The Grove of Dana

PREVIEW

Bardic Course
**Grove of Dana: Bardic Course Preview**

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*This is representative of the revised Bardic course, currently in the works. The current course however, is similar in scope, and contains many of the same lessons.*

*articles are contained in the current Bardic Manual.*
Introduction

Welcome to the Grove of Dana: Online College of Druidism. This is the first of three manuals; the Bardic manual, the Ovates Manual, and the Druidic manual. This text will be your guide through the first stage of your journey.

The Grove works towards the goal of fostering a true understanding of the self and the universe in which we all live, by exploring the trinity of knowledge, experience, and wisdom. Many educational programs merely require the student to learn by examining things as if they are outside objects, without allowing the student to feel their inherent connection to their studies. Knowledge is the area of the mind and the intellect, and is important to any educational endeavor, however knowledge alone will get us nowhere. As well as offering intellectual readings and assignments, our courses will also require the student to gain experience through certain exercises and meditations. Only through experience can we come to understand the knowledge we have, and thus gain the third part of our triad: wisdom. Wisdom is the product of experience and knowledge, just as mist is the product of water and air.

The college is set up in three different "grades" based on those outlined by literary sources: bard, or fílì; ovate, or fáith; and druid, or draoi. These titles were never intended to be "grades" in any sense of progression, but rather distinct professions among the intellectual class of Celtic people. However, in order to make our courses more comprehensible, we have adopted these titles for our courses, which do serve to denote progression. Our aim is to take people through a study in Celtic and Druidic spirituality, not to train people to serve these roles, as that takes many more years of study, practice, and experience than we can offer here. We want to give people a firm grasp on the subject, and where they decide to take their studies and pursuits from there, is a matter of their own sovereignty. That being said, we have used the inspiration gained from each of these professions to serve as the basis of our "grades". When one is a member of the bardic grade they will learn appropriate knowledge and skills that are firmly rooted in the spirit of the bard. The same goes for the ovates and druids. After completion of these three grades, the student may decide whether or not they want to specialize in a certain area. These may include "Celtic shamanism", mythology, history, healing, poetry, seership, ritual, a combination of these things, or a self chosen study. The purpose of this is to guide the student in an independent research of their particular field of interest. This means that it will require a lot more work and research on the student's part.

The Bardic course is primarily focused on getting you familiar with who the Celts are, their cosmology, history, beliefs, etc. There are also many experiences and lessons aimed at the fostering of animistic perceptions and understanding, shifting the way in which you view the world and your life.

One thing that is suggested you do, if you do not already, is take up a contemplative practice. This could be as simple as meditation, or as complex as certain forms of movement meditation. The reason for this is that the Celtic spiritual path is a mystical one, oriented to the "in-between" places we can reach through altered states of consciousness.

Overall it could be said that this first course is an “orientation”, a way of getting you familiar with Celtic culture and spirituality, and a way of integrating it into your daily life, cultivating the many practices and perceptions that go along with it.
The Nine Strands: Exploring the Druid Identity

In modern times we must reinterpret what exactly Druidism is. It is obvious that we cannot go purely by the scant models of the past, for even if we had all the information we would like, much would hardly be relevant to the modern era. On the other side of that coin, we cannot completely abandon the past, for with that we lose our ancestral identity and the foundations upon which our spirituality is built. One of the largest problems with non-dogmatic spiritualities such as Druidism, is that its hard to really establish what constitutes Druidic practice and theory, and what is not. A certain amount of blending in spirituality is fine, so long as we are aware where each strand is coming from.

In essence Druidism is more than a spirituality or religion, but is a way, and unlike organized religions it does not interpret reality for us, but rather asks us to question everything and interpret the universe on our own. So it can, at times, be difficult to know what ground we are standing on, or whether we even have solidity beneath our feet. In Druidism, it is really that ground which defines what the path is; that foundation. Everything above the foundation hinges on our own subjective experiences, but the foundation itself, the roots and structure, are what gives us our cultural and spiritual identity.

In Greywind’s book *The Voice Within the Wind* he describes Druidism as being composed of nine dimensions, or as I’ve called them strands. These strands are the foundation of Druidism. Not to say they are any sort of dogma, but in order to define something we need to be able to understand what it is. Otherwise anyone could call themselves a Druid, even if they are possess qualities directly counter-productive to what we agree that Druidism is (for example, a life-affirming path that fosters community with the natural world).

The first strand spoken of by Greywind is the tribal dimension. This is the dimension that gives us our cultural identity. If it’s not Celtic, why even call it Druidism? Druidism is made up of ideas which are clearly Celtic, relying on the histories, mythologies, languages, and ideologies that have come to be identified with Celtic culture. It is here that we find our identity. Druids of the past were not only wisdom-keepers but also historians, keeping the history of the tribe and genealogical records memorized. Today we honor this tradition by studying Celtic culture and Druidic history (at least that which is available). From this practice we clearly gain a sense of who we are today and where we came from. This does not mean one must be of Celtic descent to practice Druidism or even primal Celtic spirituality. In ancient times the Celts were a migratory people, stretching roots out over much of Europe. Today people of almost all cultures, though predominantly in the United Kingdom, Ireland, United States, and Australia, can trace at least a few roots back to the Celtic people. From the study of history we learn that the Celtic way of life is still alive and breathing, though struggling to remain so. By learning what is Celtic we help keep a struggling minority culture alive.

