

Celtic Neopaganism

At this point, an account of this Celtic neopaganism is required. The main purpose here is to complete our survey of the legacy and posthumous influence of the medieval traditions involved – a survey that would be incomplete without some reference to this contemporary phenomenon. But it is also hoped that this final section will serve to assist the perplexed academic in his efforts to understand and communicate with his neopagan interlocutor. While it would not be unreasonable to write off much of the New Age interest in the Celtic tradition as muddled, whimsical and commercialised nonsense – there are also sections within this diverse interest-community where a sincere desire for a better understanding of the source material is clearly apparent. This is of course, precisely where the academic expert is equipped to offer valuable and much appreciated guidance. This section is intended to help the academic understand and identify this potential audience. It is also hoped that other interested parties – not least Celtic neopagans themselves – might benefit from the overview this potted history and reflective summary has set out to provide.

Celtic neopaganism has a complex and fascinating ancestry but entirely lacks any independent ‘lineage’ back to genuine pre-Christian magico-religious practices in any sense (the outlines of the latter have been tentatively drawn in the Appendix of this study). Its roots are to be found primarily in a twentieth-century pagan revivalist movement known as *Wicca*, which in turn grew out of the broader culture of ritual magic and esoteric doctrine current in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that will be referred to here under the general name of ‘occultism’.

Occultism might be seen as a complementary aspect to the disillusion with mainstream religion that followed in the wake of industrialism and the rise of scientific materialism over the course of the nineteenth century. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so too, it would seem, does human spirituality. Among the precursors of the modern occult movement were early nineteenth-century figures such as Francis Barrett and Eliphas Levi, whose primary sources were extant Renaissance traditions of Neoplatonism, Cabalism¹⁰⁹³ and Alchemy. (Here we do in fact have which a tenuous connection with ‘genuine’ magical traditions from the ancient world – however muddled and corrupted these redactions might be). Also active in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were various Masonic and Rosicrucian organisations, although secrecy and fabrication obscure their precise nature

Occultism proper began with the Theosophy movement, founded in the 1870s by Helena Blavatsky, a charismatic Russian-American émigré. Blavatsky and her followers were responsible for the development of many of the basic tenets of occultism. Central to these is the belief in other planes or states of existence beyond the visible and physical. It is these ‘unseen planes’ and the intelligences that inhabit them which the Occultist seeks to understand, and to some extent control. The human being is regarded as a multi-layered entity, having an unrealised presence on each of these higher planes of existence. Occult systems offer a complex program of mental and spiritual training which

1091 Between Languages (1993) p. 205

1092 Graves, 1961, p.9

aim to awaken contact with these ‘higher selves’ – thereby effecting a process of personal growth and mystic individuation.

There is not the scope here to offer anything more than the most abbreviated history and sociology of this ongoing phenomenon, which might be described as sublime in theory but all too often absurd in practice. At the end of the nineteenth century, the ‘Order of the Golden Dawn’ was founded by a certain Wynn Westcott and Samuel Mathers-Macgregor and apparently based its rituals on an older Masonic system of graduated initiation. The Golden Dawn attracted many colourful figures, including the poet William Butler Yeats and the notorious ‘Black Magician’ Aleister Crowley. With its reputation for diabolism and sexual promiscuity, the Golden Dawn – at one level at least – might be seen as the final gasp of the Decadent movement of the late nineteenth century. The Order was disbanded before the end of the nineteenth century, following internal disagreements of a somewhat adolescent nature. A number of successor organisations were born out of this schism, which collectively might be said to represent the core of contemporary western occult practice today.

Madame Blavatsky drew heavily on Hindu and other eastern metaphysical systems and this oriental component of theosophical teaching has defined the character of subsequent occult thinking. Indeed, theosophy can be seen as the conduit through which many Asian and Far Eastern conceptual systems were first introduced into the consciousness of the twentieth-century West. This oriental metaphysics was combined with the nascent science of psychology, producing generic concepts such as ‘Thought-Forms’ and ‘The Group Mind’ – which remain a central aspect of contemporary occult practice. Of more obvious Eastern derivation are concepts such as *karma*, the *atman* and *yoga* which also made their way, via Theosophy, into the tool-box of western consciousness. These oriental theories of mind and existence were arguably unlike anything offered by nineteenth-century Christian theology and their repackaging for a western readership largely accounts for the success and appeal of occultism in an age otherwise characterised by an increasing scepticism.

