

WERE THERE DRUIDS IN DEVON?

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THE works of several of our local historians and antiquaries refer to the existence of Druids and the supposed Druidic cultus in Devon as an established fact, and with no little detail and precision give us a full account of the Druidic character and polity. By no writer is the belief in Druids and Druidism in the West so fully set forth as by Polwhele, though later authors have gone further than he did in their assignment to a Druidic origin of our more obscure antiquities, notably the rude stone monuments connected with Dartmoor. If a pile of granite rocks afforded a comfortable seat, canopied by a projecting slab, in their eyes it was a throne of the Arch Druid, or at the very least a seat of judgment. Hollows weathered in the granite, no matter how inaccessible the eminence, became rock basins in which the Druids caught the pure rain-water for their lustrations rocking-stones formed by the hand of nature were transformed into ordeals reared by the craft of man; the more grotesque granite pinnacles were rock idols,

“To whom in days long flown the suppliant knee
In trembling homage bowed;”

the burial cromlech became the sacrificial altar; the stone circle, the temple or the justice court, in which, to quote the words of Dr. Borlase, “whilst any election or decree was pending, or any solemn compact to be confirmed, the principal persons concerned stood each by his pillar, and where a middle stone was erected in the circle there stood the prince or general elect.”

I propose to enquire what is the value of this speculation. We naturally, in the first place, ask if there is any con-

temporary evidence for the existence of this mystic priesthood, and if so, whether we can connect it with our own county. With the conclusions of the antiquaries of the last century and their followers we have nothing to do, if they cannot be sustained by citations from contemporary, or approximately contemporary, authors, or by deductions from the wide field of archæology.

Now there are only five or six contemporary writers by whom the Druids are mentioned—Cæsar, in his *Commentaries*, circa 50 B.C.; the elder Pliny, in his *Historiâ Mundi*, about a century later; Tacitus, in his *Annals*, and *Life of Agricola*, later still; Cicero, a passing reference; Suetonius; and Lucan.

Cæsar, in the sixth book of his *Commentaries*, states that the Druids were honoured all over Gaul, and describes them in the following terms:

“The Druids are present at all divine offices, look after the sacrifices, public and private, and interpret the mysteries of religion. The youth in great numbers apply themselves to these Druids for education, and all persons have a great reverence for them; for generally in all controversies, as well public as private, it is they that make the determination. And whenever there is any outrage or murder committed, when any suits rise about estates, or disputes about bounds, all is left to their judgment; they *appoint* rewards or punishments at their discretion. If any, either private person or body of people, abide not by their decree, they forbid him the sacrifices. This among them is esteemed the most grievous of all punishments. They who are thus interdicted are reckoned the most profligate of mankind. All men studiously decline their company and conversation, and shun their approach as if they feared some infection. They are excluded from the benefit of the law, can sue no man, and are incapable of all honours. Amongst all these Druids there is one chief, who hath the supreme authority. Upon his death his successor is some one of the most distinguished merit among them, if there be any such; but if there be several of equal worth and merit, one succeeds by the election of the Druids. Sometimes the sword decides which party shall carry it. These Druids, at a set time every year, have a general assembly in the territory of the Carnutes, which is supposed to lie about the midst of Gaul, in a certain place consecrated to that purpose. Hither resort from all parts such as have any controversies depending, and they are wholly determined by the Druids. This sort of religious profession is thought to have been first in Britain, and from