The next strand he speaks about is art. When Celtic art is seen, it is immediately understood that these were a highly artistic people, who respected beauty and the representation of the sacred. Celtic art mirrors the metaphysics of the people, providing a clear link between the spiritual and the physical and how they interact. Art does not have to be limited to what we now perceive as art, but rather can encompass every aspect of our lives. Though visual art, prose, poetry, film, photography,
crafts, and the performing arts are what usually come to mind, art can possess the whole world. Art is simply creative expression, and when we seek to cultivate creative expression and inspiration we enrich our lives and each moment is an act of creation. Through living life this way we cultivate the flow of what the Irish called *imbas*, and the Welsh called *auen*; divine inspiration.

Healing is the next strand. In ancient times Druids were the keepers of balance, and reciprocity between the human and “more-than-human” communities. In modern times, though the Druid no longer holds the same social status as in the past, there is still a great need for this aspect. Our society has become dangerously out of balance and it is in line with the Druid role to try and reestablish that balance, restoring the Earth and our collectively wounded soul to health.

The metaphysical dimension is perhaps one of the most important aspects. Through the study of metaphysics we understand the universe. Important as it is, it is also the most subjective. Though there are clear metaphysical ideas attached to Druidism, the way each person experiences the cosmos will vary depending on multiple factors, not the least of which are their individual experiences. Metaphysics also encompasses the cosmos of the Celts, the realms of land, sea, and sky, aspects of the Otherworld. Through contact with the Otherworld insight and wisdom is gained, as well as a better understanding of the cosmos themselves. Though most people will have their own metaphysical notions relative to their experiences, because most Druids work in similar ways, and within the confines of similar cosmological maps based, there tends to often be core agreements in this area.

Directly related to the metaphysical dimension is that of seership. This does not necessarily mean divination (though it certainly includes that). There is a lot of talk about Celtic “shamanism”, and its true that there were shamanistic practices in the Celtic world. Shamanism comes from the Tungus tribe of Siberia, and today has moved to become a blanket term (much like paganism) for any ecstatic trance work. This Celtic “shamanism” probably did not have its own name, but rather fell under Druidic practice, and later that of the *Filidh* of Ireland and *Awenyddion* of Wales. Much of Druidism is concerned with contact with the Otherworld as a way of wisdom and healing. The three realms of land, sea, and sky correspond with the core shamanic idea of Underworld, Middleworld, and Upperworld. Amongst the Druids this was probably the role of the Ovates.

Ritual is the sixth strand. Within ritual we join the flow of all things. The word ritual comes from the Indo-European root *rei*, which means “to flow”. All the universe has a flow to it, a certain way of moving, much like the *Tao* is Chinese philosophy and the *neart* of the Irish. It is a great river that shapes our lives and the world around us. Through ritual we can enter into that flow, thus allowing ourselves both to be shaped, and in turn to shape. Ritual can be complex or simple as one wishes. One could employ elaborate ceremonies in there life, or make the choice of simplicity and spontaneity; either way we enter the flow and so there is no right answer but for the one in your heart.

The next dimension is that of natural philosophy. This is in direct parallel with metaphysics and seership. Druidism is deeply concerned with the environment and the world we live in, not only its spiritual dimensions, but the physical ones as well. In “The Flaming Door” by Eleanor Merry, it says, “but we shall never understand Druidism, unless we grasp the fact that it was recognized that all knowledge must be sought in two directions: one, by searching the outer world - science; and two, by searching the depths of the human soul and secrets of the human body - art.” This strand asks us to attend to the direct physical experience of the natural world, without the need to over-spiritualize it.

The eighth dimension is teaching. This is the most self explanatory of the strands. Teaching is fundamental for through it we keep the path alive. It doesn’t have to be conventional teaching.
Teaching comes in many forms, writing, tutoring, workshops, simple conversations with others. The list goes on. There is another sub-dimension to this one however. For teaching to be done, one must also be a student. We are all eternal students, and we never truly stop learning. Too many teachers think of themselves as the experts filling empty minds with facts. To truly be a teacher though is a dynamic experience where one is truly a teacher-learner. Roles become reversed often and the relationship between the teacher and student are obscured and crossed. Through teaching we not only keep the path alive and breathing, but cultivate new knowledge and wisdom within ourselves.

The ninth and final strand is service. Fundamental to Druidism is the concept of service. We do not walk this path solely for our own purposes and growth, but rather we grow in order to be of service to the world. Our individual growth is a positive byproduct of this. Service comes in many forms, and can even be inclusive in the stand of teaching, for that too is a service to those who seek this path. Service tends to encompass all of the different strands of Druidism, as it is the most abstract, limited only by the imagination. Service is also healing. When we help restore the balance of self and world, we are giving service both to humanity and the Earth. The Druid way is a search for Truth, which might be best expressed as a cultivated relationship in harmony with the universe. In a way this search for Truth is synonymous with service, for in our search we help to illuminate a darkened world.