Nonetheless, the Eastern provenance of some of this material was not to everybody’s taste, and there were a number of British occultists in particular who felt the need for a more ‘native’ or at least more ‘Western’ magical tradition. The Golden Dawn and other associated groups had met this need to some extent with a reworking of some of the pre-theosophical doctrines such as Cabalism, Alchemy and the Egyptian mysteries. Yet even this occidental ‘Hermetic tradition’ failed to provide what many felt to be the vital reconnection with the European collective unconscious.¹⁰⁹⁴ It was in this context that a number of twentieth-century occultists began to interest themselves in Celtic and other European native mythologies – which they sought (with varying degrees of satisfaction, c.f. p. 13 above) in works such as Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the Mabinogion, and (later on) in secondary sources by writers such as Robert Graves and the American folklorist W. Y. Evans-Wentz.¹⁰⁹⁵

1093 The *Cabala* (or Qabala, Kabbalah etc.) is the name of a branch of Jewish mysticism with its roots in 1st century *Merkava* mysticism. In its purest form, it is practiced only by religious Jews following the gemmatric codes laid down in the *Sefer Yetzirah* ‘The Book of Creation’, a sixth-century text outlining the ‘32 paths of secret wisdom’. Since the Renaissance, however, various aspects of this complex and fascinating tradition – in particular its schematic representation of the ten emanations of divinity as ‘the Tree of Life’ (*Otz Chim*) – have been adopted by Western esotericists, often in combination with other hermetic disciplines such as astrology, alchemy and neoplatonism.

It was in this context that we might situate the emergence of Wicca in the mid-twentieth century: a system of ‘white witchcraft’, also simply known as the Craft. Its founder was Gerald Gardiner, a British civil servant with a penchant for naturism and (it is said) a mild flagellation fetish. Gardiner had been an initiate of a Golden Dawn-derived system, and it was with the help of Aleister Crowley that the key text of this movement, *The Book of Shadows*, was initially drafted. This work, and indeed the religion as a whole, appears to be based on a variant of the rites of the Golden Dawn, combined with certain other materials drawn from European folklore and witch-tradition (none of which would appear to be much older than the nineteenth century). This concoction, as popular today as it has ever been before, might be seen as an important precursor to the closely related phenomenon of Celtic neopaganism.

Wicca offered its practitioners an atmosphere that was less formal and hierarchical – and perhaps also less intimidating – than the male-dominated initiatory system of the Golden Dawn orders. The appeal of Wicca also rested on its stated connection with the natural world: the waxing and waning of the moon, the changing of the seasons. This mixture of primitivism and nature-worship coincided fortuitously with the mood of the later-twentieth century and the popularity of Wicca continued to grow apace. For the younger, shopping-mall generation, television shows such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* and *B*witched* offered a re-packaged, sanitised fantasy of magical activity, sowing the seeds perhaps for a more serious interest in ‘The Craft’ in years to come. Wicca, as a religion and an industry, is set to thrive in the twenty-first century.

‘The New Age’ is a more generic term – often used derogatively – describing the plethora of yogic techniques, holistic therapies, dietary fads and mystical belief-systems that have sprung up in Western societies from the mid-twentieth century onwards. The development of Wicca we have outlined above might be seen as representative, *pars pro toto*, of the New Age movement as a whole. The range of interests and approaches covered by this term can in nearly every case be related, directly or otherwise, back to the Theosophy movement of the nineteenth century. But, as with Wicca, there is usually some kind of additional ingredient: whether this is the promise of kind of a ‘genuine’ connection to a spurious tradition of European witchcraft; or to any number of reconstructed mythologies from the Nordic *Vanir* to the ‘totem spirits’ of the Amerindian peoples. As with Wicca, many of these philosophies have also been influenced by the ecological movement, and other social developments of the twentieth century. Feminism, individualism, cultural relativism as well as shameless commercialism: are all represented, in varying degrees, by the diverse multiculturalism of the New Age.

The purpose here is not to criticise the New Age or the culture that produced it, but to try to contextualise the phenomenon of Celtic neopaganism, and highlight a particular characteristic which it shares with many of its correlatives. This we might sum up as the *desire for authenticity* – a desire which the New Age, by its very nature, can never wholly satisfy. As Wicca and other similar neopagan movements fall prey to the homogenising influences of the market and find their synthetic origins

1094 The psychiatrist C. G Jung was an important, if inadvertent, influence on twentieth century occult theory.

1095 W. Y. Evans Wentz. *Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (reprinted: New York: Lemna, 1973)

uncomfortably exposed, many of its would-be followers are inclined to look to elsewhere for more remote, less commercialised and more ‘genuine’ sources of spiritual inspiration.