thence carried over into Gaul. And even now those that desire thoroughly to be instructed in these mysteries for the most part go over into Britain. The Druids are exempt from all military duties, nor do they pay tribute, like the rest of the people; and as they are excused from serving in wars, so are they also from all other troublesome offices whatsoever. These great privileges are the cause that they have so many disciples; some address themselves to be admitted, others are sent to them by their parents or kindred. Then they make them, as it is said, learn by heart a great number of verses; and thus they continue under discipline for several years, not being allowed by their rules to commit what they are taught to writing, although in most other affairs, both public and private, they make use of the Greek character. This rule they have settled among them, I suppose, for two reasons—first, because they would not have the vulgar made acquainted with their mysterious learning; and next, because they would have their scholars exercise their memories, and not trust to what they have in writing. As we see it often happens, that when men rely too much on that help their diligence in learning, and care in retaining, do equally abate. One of the principal points they teach is the immortality and transmigration of souls; and this doctrine, removing the fear of death, they look upon as most proper to excite them to courage. They also make discourses to their scholars concerning the stars and their motions; concerning the magnitude of the heaven and the earth, the natures of things, and the power and majesty of the immortal gods.”*

Subsequently Cæsar states that—

“The whole nation of the Gauls is extremely addicted to superstition, so that in threatening distempers, or in imminent dangers of war, they make no scruple to sacrifice men, or engage themselves by vow to such sacrifices, in which they make use of the ministry of the Druids; for it is a prevalent notion among them that nothing but the life of man can atone for the life of man, insomuch that they use even public sacrifices of this kind: some prepare huge collossi of wicker twigs, in which they put men alive; and setting fire to them, those within expire amidst the flames.”

The chief reference in Tacitus is almost purely historical, in the strictest sense, as distinct from Cæsar’s descriptive narration.

Paulinus Suetonius [A.D. 61], in the reign of Nero, “resolved to subdue the island of Mona, a place inhabited by a

* CÆSAR, *De Bell. Gall.*, lib. vi.

warlike people, and a common refuge for all the discontented Britons. In order to facilitate his approach to a difficult and deceitful shore, he ordered a number of flat-bottomed boats to be constructed. In these he wafted over the infantry; while the cavalry, partly by fording over the shallows, and partly by swimming their horses, advanced to gain a footing on the island. On the opposite shore stood the Britons, close embodied, and prepared for action. Women were seen rushing through the ranks in wild disorder, their apparel funereal, their hair loose to the wind, in their hands flaming torches, and in their whole appearance resembling the frantic rage of the Furies. The Druids were ranged in order, with hands uplifted, invoking the gods, and pouring forth horrible imprecations. The novelty of the sight struck the Romans with awe and terror. They stood in stupid amazement, as if their limbs were benumbed, riveted to one spot, a mark for the enemy. The exhortations of the general diffused new vigour through the ranks, and the men by mutual reproaches inflamed each other to deeds of valour. They felt the disgrace of yielding to a troop of women, and a band of fanatic priests; they advanced the standards, and rushed on to the attack with impetuous fury. The Britons perished in the flames which they themselves had kindled. The island fell, and a garrison was established to retain it in subjection. The religious groves, dedicated to superstitious and barbarous rites, were levelled to the ground. In these recesses the natives imbrued their altars with the blood of their prisoners, and in the entrails of men explored the will of the gods.*

Tacitus has only two other Druidical references. In the *History* † he states, that on the death of Vitellius, "The Druids, in their wild enthusiasm, sang their oracular songs," predicting the downfall of Rome. In the *Life of Agricola* we read, "You will find in both nations [*i.e.* Gaul and Britain] the same religious rites and the same superstitions." ‡

Pliny speaks of the Druids of the Gauls as their men of religion, and as cautious and cunning magicians, and states that they were put down by Tiberius, with all the pack of such "prophets and wizards." His principal reference reads thus:—

"The Druids (so the Gauls call their men of religion) hold

* This passage of Tacitus has been assumed to indicate the extirpation of the Druids, but it does not go that length; and from the fact that the island was subsequently reduced by Agricola, it is evident that Suetonius made no permanent impression. *Annals*, book xiv., sec. xxix., xxx.

† Book iv., sec. liv.