The Druid Way, as Greywind, writes, “is derived from experience and it is highly likely that if you are a Druid you will not agree with [the above]. That is to the good. But if you do disagree, please don’t leave it at that. Work out the reasons why. In that way you will come to a more complete understanding of your own perspective. This is not an either/or competition, set in the linear context that binds us to confrontation. Even if you disagree we may both be right. We may both be wrong. We are simply striving after the Truth.”

This view of what the Druid path might be is not necessarily the right one, or the only right one. It is simply a perspective, a way of defining what is often so hard to define. It’s left to personal experience then, what the Druid Way is, and how it informs our actions. Like all ideas that may not necessarily hold true for all, but can neither be labeled right or wrong, this one might just bring some light to the darkened forest of the soul.
Spirals in Time: The Celtic Year

It is current belief that time moves in a linear fashion, that we are constantly progressing from point $a$ to $b$ on a straight line with both a beginning and end. It was not always this way however. Our ancestors understood time in a very different way. For them, the currents of time were cyclical, represented best perhaps by that most prevalent image of the spiral. Time was always circling round itself, building upon itself, and perhaps even bleeding into itself.

A strong argument could be made for Christianity introducing the world to linear time. In the Christian tradition, time is measured linearly from the birth of the divine figure of Christ (and all times before that culminating towards the birth), which in that tradition is the hierophany of the sacred into the secular or "profane" world. Time is measured from this point of hierophany (point $a$ so to speak), and life afterwards is a period of waiting for the return of the sacred in the form of the second coming of Christ (point $b$). Importantly it can be noted how this model of linear time alienates a person from the experience of the sacred by relegating it to a period of the past or of the future. There is little space for the sacred in the present moment because the hierophany has already come and gone, and life is waiting expectantly for it to return at "the end".

Ancient cultures who focused their attentions of reverence to the Earth were not constricted by such. In observing the motion of the seasons it was evident that life moved in a cyclical way. The sacred hierophany was not a point in time, but a perspective through which the world was seen and acted in. The hierophany was happening at all times, and it was important to many ancient cultures that each tribe or community had a representation of this in a visible "world tree" or "world mountain", an axis mundi which facilitated this effervescent flowing of the sacred into the world. The pre-Christian Celtic as well as the early Celtic Christian traditions provide an excellent example of this perspective of time.

There are four major feasts in the Celtic traditions; Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine, and Lughnasadh. Each is a stopping-place on the pilgrimage through the yearly cycle of the seasons, a touchstone for communion and celebration with the spirits of the season, and for reaffirming our place as humans within the cosmos.

The year begins, like the Celtic day, in the dark period, which starts at the festival of Samhain, which takes place on November 1st. Samhain is the most important of all the Celtic festivals. It is the turning of the seasons into the dark half of the year from the light half. It is a time for honoring the ancestors, and welcoming them into the home. Food is often left out for them at a place set for them on the table. Renewal is also an important aspect to this festival. One common theme associated with this period of time, even in contemporary Western society is that of the dissolution of identity. We wear disguises, we play tricks, and do things generally out of our character. There is also a sense of timelessness. This is a transition point, a threshold, where we are between the worlds, and in a place of no-time. The veil between our worlds is temporarily opened, allowing not only for the ancestors to return to this world, but for the living to more easily make the journey to the Otherworld. Another important theme is sacrifice. The first being to give honor to the land goddess for the harvest, and the
second being to renew the cosmos, all quite fitting when one considers the meaning of this festival.

Imbolc, on February 1st, is fundamentally about new growth. The name has connotations of the milk beginning to be produced by ewes. The light is now growing at this time of the year, and Imbolc is a reminder to slow down and honor the natural rhythm. This is Brighid’s day. In Ireland there is a beautiful fusion of the two traditions, pagan and Christian, around this time so that the goddess Brighid became St. Brighit, and the meaning of the day has been preserved. As the light begins to grow in the womb of winter’s darkness, this is a time to focus on the inner light growing within ourselves. In many traditions, trips are made to holy wells sacred to the goddess Brighid, where ablutions are made. The purpose of this might be thought of as the cleansing of the energies and emotions from the dark half of the year so that the light may grow more steadily. It is a time to spend with family, around the hearth, honoring our connections to one another.

The next festival, and opposite to Samhain is Bealtaine, which serves similar functions. It is a threshold place between the dark and light halves of the year. If Samhain is the beginning the dark half, Bealtaine is the beginning of the light half of the year, and so the first day of summer. As the light now grows far beyond the strength of darkness, the year is in a time of transformation once again. This begins a time of increased activity. As we were gestating in the womb of darkness during Samhain, growing and contemplating, this is a time to take that growth and integrate it into our lives. It is the first rays of the summer sun at dawn that purify us and transform the darkness into light. There is a tradition of catching the first rays of light this dawn in water, and storing them for the year for use in healing. The image of fire and water together is a powerful motif repeated often by the Celts. There is also a well known tradition of building two large bonfires close together and pass through them in order to purify the self symbolically (cattle are also traditionally herded through for the same reason). Along the same lines many people will jump the fires in order to promote fertility throughout the year.

