of the resistance of native Britons to the Roman invasion and occupation. This representation had already contributed significantly to the construction of the eighteenth-century image of the Patriotic Druid. The fact that the Romans were a culture which drove huge new road-building schemes across the British landscape, designed purpose-built new towns with a grid layout and matching tiling, invented reinforced concrete, were dominated by a despotic central government, and quelled dissent with a standardized, professional, armed force, made them unusually suitable among ancient European peoples to represent the dehumanizing modern state, as perceived by the counter-culture. There was, of course, a direct clash between this concept of the Druid, as resistance leader, and that propagated by Philip Carr-Gomm, as giver of peace to a disturbed world; and both were equally well rooted in ancient texts. In practice this

produced considerable tension between New Age and Counter-Cultural Druidry during the middle and later years of the 1990s, and rendered impossible the full representation of both varieties (and the older Theosophical Druidry) in a Council of British Druid Orders. On the other hand, the two traditions made up a spectrum of personalities rather than two opposed blocs, and there was considerable overlapping; members of OBOD and the LAW were found side by side in the same actions over the same issues, whatever the public and formal breaches between their chiefs.

Finally, it may be of interest to fellow scholars to record a couple of special difficulties and challenges which the study of these Druids presented to me as an academic scholar. One concerns the problem of reactivity, of the effect produced upon a social group by a person studying it. There is no doubt that I am guilty of this on a huge scale. Before I began to make a systematic consideration of contemporary Druidry, I was already well known to many of its practitioners for my writings on prehistoric archaeology, ancient paganism, the history of the ritual year, and other varieties of modern Paganism such as Wicca. Those works had already to some extent conditioned and altered the self-image of a lot of British Druids; the latter were in this perspective, an integral part of the public whom I was paid to serve. I was welcomed into the company of members of all of the orders which I have discussed, and invited to many of their formal occasions, because they expected me to present and discuss my ideas with them and to keep them apprized of current academic discoveries and opinions. One very clear result of this interaction was that my very presence among them, let alone my words and deeds, tended to dissolve a self-image which many of them had possessed, of being the natural opponents of an academic establishment which denied any validity to their identity and beliefs. Our conversations and arguments hastened a process which I believe would have begun in any case, whereby many of

them assimilated most of the postmodernist lexicon of polyvocality and multivalency, of the social construction of knowledge, and of the evils of intellectual hegemony, which they could make into new ideological devices with which to express their views. I feel likewise that the interaction only speeded up their assimilation of new data and interpretative models from the worlds of professional history and archaeology. Nonetheless, it is reasonably clear to me that merely by writing my earlier books, let alone by studying Druids in the field, I have become part of the history of modern Druidry.

The other issue upon which I experienced some self-doubt was a very specific one: the trial of Arthur Pendragon at Southwark Crown Court, South London, on 5 November 1997. During the previous two years, he and his warband had gradually turned themselves into greater and greater irritants to the police of the Thames Valley and London areas, because of their prominence in demonstrations and their constant minor breaches of law consequent upon non-violent direct action. A determined attempt was eventually made to remove Arthur from circulation, based upon an incident in which he attempted to enter a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, the traditional centre for political rallies in the capital. He was carrying his ceremonial sword as usual, and this enabled the policemen present to arrest him upon a complex of very serious charges relating to public order and offensive weaponry. If sustained at trial, these would have committed him to prison for a substantial term. For me, this dramatic development might have furnished a particularly exciting twist in my research, an opportunity to attend the trial and observe exchanges which promised to reveal in stark form the interface between the new Druidry and its parent society. This detached role was prevented by a single circumstance: Arthur Pendragon named me as the expert witness for the defense.

His action was perfectly logical, because I was the perfect person for the job, an independent and professional observer who had been studying him as a

Druid chief for three years. The crux of his defense was to prove that he actually possessed such a status and that his sword was therefore a ceremonial object, never hitherto used as a weapon or intended to be one. I knew this defense to be correct, and could document it from my field notes, and so in justice, there was no way in which I could refuse to cooperate. I accordingly wrote a long report for submission to the court, and dispatched it in the full expectation of having it examined in public view by a highly-trained prosecuting lawyer who would attempt to undermine confidence in my ability and integrity. This did not occur. Instead, when the court went into session, the judge retired into a different room with my report, emerged a short while later, dismissed the jury, and threw out the case, declaring that I had proved that there was none to answer. Arthur went free, the police had to return his sword in front of the massed ranks of journalists and television crews, and I was left with mixed feelings. Most were characterized by fervent relief, that Arthur had been rescued from an act of clear injustice and that I had escaped cross-examination. I had also, however, some doubt concerning the process which had just occurred. The Crown's case, however flawed on face value, had not been determined by a jury, but rejected by the judge, on the word of a single hostile witness. It was certainly a stunning example of the power which an academic could wield in society, but left me wondering how far I deserved to possess such a power, and whether the traditional liberties which were defended by the Loyal Arthurian Warband had not themselves been further eroded by the events concerned.