‡ Sec. xi.

nothing more sacred than the mistletoe, and the tree on which it grows, provided it be an oak. Therefore they choose solitary groves, wherein are no trees but oaks; nor do they perform any ceremonies without the branches or leaves of that tree: so that from thence (if we attend to the Greek signification, they may very well be thought to have taken the name of Druidæ. Indeed, whatsoever they find growing to or upon an oak, they take to be sent from heaven, and look upon it as a certain sign, that their God hath made choice of that particular tree for himself. But it is a thing very rare to be met withal; and when it is found they resort to it with great devotion. In these ceremonies they principally observe that the moon be just six days old; with which they begin the computation of their months and years, and of that period which with them is called an age, *i.e.* thirty years complete. And they choose the sixth day, because they reckon the moon is then of a considerable strength, when she is not as yet half-full; and they call it by a name answering to 'all-heal.' The sacrifice and a festival entertainment being prepared under the oak, they bring thither two white bulls, whose horns are then, and not till then, tied. This done, the priest, habited in a white vestment, climbs the tree, and with a golden knife cuts off the mistletoe, which is carefully received in a white woollen cloth by them that attend below. Then they proceed to kill the beasts for sacrifice, and make their prayers to their God, that he would bless this, his own gift, to those to whom they shall dispense it. They have a conceit that a decoction of the mistletoe given to any barren animal will certainly make it fruitful; also that it is a most sovereign antidote against all sorts of poison.*

Pliny has no other Druidic allusion save to the adder-stone, of which more hereafter.

The passage in Cicero † runs: "There are Druids in Gaul, with one of whom I was acquainted, namely, Divitiacus Æduus, who enjoyed the hospitality of your house, and spoke of you with admiration. This man not only professed an intimate knowledge of the system of nature, which the Greeks call physiology, but also foretold future events, partly by augury and partly by conjecture."

This is all the direct contemporary evidence upon Druids and Druidism, beyond a statement by Suetonius, in his life of Claudius, that this emperor extinguished the Druidic faith

* PLINY, book xvi., sec. xlv.

† *De Divinatione*, as translated by Davies, *Mythology and Rites of the British Druids*, p. 44.

among the Gauls,—an assertion which has to be taken with at least some qualification; and Lucan's verses following Cæsar.

I have set these citations forth in full for two reasons. First, to show that contemporary writers do not connect what they called Druidism with any part of Britain in particular, except the north of Wales. Secondly, to point out that contemporary authorities fail to present to us any clear, well-defined picture of what a Druid was; and, as I think I shall be able to show, afford no foundation whatever for the Druid of modern belief.

We take Cæsar first, as the leading authority. I do not think his account entitled to more weight than would attach at the present day to a description of the religion of a semi-barbarous people, who made its profession a mystery, and information concerning whose creed and ritual had been gathered on hearsay by an invading foe. It is not possible, on Cæsar's own showing, that he could have been fully informed. Moreover, he goes too far. We cannot believe that the Druids habitually employed the Greek character. If they did, why are there no such inscriptions left, when we still have Ogham writings, and many a Keltic inscription in Roman letters? If the Druids ever used the Greek character, it must have been in the same way as the Romanized Kelt and Teuton borrowed the alphabet of their conquerors. Cæsar elsewhere, too, speaks of the gods of the Romans as being worshipped by the Gauls. Either this must have arisen from Gaulic association with Rome, or from an identity of characteristics between the deities of the two peoples. Indeed, Cæsar says * "The Gauls fancy themselves to be descended from the god Pluto, which, it seems, is the established tradition among the Druids." But if there was this similarity or identity of faith between the Gaul and the Roman, what becomes of the distinctive characters which made Druidism a religion *sui generis*? So also we must accept the idea, if at all, with considerable qualification, that the Druids formed a kind of wide-spread corporation (extending its influence into Britain) over the whole of Gaul, with an annual assembly and a single head—a notion expanded by other writers, without the shadow of evidence, into the existence in Britain of two primacies, the Druidic Canterbury and York. The arguments against the acceptance of the existence of such an organization are most weighty. Gaul and Britain were divided into a number of territories, held by different tribes, often at enmity with each other, rarely uniting even against a common

* *Commentaries*, book vi., sec. xv.

foe, prone to warfare on the smallest provocation. Among such a collection of peoples, of different races, with different interests, thoughts, and feelings, could there have been such an order as the Druids—not a caste, be it remembered, like the Brahmans—raised above all local and tribal strifes and jealousies, exercising a universal sway amid universal discord?