The last festival of the year, before leading back into Samhain, is Lughnasadh, which traditionally lasts the whole month of August. It is primarily a harvest festival, celebrating the triumph of Lugh in the battle of Magh Tuireadh. In the story of this battle, the Fomorii are representative of the untamed power of nature, they are essentially the spirits of nature. The de Danann on the other hand, are the ordered power of the Tribe. This sets up a conflict not of good and evil as some have suggested, but between chaos and order, two very different forces without any moral connotations. The Land is chaos, and the Tribe is order, and these two struggle together, each force trying to overrun the other. But in the end, when the Fomorii are defeated, Lugh wins a certain amount of time in which the chaos of the Land is subsided, and can be cultivated to grow crops. Lughnasadh then is a last celebration of this triumph, before the chaos of the land-spirits take over again at Samhain. The festivities or great assembly is held traditionally on a sacred hill. Here, the first harvests of the season are ritually reaped and consumed, while the rest of the month serves as a time to harvest the remaining crops. Lughnasadh is also traditionally a time of legal processions, such as marriages, lawsuits, court hearings, and other business of the tribe. Fertility magic is also worked between paired couples of men and women. Flowers soaked in water, most often left over from Bealtaine, are poured into the earth and covered over, symbolically ending the summer. At this time there is a reaffirmation of the order of the tribe, strengthening this social structure so that it can co-exist with the chaos of the land-spirits. It is appropriate that this festival be dedicated to Lugh, because Lugh is not only the archetype par excellence of the order of the tribe, but also plays the role of psychopomp, who leads people to the Otherworld at death. Essentially the festival of Lughnasadh serves the purpose of leading the tribe
towards the dark half of the year at Samhain, and so is a representation of Lugh's "soul-leading" role.

Although these are the festivals associated with the pagan customs of Ireland, they have also been adopted and incorporated into the Christian church and local tradition of both Ireland and other Celtic lands. This shows a certain versatility of the Celtic spirit to hold a variety of religious perspectives at once. It is important to point out that the Christian tradition in Ireland does not perhaps see time in the same linear model of other western Christian traditions. During the conversion to Christianity, many of the same attitudes were carried over, the reason that these festivals were perhaps so well incorporated into the calendar.

Through the re-affirmation of the human connection with nature, and in viewing the shifting of the seasons as threshold times, the ground is provided for an ever renewing relationship with the sacred. Time here is seen as circular, and the participation in each festival, and the cycles of nature they mark, offer a point of renewal and reorientation of the human community to the living experience of the sacred.
Into the Well of Beauty: 
The Shape of the Sacred in Celtic Spirituality

When we look at the world with eyes that can see the sacred pulsing through everything, our heart opens. There has been no time in our collective history when we have needed to recover this gift more than now. The enlivened senses that we were born with have collectively shut down. We no longer see the sacred world. What we see in its place is the wholesale degradation of the earth as a resource; as a commodity for the use and control of human beings. In our eyes, the sacred has left the earth. If we are to heal the wounds we have caused the earth, and thus ourselves, we need to shift the way in which we think about the earth. We need an enlivened spirituality capable of re-imbuing the word with the divine presence of the sacred.

Most, if not all, of the spiritualities that are indigenous to their respective locations are animistic, honoring the earth and the spirits of the earth. The indigenous inhabitants of Ireland were no different, nor where the Celtic people who's culture mixed with that of the native population's in the beginning of the Iron Age. The result is what we talk about as the pre-Christian Celtic religion. This is just one of many viable and ancestral paths back to the wisdom of seeing the world for what it is: sacred.

Animism has come to be something of a derogatory term, especially in many circles of Western psychological thinkers. It is thought of as a pre-rational stage to be developed beyond. This is of course absurd if one takes into account that the ancient Greeks, who are thought of in the Western world as the champions of logic and reason were animists. Animism defies the modern Western mind. It is a way of seeing and participating in the world that states that all things are imbued with the numinous; that ever grove of trees, stone, river, mountain, ocean, and lake has its spirit, and are filled with the presence of divine beauty. All the world is ensouled in animism. As Irish poet and philosopher, John O'Donohue, puts it, "The body is in the soul".

In animistic spiritualities soul is all around us, we move through it, just as we move through the air. We breathe it. It is no accident that in most Indo-European based languages, the word for breath and the word for spirit are the same, or else closely related. We see this in the Greek anima, which has the double meaning of soul and breathe. We can also see this word echoed in the modern Irish words, anam, meaning soul; and anal meaning breathe. To the animistic mind, spirit and soul are as close and pervasive as the air that we breathe.

The Celtic understanding of divinity has been shaped by this worldview. It was not until they came into contact with the Romans, on the continent and in Britain, that the deities were carved in human form. In Ireland, which never came under the control of Rome, this never occurred, although there are a few carvings of human forms which some scholars argue to be deities. The gods were not seen as being anthropomorphic figures. A close parallel for understanding the deities of the Celtic traditions might be the Japanese Shinto concept of kami, a word which although often translated as deities, simply means "outstanding". Patricia Monaghan, talking about the goddess in Ireland, uses this parallel aptly, describing the kami and the goddess as:
moments and places and myth and beings in which divine presence makes itself felt. The blossoming of cherry trees, a sharp outcropping of rock, the sun bursting through clouds: these are kami because they remind us of the order - the divinity - into which we are born. In Ireland, similarly, the goddess is experienced as a hierophany, a breaking through, of divine power into our human consciousness, with specific natural settings and moments as the medium of communication.