An interesting case in point is the approach pioneered by British authors Caitlín and John Matthews, who in 1985-1986 published *The Western Way* – an influential two-volume work offering a new synthesis of the native and hermetic elements of the Western tradition.¹⁰⁹⁶ A key influence apparent in this work is that of the occultist Dion Fortune (née Violet Firth), whose Society of the Inner Light (founded in the early 1930s) was one of the many offshoots of the Golden Dawn. But equally important, the *Western Way* underlined a specific interest in material of Celtic derivation. The medieval wonder-tales of Ireland and Wales constitute the primary source material of this ‘native tradition’, with the interpretation and overall atmosphere resembling nothing so much as Kenneth Morris’s treatment of the Welsh tradition discussed above. *The Western Way*, perhaps, might be regarded as the point at which the ‘British Arcadia’¹⁰⁹⁷ of the Romantic Revival (from Iolo Morganwg to Robert Graves, via Lady Charlotte Guest) is comprehensively imported as a backdrop for a more generic New Age programme of personal growth. Significantly, the Matthews duo attribute much of their ‘inner knowledge’ of the native tradition to a technique known as *analeptic memory*,¹⁰⁹⁸ an intuitive process of mythographical investigation described in Chapter 19 of *The White Goddess*. From a strictly academic point of view, this is the final proof that we are indeed back with Iolo in the ‘mist of unreliable antiquarianism’.

Be this as it may, it is intriguing to observe yet another incarnation of the indefatigable personalities of the Mabinogi: whose varied and complex histories we have considered in Chapters 2-5, and whose ongoing posthumous influence we have been observing in the sections immediately above. These British-Celtic ‘god-forms’, as they are described in *The Western Way*, are to be regarded as ‘representative of an abstract energy, which the esotericist does not worship but mediates to Middle Earth’ (note the Tolkeinesque language). The likes of Arianrhod, Bendigeidfran and Math fab Mathonwy are assigned certain fixed, archetypal characteristics. Arianrhod becomes ‘goddess of the moon and stars ... a stern mistress of destiny, setting heavy geasa upon the candidate’. Bendigeidfran, Brân the Blessed, is a ‘Titanic God of the Celts’, and also (interestingly enough) a ‘prototype Grail contact’. The reader is assured that he will meet ‘some, if not all’ of the Children of Dôn on his mystical journey. Either the glass boat or the magical horse of Manawydan ‘will bear the seeker to the Otherworld’.¹⁰⁹⁹

1096 The two volumes, representing the Native and Hermetic traditions respectively, have been published in single omnibus edition by Arkana Press (London: 1993). All pages references cited below are to this edition.

1097 This phrase has been coined as a variant on the more familiar ‘English Arcadia’ – which is sometimes used to describe the distinctive mood and aesthetic associated with the Romantic poets (Keats and Coleridge et al) and the vision of certain English fantasy writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien in particular. This is essentially a bucolic vision, in which the English countryside (enriched with historical and mythic associations) forms the distinctive backdrop. In this spirit, the writer Peter Hunt has commented (quoted in Sullivan, 1989, pp. 100) ‘the English countryside has four dimensions, rather than the usual three, the fourth dimension being made up of historical and cultural associations’. The same is surely as true – if not more true – of the countryside of Wales.

This ‘Otherworld’ is frequently discussed by the John and Caitlín Matthews, but with a kind of studied vagueness that is perhaps the defining characteristic of the genre. The underlying concept seems to be something similar to Jung’s collective unconscious, or the ‘Astral Plane’ as understood by Dion Fortune. But, as is often implied by Jung and Fortune alike, *The Western Way* tradition regard this Otherworld as culturally- or even racially-specific, stocked with immutable ‘native’ archetypes which are ‘the inner reality of the land’.¹¹⁰⁰ It has become fashionable to conflate such discourse with the racial rhetoric of the Far Right, but this would be inaccurate as well as grossly unfair in the case of the authors of *The Western Way* – whose politics, such as they are, might best be described as tending towards the woolly side of liberal. However, the notion of a monolithic ‘national consciousness’ to which *The Western Way* perhaps unconsciously subscribes is problematic on a political level as well as an ontological one. To paraphrase George Orwell once again (c.f. p. 12, n. 10), one does not find humanity displayed like butterflies on pins, neatly labelled and divided into this or that race or culture. It is certainly true that the various layers of human consciousness (analogous to the ‘inner planes’ of the Occultists) are strongly shaped by local cultural factors. But these conditions do not remain constant throughout history, nor do they adhere to precise national boundaries, but seem to express any number of diverse human contacts. This much should be obvious even from our study of the history of the Mabinogi, which has demonstrated the rich variety of sources drawn on by the Branches in their evolution, and how the tradition as a whole has altered both its content and significance over the course of the generations.

It is the *myth* rather than the reality of an eternal tribal identity itself that remains a more or less constant feature of human self-definition. This might be seen as part of a more general social instinct, the ‘need to belong’, which (until recent generations, in Britain at least) might have been satisfied by membership of a local church, trade union or village community. It is perhaps not surprising that with the increasing atomisation of contemporary society, the appeal of myths such as those propounded in *The Western Way* seems, if anything, to be on the increase. In the United States in particular, there has been a strong interest in genealogy and the rediscovery of ancestral heritage. What was once thought of as a melting-pot is being increasingly redefined as a ‘sensitive mosaic’ of discreet ethnic, national or religious identities. Amongst those numerous Americans with Irish, Scottish or Welsh ancestry, there is a growing desire to reconnect with their ‘Celtic’ roots – which in some cases expresses itself in an interest in the kind of New Age revivalist paganism represented by the writings of John and Caitlín Matthews.