There may have been some such polity existing within a limited area; with a general assembly of the so-called Druids of the Carnuti, or of that tribe and its allies. But Cæsar himself tells us in the opening lines of his *Commentaries* that Gaul was divided between the Belges, Aquitanians, and Gauls or Kelts, and that these peoples each differed in language, customs, and laws. How then could the Druids have had a universal sway? Modern speculation has assigned them to the Keltic division. Cæsar expressly states there were none among the Germans, to whom the Belgic tribes were closely akin. And no one has claimed any Druidic connection for the modern Basques, who represent Cæsar's Aquitanians.

We may probably accept without question the existence in Gaul and Britain of an order of men known by some such name as Druid or Druith—a barbaric priesthood, with a certain organization, and wielding a powerful influence. That they were the wisest of their fellows is also proved by their position. But we may grant all this without accepting the Druids of the later antiquaries, and their more than regal sway here in Devonshire some scores of centuries ago.

The Druid painted by Cæsar is rather a compound of the Greek philosopher and the Roman judge than a barbaric reflex of the Pagan priest, and has little in common with Pliny's save the name. We can as little believe in the high attainments in philosophy or the collegiate institutions of the Druids, as in the universality of their civil organization; and it is worthy of notice that on this head Cæsar does not speak positively. He has only *heard* that the Druids made their disciples learn by heart a number of verses, and he only *supposes* the reason. It is a curious illustration of the contradictions that meet one on every hand in investigating this subject, that while Cæsar says Druidism came from Britain, and that here its mysteries were best known and taught, Pliny says it was carried hither.

As a suggestion, to be taken for what it is worth as a speculation of my own, I would offer this hypothesis as a possible and partial explanation of the erroneous ideas that the Roman writers entertained concerning the Druids. They

seem to have derived the name from the Greek $\Delta\rho\upsilon\varsigma$, an oak; and this being so, it is not difficult to understand why they should have regarded them as in some sort specially associated with that tree. Hence the remarks of Pliny, who wrote, it must be borne in mind, from the report of others, concerning the oak and the mistletoe, in which one seems also to recognize an echo of some features of Grecian paganism. Notwithstanding the assertion of Cæsar that the Druids used the Greek character, we cannot believe that a Keltic race, in barbarous times, went to Greece for a title for their priests, much as we might do nowadays for a new scientific term. It is in the Keltic if anywhere that we are to find the origin of the name; and though the Keltic for oak, "Derow," may be pressed into the service, there is much more probability in reading the word as we find it in the oldest Irish and Welsh writings, *Druith*, and giving it the interpretation which it then had—that simply of a wise man, diviner, magician. Doing this, we shall find ourselves also in accord with the statement of Pliny, that the Britons were renowned for their practice of magical arts. Williams's *Lexicon Cornu-Britannicum* gives *Druth* as signifying a harlot. The word is clearly one of low character.

A critical examination of the written evidence then, I think, disposes of what we may call the antiquarian or traditional Druid altogether, not only in Devon, but everywhere else; and substitutes in his place a being akin to the medicine or mystery man of the North American Indians, or the sorcerer or rainmaker of Africa.

But it may be said that the archæological evidence, on which the antiquaries of the last century and their followers relied, points the other way. I have shown that the historical references to Druidism (in whatever sense that word may have been used) in this country are of the slightest, and in no way connected with this part of the kingdom. We shall find the testimony of archæology even more decisive.