The line between the Celtic deities and the ancestors is very thin. The gods and goddesses, the Tuatha dé Danann (often translated as the People of the Goddess Dana), were the first ancestors. Because they are understood to be born from Dana, the primal "mother goddess" of Ireland, we might think of them as Dana-spirits in the same way a Shinto practitioner would talk about the kami. The idea that we are related to the gods, that we are their descendants is an articulation not only of the closeness and immediacy of the divine pulsing through our blood, but in the interconnectedness of the human community with the "more-than-human" community. If all of nature is divine, if it is indeed the body of a goddess – the same goddess that the Tuatha dé Danann, the first ancestor-deities, were born from – then it goes to say that all life, all nature (which includes humans), is interconnected and related to one another.

No matter how you choose to look at it and try to understand it, the divine is a complicated matter, a mystery that we as humans can just barely even begin to understand. In the Christian tradition, God is spoken of as a threefold deity, the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Given the Celtic love of the number three, such an approach is also helpful in understanding the pre-Christian Celtic relationship with the divine. Tom Cowan and Frank MacEowen, two teachers and respected authors on Celtic spirituality speak of the Shaper, the Shapes and the Shaping.

This is something of a modern "invention", but based on the idea that the Celts were prone to place emphasis on "shaping", rather than "creation". Creating implies that something is being made from nothing, while shaping holds in it the notion that something pre-existing is in a process of taking on new forms.

One of the words for God in Scots-Gaelic is Cruitheair. It comes from the root word cruth, meaning "to shape". We can also see this in the Irish word for creator, cruthaitheoir, which also comes from the root word meaning "shape", cruth. God is seen is a Great Shaper, and this same understanding certainly holds true for the pagan experience of the deities as well; they are the Shapers of the world. From this we get the sense that nothing is truly created that is outside the shaping of the essence of the Shaper(s).

Nature, the "created" world, is the Shapes. Because these have been formed from the very essence of the Shaper(s), they are a part, an extension, of that divinity. The Shapes are the imminent blossoming forth of the divine presence, flowering from the transcendent reality of the Great Shaper(s). God, or the gods, are not entirely imminent nor entirely transcendent. They are both simultaneously, because they are both embraced by the same divine process of Shaping that transcends and includes both.

The Shaping is a mysterious process, much like the Holy Spirit in Catholicism. It is not just the Shaper shaping Shapes. One gets the idea that even the Shaper is Shaped by this, or perhaps even more perplexing, that the Shaper is a process of Shaping itself, rather than a fixed and motionless entity. The Shaping is the enlivening process underlying all things. It is like the Chinese concept of the Tao,
which translates as "the Way", a harmonizing principle which we can either allow ourselves to be shaped by or not. If the Great Shaper is a process of Shaping which encircles all Shapes, then all things are a part of this divine process. It is a triune idea, but each aspect is fundamentally bound into an inseparable whole; we are all, in our own right, shapes, shaping, and shapers, and in this way we participate in the divine play, just as God, or the gods, are present and active in each moment of this process of ceaseless shaping.

Perhaps it is in the Irish concept of *neart* in which we see the native articulation of this process of divine Shaping. *Neart* might simply be summed up as "creative energy". It is the process of transformation, or shaping, and the divine expression of forms all at once. We can see this process of shaping, or *neart*, reflected in Celtic art as flowing, interlaced lines wrap around and take a multitude of forms, shape-shifting all that they touche as they snake along. Humans become other humans, which become dogs before turning into swans, and on the journey of transformation goes. The process continues on as form gives way to form, and all things are embraced by intricate lines and spirals.

Seán Ó Duinn describes a possible meaning of this artistry in his book, *Where Three Streams Meet*:

...here we have great lines of creative energy emanating from God to take the form of a dog temporarily. For the dog will die and perhaps from his grave a flower will grow, and now the *neart* which had formed the dog is taking the form of a flower, and eventually the flower will die and be replaced by grass, shall we say. And now the creative *neart* has taken the form of grass. iv

As Ó Duinn points out that this *neart*, this Shaping power, emanates from God, the Great Shaper or Shapers, who facilitates its issuing forth into the world of Shapes. This is a world of dynamic fluidity; nothing is static.

When Christianity reached Ireland, the people began to convert. However, the Christianity that arose from them was very different and distinct from the Roman form of Christianity, which exerted little control over the Celtic church in the early Christian period. Many of the old pagan practices persisted in an ever so slightly altered form, taking on the colors of the new faith, but maintaining the form of the old.

One of the most noticeable differences is that the Irish Christians still stressed a great deal of importance on the idea of the imminence of God. It was not so much that they did not recognize the transcendence of the divine as well, but focusing on the imminence was a recognition of the close presence of the sacred in everyday life. It was right there in the fields, in the clouds, in the mountains, and the trees. It was a surrendering to the fact that the transcendence of God was an ultimate mystery, and a display of a profound comfort with that mystery.

