

Druids and Druidry in the 21st century

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What would our ancestors think of us? Namely, what would the ancient Druids think of how we conduct Druidic business and organise ourselves? I guess that, notwithstanding the honest efforts in reviving a fading Tradition, they would be alarmed at our fragmentation.

It is true that Celtic culture was, as Benozzo (2016; internet) puts it: “many-sided, coloured, rural, disquieting, stratified [and] archaic”. That is to say, it was diverse, free, non-centralised and it followed a confederal model. It is known that it was more open and progressive (using modern terminology for clarity even if risking an anachronism) in comparison to their European counterparts.

Still, the Celts of days gone by and their Druids were not – as some like to believe – an ideal perfect people, living in the land of milk and honey, and flying unicorns...

They needed to have educational, legal and religious systems in place which guaranteed the existence and continuity of that particular and recognisable culture for centuries. Druidry took a prominent role in maintaining that unity and stability, as Pena Granha states (2005; internet):

“The reality of Celtic Europe consists of a unending network of thousands of independent or inter-dependent autonomous political communities ... speaking related languages to a greater or lesser degree ... But this multi-coloured network responds to a single organisational impulse, to a territorial commitment and to a shared common faith ... Celtic religion is fundamentally dogmatic, with a uniform organisational system. Celtic Europe was arranged in a manner comparable to that of Medieval Christian Europe, politically divided but united by [religious] structure, giving it sense and strength of unity [with an] internationally cohesive clergy.”

Indeed, in almost every research about the apparition, consolidation and development of Celtic Civilisation, Druidry emerges as the defining force behind it, from a number of original common beliefs represented in early engravings to the formation of a well-defined and widely respected institution in charge of justice, education, medicine and, of course, what we would now understand as religious services. Waggaman (1988: 491) insists on this idea:

“If no political unification existed between the different Celtic ‘tuaths’, the same did not apply, however, to their unification under a same religious system ... Druidism was the exclusive religion of the Celts and all the ‘tuaths’ shared an identical religious system ... Druidism was not a tribal institution but a somehow international cult which was followed by all the diverse Celtic territorial groups. The ties which existed between those geographically separated groups were principally maintained through their shared practice of Druidism.”

This situation reveals a world where there was travel, commerce, constant contacts and exchanges; war too, but also someone responsible for diplomacy, making sure no conflict would dramatically affect the fabric of *Celtia*. Thus, ancient Druids were versed not only in the formal knowledge of Nature, laws, Gods and Goddesses and so on, but they were also very much aware of their agglutinating role. Following on this, in a time with no internet, phones or airplanes, it is logical to assume that an extremely strict orthodoxy was required in some fields in order to avoid a fragmentation of that knowledge and the increasing divergence of decisions and individual acts. How else could have they maintained such cohesion over such a long period of time in a territory which certainly felt much bigger than today?

Therefore, Druid training had to be rigorous, using the exact same syllabus for all of Europe. Druids formed a well established and perfectly stable institution, with clear functions, dogmas, rules and regulations. This is, then, a reality rather distant from the romantic visions invoking a New Age-ish abstract “way of life”, “open philosophy”, “religion of Nature”, etc where anything goes.

Nonetheless, the association of terms such as religion, orthodoxy or dogma to the current major cult in Europe – Christianity – often taints their core meaning and provokes immediate rejection. Yet, we should be able to see past that and understand them for what they really are, whether a set of spiritual and transcendent convictions, rituals and practices, internal structure and organisation, and basic tenets for anyone who follows this specific path.

What about us then? What happens to those of us who call ourselves Celts, followers of the Celtic Religion and even – a very big word – Druids?

Much has been said and done, and fortunately much has been properly researched, since the first revival of Druidry 300 years ago¹. The gap with ancient Druidry is still obvious and the breakdown in the direct transmission of the Tradition makes it almost impossible to ever truly understand all the mysteries of that past. However, we do now possess a significant body of information and modern tools which help us to better comprehend the foundations of Druidic beliefs and ethics. That, I consider, is the main task at hand when studying and reconstructing the Primordial Tradition. It is like each of us has a piece of a puzzle and we need to work towards putting them all together.

We are lucky, I think, finding ourselves at the unique crossroads between said accumulated knowledge of the modern era and the possibility of (re)establishing direct communication with each other thanks to technology. It goes without saying, it is also a tremendous responsibility.

¹ It is generally accepted that Irish-born philosopher John Toland’s call for a “druidic gathering” at Primrose Hill, London, during the Autumnal Equinox of 1717, constitutes the first attempt at reviving the old Tradition in the modern era. It must be pointed out, however, that the actual historicity of this event is still being discussed by some.