It is perfectly certain that at the time Cæsar wrote there were at least two races in this island. He states that the coast country was peopled by Belgic tribes, the inhabitants of Kent differing little in manners from the Gauls, while the inland parts were inhabited by those whom fame reported to be autochthones—natives of the soil. Probably by the inland parts we should rather understand the country remote from the district with which Cæsar himself was acquainted, and include under that head our own county of Devon. And it must be borne in mind that Cæsar had but the smallest

personal acquaintance with Britain. His first incursion (B.C. 55) was little more than an armed reconnaissance. In the following year he did not penetrate into the country more than 70 miles.

Cæsar's statement as to the existence of two races of people here is, however, confirmed by an authority which cannot be disputed. The barrows which have been so carefully investigated during the last twenty years contain the remains of a long-headed race and a round-headed race—the latter the more civilized of the two. To one or other of these the Druids of Britain, if they had any existence, must have belonged. What were these people? Dr. Thurman's answer appears conclusive: that archæological and osteological data establish "the existence in this island of the West of two distinct races in pre-Roman times. One of these, I may repeat, which had lost its supremacy, at least in the south of the island, being the earlier and dolichocephalic, was probably Iberic; the other, being the later brachycephalic, was probably Gaulish, or in other word Belgic."

Tacitus states and Strabo inferentially confirms the idea that the earliest historical inhabitants of Britain were of Iberic, or, in other words, of Turanian origin; akin therefore to the Aquitanians of Gaul, now represented by the Basques. When Cæsar wrote the early Aryan wave was pressing westward, and immigrants from Gaul, whether we call them Kelts or Belgæ, were driving the Iberic tribes into the corners of the land—into Wales and Cornwall, and the distant North, precisely as the Britons of later days were thrust in the same directions by the invading Saxons.

There is no reason to doubt that when the Romans first made their acquaintance with Britain this part of the island was occupied, not by the more polished round-headed races whom we may identify with the Gaulic peoples, but by the long-headed and inferior race—their inferiority being clearly indicated by the fact that they belonged to the stone age, while their more powerful encroaching neighbours belonged to the age of bronze.

If such were the inhabitants of Devon in the palmy days of the Druidic cultus, what place would the highly-cultured priesthood, drawn by Cæsar and believed in by Polwhele and his followers, have had among them?

All the accounts we have of the early Britons picture them as being, with slight exception, a very barbarous folk. Cæsar indeed speaks of the men of Kent as the most civilized in the island, differing little from the natives of Gaul; but he

describes the bulk of the natives as sowing no corn, living by hunting, clothing themselves with skins, dying themselves with woad, and to a certain extent having wives in common. Pomponius Mela asserts that all were barbarians. Diodorus Siculus claims for the dwellers in this western promontory that they were more civilized because of their dealings with outsiders. Strabo and Tacitus liken the Britons to the Gauls ere these had passed under external influence and become effeminate. Xiphilius, as cited by Dio Niceæus, avers that the northern Britons lived by hunting, without tillage, dwelt in tents (Strabo, like Cæsar, describes wattled huts), had wives in common, and took a mighty pleasure in robbery and plunder. Herodian says that they knew not the use of clothes, and were warlike and bloody. Other authorities mention that they were tattooed. In fact the picture presented to us of the dwellers in Britain immediately antecedent to Roman intercourse is that of a collection of savage tribes, resembling in many particulars the North American Indians ere they were brought under European influence, and in other existing African tribes of a far lower type. How far the trade influence, of which Diodorus Siculus speaks, may have ameliorated the character of those who dwelt in Devon it is difficult to say, but apart from that influence their Iberic descent would place them low down in the scale.

Contemporary history, whether general or particular, thus fails to give any proof of the existence of Druids in Devon. Indeed the case against Devon derived from this source is stronger than that against almost any other part of the country.