In native Irish sources, the word used for God is *Rí na nDúl*, the King, or God of the Elements. From this we get the sense that God is a God of Nature. The Irish word for nature is *dílra*, and also contains the same word for element, *díil*. Another word used for God, or Creator, in the Irish language is *Dúileamh*. God is fiercely entwined with the natural world. These words suggest that the divine in intimately a part of the world, and that the world in turn is intimately a part of God.

In his book *Yearning for the Wind*, Tom Cowan points out that the same word *díil*, can also mean desire, liking, or hope. This idea is finds its way into the traditional prayer, "You are the pure love
of the moon, you are the pure love of the stars, your are the pure love of sun, you are the pure love of the
dew, you are the pure love of the rain, you are the pure love of each living creature." This is radical
notion to our modern world, to entertain the thought that the world is so filled with love and fondness,
and that what more, we are the love and affection of all things.

This makes vast amounts of sense if we hold to the old Celtic notion that the land is a goddess. Often
the land is portrayed as either a mother or a lover. An old Scottish Highland saying states,
"Within the heart of God is the heart of a mother." This idea of the Mothering power of the land
survived the conversion of Christianity and its masculine God. Even God was recognized as having the
feminine attribute of a mother, a recognition of the often neglected divine feminine. If nature is so full
of such mothering powers, of course it loves us, and is filled with affection for us!

In his brilliant book, *Divine Beauty*, John O'Donohue plays with this idea, asking the questions
we might never think to ask ourselves:

> Concealed beneath familiarity and silence, the earth holds back and it never occurs to us to
wonder how the earth sees us. Is it not possible that a place could have huge affection for
those who dwell there? Perhaps your place loves having you there. It misses you when you
are away and in its secret way rejoices when you return. Could it be possible that a landscape
might have a deep friendship with you?!

Such a relationship with the world would require from us a profound softening of the ways in
which we dwell within it. It would require us to treat the world as if it were divine, as if it were God
itself, or as if it were a mother or a lover. We would have to give the earth the same love and affection
that it gives to us, even as we destroy her.

This way of sensing and appreciating the world needs the cultivation of a different set of
senses; senses that are capable of perceiving the numinous dimensions hidden quietly within each stone,
coursing in the sap up through trees, and flowing secretly in the currents of rivers. Such enlivened
senses would show us a new landscape, one in which sacred springs are the eyes of a goddess, and
wild mountains are her breasts. When we open these eyes, we open a new heart, filled with reverence
for the earth. We need to enter this well of beauty now, more than ever. Our ancient spirituality, and
the science of the 21st century have both shown us that we are part of an intricate system of
interpenetrating cycles of life and consciousness. The land is indeed sacred and filled with a divine
presence, we have simply forgotten this. We need to remember. We are the love and affection of
the earth. We are the love and affection of the Shapes, the Shaper, and the Shaping of Life.
End Notes

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The Preserving Shrine:
The Memory of the Land

Early law text, the Senchus Mor, which encodes the Brehon Law system of the Irish, asks the question, “What is the preserving shrine?” It then goes on to give two answers: “Not hard: it is memory and what is preserved in it,” and then, “Not hard: it is nature and what is preserved in it.” There is a deep and abiding connection between memory and nature in the Celtic cosmology. We can see it in the practices of the druids, as well as the filidh, or vision-poets. It is evident in their stories, which present to us a profound connection of history, myth, and their landscapes. Through an in-depth look at these things, it becomes clear that the wisdom and the sacred landscape of Ireland has the power to connect us to what is called “the spirit of place”. The spirit of Ireland is deeply connected to the Otherworld and the Celtic “dreamtime” history. By connecting with this spiritscape we are entering into the preserving shrine, and all that is preserved within it.

There exists a vast collection of place name stories called the dindshenchas. These are myths detailing the mytho-historical explanation of why certain places are named as they are. The tradition of the dindshenchas is a valid one, but the problem arises with the actual stories we have. As Seán Ó Tuathail explains in his article, Power and Landscape in Ireland:

Their compilers sought to include as many places as possible, and as with all such ‘quantity over quality’ attempts, the result is a farce. Many of the ‘explanations’ given are early medieval or Norse, others are the result of the local people in one township bearing a grudge against those living in the neighboring township...and a large number are pure invention by the compilers themselves, taking the actual name and inventing stories (often directly contradicted in valid seanchais) to explain the name (Ó Tuahail, sec. 5).

One of the stories from the dindshenchas that we can assume with some certainty to be authentic is the one that recounts the way in which the Boyne river got its name.

The story goes that after coupling with the Dagda and having a child, Oengus Mac Og, the goddess Bóand went to the Well of Segais in the Sidhe of Nechtan. Her plan was to walk widdershins about it three times, a regenerative circumnambulation ritual to restore herself to state of purity and virginity; walking in the opposite direction of the sun’s course and thus turning back time. But only Nechtan and his three cupbearers were allowed to go to the well, and it was said that anyone else who went would be maimed. When Bóand did her ritual, the waters of the well rose up, taking one of her eyes, a foot, and a hand. These injuries resemble the crane posture taken by Lugh at the second battle of Magh Tuireadh, closing one eye, standing on one leg, with one hand behind his back. There seems to be a “shamanic” significance with this posture, and idircheo, being “between the mists” of the Otherworld. Bóand fled the well, towards the sea to escape her shame, but the waters followed her. When finally she reached the edge of the sea, the water, behind her forming a great river, swallowed and killed her. The river has ever since been named Boyne, and Bóand has been its spirit.