There are various strands of Celtic neopaganism – some of which are indistinguishable from the Wicca system previously described; some of which are associated with the long-running Romantic fantasy of ‘druidism’¹¹⁰¹; with others being specifically linked with particular Irish or Scottish communities in the United States and elsewhere. One particular group describe themselves as ‘Celtic Reconstructionist Pagans’ and follow a path most reminiscent of that set out by Matthews and Matthews in *The Western Way*. ‘CR Pagans’ as they are sometimes known are perhaps the group

1098 Matthews (1993) pp. 31, 44-46

1099 *ibid.* pp. 76-84

1100 p. 72

with which the academic Celticist might most usefully engage, having as they do a genuine interest in the Medieval Celtic literary tradition as well as in the archaeological data of the Iron Age Celtic world and any other sources of primary evidence from which a picture of Celtic paganism might be faithfully reconstructed.

It is perhaps appropriate that we end this survey by opening the door – albeit briefly – into the garrulous pandemonium of cyberspace. Here, perhaps more than at any physical location, is where we find the true spiritual home of Celtic neopaganism. There is not the scope to offer anything more than the briefest and most subjective snapshot of the bewildering array of opinions and resources offered up by any of the better-known search engines under the keyword combinations "Celtic+Paganism", "Gods+Mabinogion" or "Druidism+Wicca". It will be apparent from the several thousand pages retrieved in each of these searches that there is a considerable degree of variance in the depth and quality of this online material. For some, Celtic neopaganism seems to be little more than an adolescent fantasy – a half-hearted attempt to live the life of ‘Highlander’ or ‘Sabrina the Teenage Witch’ through the hyper-reality of the online world. But there are others, it is clear, for whom the symbolic language of the Celtic tradition seems to have resonated on a deeper level, finding correspondence with complex inner realities. It is this latter group, one might argue, who are using the tradition in the vital ‘reconstitutive’ manner for which it was originally designed.

On the value or significance of this Celtic neopaganism – and the New Age culture in general – it is perhaps still too early to say. Recently John and Caitlín Matthews, on being asked for an assessment of current neopaganism tactfully demurred, pointing out that many of the movements involved ‘had not yet reached their full flowering’. Whether such a flowering takes place perhaps ultimately depends on the ability of its spokesmen and women of the neopagan movement – its latter-day bards – to tap into the same poetic energies so ably deployed by their medieval predecessors. As we have seen in this study of the Mabinogi, there is more to this art than the simple conservation of inherited traditions. These traditions are at their most effective when *reworked into a living narrative matrix*, capable of addressing specific contemporary concerns and also (more importantly) forging a connection with the ‘organic patterns’ celebrated in Romance, as alluded to on pp. 619 above.

Perhaps the urban lifestyle of most twenty-first century Westerners renders the more cosmopolitan traditions of Neoplatonism, Cabalism or Tarotic iconography a more appropriate vehicle for esoteric meditation than any reconstruction of rustic Celtic paganism, the original nature of which we know very little.¹¹⁰² Nonetheless the appeal of this misty native horizon remains as strong as ever. There are several reasons for this desire to reconnect with this remote aspect of our historical experience, though some of these reasons are more creditable than others.

¹¹⁰¹ There are many druidic orders active today, the earliest of which originated with Iolo Morganawg and various eighteenth-century predecessors. The religious leanings of these early-nineteenth century druids reflected the homespun Unitarianism of its founders, and had little basis in the ‘genuine’ Celtic tradition. Over the years, the various groups describing themselves as Druids have tended to fall in with the general pattern of New Age universalism, sometimes with specifically ‘Celtic’ overtones. These groups are not to be confused with the druidic order of the Eisteddfod – academic and literary luminaries awarded with a blue, green or white ‘robes’ according to merit. There is a ceremonial element to these appointments, but no religious overtone.

But history surely tells us that what has sprung from these impulses has on more than one occasion borne fruit of extraordinary kind. It is not for academic Celticists to denigrate such popular interest. Their role must be to proffer the kernel of truth in these matters, as far as they are able, in the form of a careful interpretation of the source materials involved. Like modern day versions of the *cyfarwyddiaid*: their job is to speak, not to sing. But the next time a latter-day bard of the calibre of Robert Graves breathes the living *awen* back into the tradition it is to be hoped that they show themselves to be rather more supportive than their mid-century forebears.

1102 *The current state of academic knowledge of the magico-religious system of the pre-Christian Celtic-speaking world has been summarised in the Appendix below*