We turn to archæology. If such a cultus as that ascribed to the Druids ever existed here we should find its traces. Evidence of the religious observances of a pre-historic people is best deduced from the associations of their interments. The examinations of our barrows supply no proof of Druidism, but on the contrary indicate the frequent use of funeral feasts (some cannibalistic) in honour of the dead, and the not infrequent offering of victims to the departed shade. The popular Druid, among such rites as these, would have been as great an anachronism in pre-Roman Devon, or pre-Roman Britain either, as a locomotive.

There is absolutely nothing to connect the stone circles and avenues and menhirion of Dartmoor with the Druids, beyond the speculations of imaginative writers who fathered everything mysterious upon a Druidic parentage, just as an earlier age attributed every difficult work to the devil. Most of the

rude memorials of an unknown past, once fondly deemed religious in their purpose, are now known to be sepulchral, and there is no link to associate the remainder with Druidism. The celts and palstaves, once regarded as the implements (though stone and bronze and not golden) wherewith the Druids cut the mistletoe, are now known for tools and weapons of every-day life. There has never been found, either in Devon or elsewhere, not even in that metropolis of the Druidic cultus—Dartmoor—anything that can be interpreted to have a specially Druidic significance.

We take next the evidence of "survivals." Can it be possible that if such a religion as Druidism had once been the universal or general profession of the inhabitants of Britain all traces of it would have disappeared, especially in a county like Devon, which is so rich in folklore and superstitions of various kinds, much traceable to Northern mythology, much to Roman paganism, some even to that ancient sun worship which is the highest form of the cultus of nature? Yet there is not a tradition even remotely Druidic in its character that can be followed further back than the days of Stukeley, Borlase, or Polwhele.

When we come to inquire into the folk-lore connected with our trees, it is a very curious fact that there is no tree which is so barren of association as the oak. Apart from its connection with the 29th of May, indeed, I do not know of any popular custom connected with the oak, nor am I aware of a single well-marked superstition. Around the ash tree legends and customs cluster in bewildering profusion; the holly and the ivy have been in request for winter decorations from the very earliest times; laurel is still the emblem of victory, the cypress of sorrow, the olive of peace. The oak, this very kernel of Druidical practice, this favourite tree of one of the widest spread and most powerful religions of the world, stands almost alone in its neglect. It is impossible that the oak can ever have been held in such universal estimation, whether here in Devon or over the whole Keltic world, and have sunk into such utter legendary insignificance. The singular persistence which has kept alive so many relics of our ancient solar worship, and which has preserved in such vitality the superstitions of the ash, would assuredly have perpetuated the cultus of the oak had it ever any existence.

With regard to the mistletoe the case is somewhat different. The fact of its rarity in this county, if Dartmoor was a Druidic centre, seems difficult to explain; but the mistletoe has its customs and superstitions, which Devon shares in

common with the rest of the kingdom. The only association however of the mistletoe with religious purposes of which I am aware, is one that has nothing whatever to do with this county, alluded to by Stukeley, and which we must take on his authority. He says in his *Medallie History of Carausius*, quoted in Brande,* that the festival of the winter solstice was the most respectable among the Druids, "when mistletoe, which they called 'all heal,' was carried in their hands and laid on their altars as an emblem of the salutiferous advent of Messiah. (!) This mistletoe they cut off the trees with their upright hatchets of brass, called celts, put upon the ends of their staves which they carried in their hands. Innumerable are these instruments found all over the British Isles. The custom is still preserved in the North, and was lately at York. On the eve of Christmas-day they carry mistletoe to the high altar of the Cathedral, and proclaim a public and universal liberty, pardon, and freedom to all sorts of inferior and even wicked people, at the gates of the city, towards the four quarters of heaven."†

It does not however by any means follow that the existing estimation of the mistletoe is traceable to a Druidical source. The mistletoe finds a place in the legends and superstitions of several nations, as indeed, from the peculiarity of its growth, in the early days of nature worship was inevitable. In the mythology of our Norse ancestors it plays a prominent part, for it was the only created thing that took no oath not to injure Balder, and by which therefore he was killed. Virgil mentions it when he describes the search of Æneas for the golden bough, which was to be his passport to the infernal regions :

"Through the green leaves the glittering shadows glow ;
As on the sacred oak, the wintry mistletoe,
Where the fond mother views her precious brood,
And happier branches which she never sowed." ‡

Pliny speaks of the mistletoe, quite apart from his Druidical references, as a marvellous great wonder in nature, and

* Ellis's Edition, Art. Xmas.