This is a perfect example of the way in which myth, landscape, and an saol eile (the Otherworld, which is a spiritual landscape that is “present but not present” at all times) interact with one another. It is the
very character of myth to connect us to this realm. Beyond the function of explaining the unknown, myths are made to make it easier for us to slide into these liminal states of awareness, where we can access the Otherworld. Myths launch us into the misty threshold that is between this world and an eile, the other. This story is just one example of a story-telling tradition that is clear evidence of a connection in the Celtic consciousness between their myths and landscape, and the connection to the Otherworld they give us together. The *dindshenchas* are comparable to the Australian Aboriginal concept of songlines and their own dreamtime.

History and myth are not separated by the Celtic mind. By not keeping written historical records they resisted, as Alexei Kondratiev says, “being dragged into the continuum of history, held on to the Dreamtime, the eternal present, and the certainty of an unchanging pattern” (Kondratiev 4). Like with all things, the Celts preferred to keep both history and myth in the threshold between each other. It is evident in their mythology, as they include various historical or supposed historical events. After all why should history be forced to conform to so-called fact and rational theories of what constitutes the past. That would assume that there is only one past, rather than a multitude of realities and ways in which such things can be experienced or perceived. To keep history and myth unseparated is to do exactly what Kondratiev says, to remain within the dreamtime; to remain in a constant threshold experience where they are in the constant presence of the Otherworld.

In Ireland, the entire island is spoken of as a goddess, and there is a rich tradition of honoring the land in this way, and how it is interacted with. The Goddess of the Land is actually a triple goddess, appearing in myth as the sisters, Banba, Fódhla, and Ériu. When the Milesian Gaels invaded or migrated to Ireland, they encountered each of these goddesses in turn. Each one asked for them to name the island after them, and in return they would not hinder them. To Banba and Fódhla they agreed. When they reached Ériu though, she too asked this question and Amhairghin Bright-Knee responded, saying that the island would be named for her as well. But because, as Patricia Monaghan says in, *The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*, “the words of a poet can never be reversed, the land would be called Éire” (Monaghan 21). This Goddess of the Land forms the essential form through which the Irish Celts understand the land. In ancient times, when there were still kings, there was a custom of the king symbolically marrying the Goddess of the Land. This was to ensure that the king was sensitive to her sovereignty, so there would be a good harvest, and of course, to retain the necessary balance between tribe and land.

There is a story surrounding this custom. One day, Niall (of the Nine Hostages) was hunting in the forest with his brothers. The day was unlucky though, and they brought back nothing. They wandered the forest, and became quite thirsty. When finally they came upon a spring, there was a gruesomely hideous hag, serving as its keeper. She offered them all the water they could drink, in return for a kiss. His brothers all refused, but Niall did not. He went to her, and going beyond a simple kiss, he made love to her. When they were finished, Niall opened his eyes to find that the ugly hag was now a beautiful goddess. He asked what her name was, and in response, she said, “Flaitheas”, which means sovereignty. After he proved himself to her, he was made *ard-rí*, High King of Ireland. This is also a good example of how myth and history have a tendency to entwine, as Niall of the Nine Hostages is recorded as one of the most powerful High Kings of Ireland around 400 A.D.

Although this explains the important role of the landscape in the Irish Celtic tradition, it does not address the issue of memory and its connection to the land. Memory is something that was held of the highest importance in Celtic society. Celtic society, because of its oral nature, was fluid and unrestricted. It could evolve as was necessary without old beliefs and ideas persisting merely because they were written on the page
of a book. Like all oral societies this demanded that the wisdom and lore keepers develop memories of encyclopedic knowledge in a large variety of subjects. The cultivation of memory, however, is far more important than just being able to remember poems and stories. As Searles O'Dubhain states in his essay, *The Traditional Roles of Druids*, “The memory techniques are import for three reasons: To remember the truth when we experience it, to make the instantaneous associations that are necessary for creative thinking and production, to serve as a checking of truth in a matrix of facts and relationships” (O'Dubhain sec. 8). Truth was of an extremely important value to the druids, and extended far beyond the language game we have turned it into today. Greywind, author of *The Voice Within the Wind*, says that truth is, “a measurement of the degree of which a thing is rightly integrated with the underlying unity of all things” (Greywind 102). Truth then, becomes a matter of integrating subjective reality with objective reality, as evidenced by the old saying, the Truth against the world.

It was the Earth though that held the greatest memory. John Mathews, in *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Wisdom*, says:

> The earth remembers everything and is witness to history in a way we cannot fully appreciate. In Celtic tradition, the land is characterized by spiritual manifestations of its power: by the Goddess of the Land, by the appearance of warring dragons, by the flowing of rivers of mystical properties. It is the shaman’s task to read and know the land, to be so part of it that any imbalances within it registers in a conscious manner (Mathews 6).