In consequence, serious² Druidic groups and Druids genuinely interested in a “Celtic Revival” ought to, first of all, open a direct and honest dialogue. The subsequent tricky task would revolve around the definition of what can be considered as “Celtic” in the times we live in, and work towards its promotion and implementation.

We often ask ourselves the questions of what does it mean to be a Celt nowadays, why is this relevant at all. We come to think that Druidry explains the deep spiritual connection between a People and their Land, their past and their traditions. Being a Celt in the 21st century is gaining awareness of that ancient heritage and persevering in keeping it alive. Both aspects – Druidry and Celticity – are also a path into the future open to all. It is an example of how a society can embrace old but at the same time useful, forward-thinking values, and share them with the world. Being a Celt is, then, studying, learning, respecting that past, but also reconstructing and living an identity in an educated and reasonable manner, establishing links with akin communities and individuals. Druidry is not the only way, but it certainly is an excellent option to do that when that fond feeling emanates from the soul and the heart. It is not only about what was, but what is, and what we want it to be for the times to come.

Then again, it is my conviction that what Druidry did give Druidry shall provide again, for if Druidry was the spine of ancient Celtic society, Druidic principles can help in determining what is Celtic and why this is pertinent nowadays. What we know and share, even if under different names, about Honour, Responsibility and Commitment (the three fundamental aspects in Celtic ethics) combined with a number of identical beliefs³, will hopefully pave the way in reintroducing timeless concepts such as generosity, loyalty, hospitality or eloquence, to name just a few, into our currently fragmented and rapidly decomposing Celtic countries.

It is a fact that 21st century Druids cannot automatically function as doctors, educators, judges or legal advisors by default, since this would constitute a breach not only in legality but also in professional courtesy. Yet we can humbly offer an alternative view of things which may organically resonate with what is left of our native heritage in our respective territories, and not only. This example in work and action should also serve as a reference to anyone wishing to learn from and get involved with Druidry anywhere in the world.

2 With no intention of sounding snobbish, I accept the criteria for “serious” Druidic group or individual as indicated for the forthcoming Celtic Druid Alliance Gathering (2019), that is, groups which “regardless of their own particular characteristics and idiosyncrasy, observe and respect the following:

- 1) Open and honest approach to genuine native Celtic traditions: Groups with a primary focus on the research, study, teaching and practice of Celtic-only spirituality and heritage, with no mixtures or eclecticism.
- 2) Non-commercialism: Non-profit groups and organisations exclusively, with no interest in personal or media promotion.
- 3) Non-racist, non-sexist, non-bigot groups: Groups with a clear and reputable public presence.
- 4) Against animal cruelty and solidly linked to environmentalism: Groups putting Nature in a central and visible place in their ethics and philosophy.”

In <http://celticdruidallianc.wixsite.com/celtic-alliance/gathering-2019> (last access 12th July 2017).

3 An introduction to the main aspects of Druidry as understood by the *Irmandade Druídica Galaica* – IDG (Pan-Galician Druidic Fellowship), which I represent, can be found in Galician-Portuguese in Paredes (2017) and <https://durvate.wordpress.com/druidismo/> (last access 12th July 2017).

In summary, Druids (and Druidists⁴) have an imperative to assemble, talk, move forward, propose and create rather than always lament how much has been lost and how unfair history has been to our people. If we are ever going to be worthy of really being called Druids then we will have to assume the onus of our predecessors and rally those who feel the call of Celtic culture and spirituality, of those who consider it relevant and useful. Between rituals and celebrations, it is our obligation to continue researching at the highest possible level and uphold the required rigour and scepticism in balance with an open mind. We have to somehow find the mechanism and protocols to put together our many (licit) diverse opinions and ideas and devise a minimal agreement, a starting point for future amicable discussions and practical resolutions.

Last but not least, we must carefully sort out and distinguish ourselves from those who merely chase a fantasy world built on self-complacency, or those whose only interest is the perverse use of Druidry for profit or ego, presenting it for what it is not and misleading the innocent and neophyte in doing so.

Druidry is not what it used to be but there already is enough to claim back the so-called Primordial Tradition and present it as it was, both a source of insight and an instrument for progress. It is paramount to guard it, but also to adapt it to a reality our ancestors probably could have never envisaged. We cannot do that in isolation nor can we dawdle, since modern pressures also deepen the social and cultural deconstruction of our nations. There is a lot of work ahead, but the path we walk should not be a lonely one.

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4 Regular Druidic believers. Generic for non-initiated followers of Druidry.