The practice of participatory anthropology is now well established in the social sciences, although it is still not quite beyond controversy. The examples given above go well beyond this; they represent *precipitatory* anthropology, and raise far more disturbing and difficult questions about the role of the scholar making the study. The most positive lesson to be drawn from them is that academic experts in medievalism, and its sibling phenomenon of

Celticism, are interacting with a living and dynamic culture, which is quite as capable of appropriating them as they are of observing it. Their subject material is indeed the stuff of which dreams are made, but also conflicts, freedoms, identities, and self-realization. This paper has attempted to illustrate how much the hazy ancient image of the Druid has been utilized, repeatedly and in many different ways, in modern Britain. It concludes with the perception that the traditional academic reaction to that process has been wrong two times over. Not only is the struggle to rediscover an “authentic” ancient Druidry a futile one, but those engaged in it are, willingly or not, locked into a relationship with a modern Druidry which they have at best marginalized and at worst derided. In favour of that traditional approach, it can at least be said that its blinkers have rescued practitioners from some challenging and disturbing experiences.

WORKS CITED

1. Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the man and the masks* (London: Faber, 1949), 123.
2. The classic book of this kind is Stuart Piggott, *The Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), which was the dominant work on the subject in the 1970s and 1980s. Its emphases are reproduced by Barry Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids* (London: Constable, 1994). Miranda Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), is more polite about modern Druids but retains the same balance of interests, while Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966; 2nd ed. 1997), does not mention modern Druidry at all.
3. The texts concerned are by Diogenes Laertius, Julius Caesar, Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo,

- Ammianus Marcellinus, Suetonius, Pomponius Mela, Lucan, Pliny, Tacitus, Dio Chrysostom, the various authors of the *Historia Augusta*, Ausonius, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and Valerius Maximus. For sharply contrasting opinions of them, see Piggott, Chadwick and Ellis, above.
4. Compare, for example, *The Cycles of the Kings*, *The Annals of Tigernach*, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, and the *Vitae* of Berach, Declan, Fintan, Lassen, Ciaran, and Patrick (the latter both in the version by Muirchu and in the *Tripartite Life*).
 5. VI.13-21.
 6. T. D. Kendrick, *The Druids* (London: Methuen, 1927); J. J. Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 60 (1959-60), 189-275.
 7. Ann Ross and Don Robins, *The Life and Death of a Druid Prince* (London: Rider, 1989). Among the textbooks which made a less adventurous, but still confident, acceptance of the find as evidence for sacrifice was my own *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 194.
 8. "Overkill," screened by Horizon, on BBC 2, 2 April 1998.
 9. J. A. J. Gowlett, R. E. M. Hedges, and I. E. Law, "Radiocarbon Accelerator Dating of Lindow Man," *Antiquity* 63 (1989), 71-79.
 10. C. S. Briggs, "Did They Fall or Were They Pushed?" in *Bog Bodies: New Discoveries and New Perspectives*, ed. R. C. Turner and R. G. Scaife (London: British Museum, 1995), 168-82.
 11. A range of such literary and artistic images are discussed in Sam Smiles, *The Image of Antiquity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 75-109, and Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon : a history of modern pagan witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), 7-11.
 12. Stukeley's books are *Stonehenge* (1740) and *Abury* (1743). Other examples of the genre, from different

- points of the chronological range, are John Toland, *A Critical History of the Celtic Religion and Learning* (1719: publ. 1815); Edward Davies, *The Mythology and Rites of the British Druids* (1809); and Morien O. Morgan, *The Royal Winged Son of Stonehenge and Avebury* (1893).
13. Prys Morgan, "From a Death to a View," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 43-100; Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Cornish Language and Its Literature* (London: Routledge, 1974), 147-62.
 14. *Ancient Order of Druids: Introductory Book* (1889); Charles Beale, *A Short Account of Modern Druidism* (n.d.).
 15. The founder of this tradition of thought was Godfrey Higgins, in *The Celtic Druids* (1829) and *Anacalypsis* (1836). Later representations included Gerald Massey's *The Book of the Beginnings* (1881) and *The Coming Religion* (1889), and Ross Nichols' *The Book of Druidry*, published (very) posthumously by Thorson in 1990.
 16. Caitlin Matthews, "The Testament of Rhiannon," in *Voices of the Goddess*, ed. Caitlin Matthews (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1990), 87-97; and "Following the Awen," in *The Druid Renaissance*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorson, 1996), 224-35.
 17. Nichols, *Book of Druidry*, 9-13; Philip Carr-Gomm, *The Elements of the Druid Tradition* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1991), 58-59.
 18. This is all based on participant observation in the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids.
 19. What follows is based mainly on participatory observation (stopping short of political direct action) in the Secular Order of Druids and the Loyal Arthurian Warband, but some of the material has been published in Tim Sebastian, "Triad: the Druid Knowledge of Stonehenge," in *Who Owns Stonehenge?*, ed. Christopher Chippindale (London:

Batsford, 1990), 88-108; Elen Evert Hopman, "Interview with Tim Sebastian," *Keltria* 31 (1996), 20-23; interview with Arthur Pendragon in *The Big Issue* 132 (29 May 1995), n.p.