This is where memory and land interact. The poet Amhairgin, first of the Gaels to set foot on Ireland uttered a well know poem in which he recounts a series of images, claimed that he *is* them. Amongst these images are, the wind of the sea, a stag of seven tines, a tear of the sun, and a hill of poetry. This is reminiscent of the poetry of the Welsh bard Taliesin, who has similar lines of poetry claiming memory of similar experiences. Erynn Rowan Laurie recounts in an essay titled, *The Preserving Shrine*, “Because of their identification with nature, both of them know deep secrets. ‘In what place lies the setting of the sun?’ asks Aimirgin, and it is apparent that he knows the answer” (Laurie 40). It is exactly this memory of the earth that allows one to identify so completely with all aspects of nature, that such secrets become revealed, and memory again that allows one to recall the experiences, and make the instantaneous associations between them and other facts and relationships. These techniques were employed widely by both the druids, and the fidh, or vision-poets, who took their place after the coming of Christianity.

It is this memory connection that allows for the obtaining of such wisdom. When we are able to develop such a deep connection of remembrance with the earth and our landscapes, we become recipients of its stored knowledge. This is just what the preserving shrine is. It is nature, memory, and what is preserved within them.

Each specific place in nature has its indwelling spirit in the Celtic traditions. This animistic worldview, held by many native traditions, is the product of a belief in the sacredness of all things. Unlike many world religions which hold that divinity is entirely transcendent, animistic traditions believe that this divinity is *both* immanent and transcendent. God does not only dwell in heaven, but within the Earth as well. This view was held by both the ancient Celts as well as the modern ones. While Celtic Christians speak of this as the imminence of God, Celtic pagans speak of this as the spirit of place. If human beings can be conceived of having their own spirit, individualized as well as connected to the larger whole, then it would not be too far of a stretch to conceive all of the physical world as being possessed of the same spirit.
In Scots-Gaelic, one of the words for God is *Cruithear*, a word which means “shaper”. We see the same idea in Irish Gaelic with the word *Cruthaitheoir*, which means “creator”. However the word *cruth*, means literally “to shape” and so this word for creator holds within it the root word that means “to shape”. Shaping and creating are two very different things. The Celts have no creation myth; no tales about how all this came to be. In their mind it has always been, and always will be. God is not a creator, but rather a shaper; shaping that which already, and always has existed. This entity does not sit in golden throne in Heaven, taking no part in the supposed creation, but rather is constantly in a process of shaping. God is within all things, and therefore everything is a constant process of being shaped.

This adds an incredible dimension to the way in which landscape is interacted with. It is not just something that exists as our environment, a backdrop in which our lives play out like the scenery of a play. The landscape holds its own personality, grows as we grow, is shaped as we are shaped, and perhaps even more importantly, shapes as we shape. Shaping is not just the Shaper(s) elite hobby. When we realize that there exists a stream of shaping, then we have a choice to either engage in this flow, letting it take us on its currents, thus being shaped, or resist it and stagnate. To let it shape us though, we realize that we too have the ability to do this, and can then take our parts in this divine play. The landscape is the same way. The ability to recognize the shaping power of the land is the ability to be shaped by it.

Similar to the Australian Aboriginal idea of songlines, the Celts too believed that the indwelling spirit of each place could be profoundly affected by song. The bardic tradition was a strong one in the Celtic lands, and in Irish the word for poet and seer are the same, establishing a mystical connotation to poetry and song. During training, a bard was expected to memorize vast areas of landscape in connection to myth, song, and poetry. To then recite the lore at their respective locations was a way of recreating the events, and so also a way of recreating that place. It was a deviation of the practice of symbolic sacrifice to recreate the world in a more localized context.

This entire idea of the Earth as sacred, as well as all the practices, traditions, and beliefs that surround it, serve a purpose of allowing us to form a bridge between nature and the Otherworld. There is a tradition in Celtic Christianity referred to as Green Martyrdom. This is the wandering of a person who has given up their life to search for God in the wilds of nature. It is a symbolic act of letting go of one’s ego into the tangled “wilderness” of our deeper self, that core called the soul, which each of us possess. Our interaction with the landscape through these traditions, whether it is a Green Martyrdom or simply holding an awareness of the holiness of all the world and allowing that to be embodied in every action, can lead us deeper into the spirit of the land, as well as into our own selves. As Frank MacEowen writes in *The Mist-Filled Path*, “your life is a gift and a pilgrimage; see every day, every event, every moment, and every act as a renewable point in time offering you a new beginning” (MacEowen 122).

Each step we take, in either literal pilgrimage or the one that is our life, will lead us both deeper into both the spiritualscape of the land and of ourselves. It is a constant rebirth of our selves and a renewal of the spirit of the land, a way of thinking and envisioning the world in which we are only the guests. To realize this sets us down a stream that is the shaping power of landscape, divinity and ourselves. These are not independent of one another. We are the bridges between these two sacred dimensions, a threshold point between earth and spirit. It is exactly this that leads to the perpetual rebirth of soul and nature, and to the opening of our holy senses which allows us to perceive their interconnectedness. This connection and dialogue preserves everything. What is the preserving shrine? Not hard: it is memory and nature, and what is preserved within them.
Works Cited


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