† If Stukeley's inferences anent the descent of this custom from the Druids rest upon no better basis than his belief that the celts were used for cutting mistletoe, and placed for that purpose upon the ends of staves, they will need no further discussion. Our island can have borne little else but mistletoe in these early days if all the celts found were used to cut it. Stukeley, after all, is a little less wild than an unnamed correspondent of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, quoted in Brande, who says that "mistletoe appears to be the forbidden tree in the middle of the trees of Eden !"

‡ Book vi. Dryden's Trans., ll. 297-300.

says that it grew in great plenty on the oak, which is certainly not our modern experience. He notes it as useful in medicine, as specific against the king's evil, falling sickness, &c., and says, "Some observe certain superstitious ceremonies herein, and are of opinion that it will work the better, and with more efficacie, in case it be gathered from the oke the first day of the new moone; also that it be not cut down with any bill hooke, knife, and edged yron toole." Have we not here the germ of his statement about the mode in which it was cut by the Druids, which, so far as I am aware, rests upon Pliny's sole authority, and was with him but hearsay?

There are indeed those who have faith in the medicinal virtues of the mistletoe still; but I believe it has no place in our local herbal.

The only local item of traditional belief which in any way seems to be associated with the Druids is that in the "Glain Neidr" or adder-stone. Borlase says in his *Antiquities* that it was a common opinion in most parts of Wales, all Scotland and Cornwall (and I have heard it in Devon), that snakes "meet in companies, and that by joining heads together, and hissing, a kind of bubble is formed, which the rest by continual hissing blow on till it passes quite through the body, and then it immediately hardens and resembles a glass ring." Now this so-called adder-stone is only a bead of glass, and Borlase in this citation does little more than quote Pliny, whose account of the "glain neidr" Mason versified as follows:

"When in undulating twine
The foaming snakes prolific join;
When they hiss, and when they bear
Their wondrous egg aloof in air,
Thence before to earth it fall
The Druid in his hallowed pall
Receives the prize,
And instant flies,
Followed by the envenomed brood,
Till he cross the crystal flood."

But Pliny herein himself does not believe the Druids, those "cautelous and cunning" magicians; and his account of the "glain neidr" does not at all agree with that of the "gloine-an-Druidh," or "magician's glass," as these adder-stones are called in Ireland. He describes it as of the size of an apple, and in terms which could not apply to a bead or ring of glass. There is no evidence for the existence of the popular Druid, moreover, in a name which is not held to mean more than magician; and the "glain neidr" occasionally found in Devon is rather an argument on the other side.

In some of the more Keltic parts of the United Kingdom we do find ancient, but by no means contemporary, allusion to Druids. For example, the Irish *Annals of the Four Masters*, which commence with the statement that forty days before the deluge Ceasair, granddaughter of Noah, came to Ireland with fifty girls and three men,* occasionally mentions them; but always in the sense of diviner, soothsayer, or magician, and rather as a common than a proper name. Thus under the year 555 A.D. Coem Colle says, "My Druid is the Son of God." And in Lhuyd's *Archæology* we find "droithe" given for augur in the Irish tongue, and "droidheachd" for sorcery, magic, divination.

The most ponderous book on Druidism ever penned, that of Davies, already cited (p. 232), is built up on the writings of Welsh bards, who occasionally speak of the Druids, and on the Welsh triads. None of these presumed authorities can be traced in MS., however, further back than the tenth century, and those writers upon whom he chiefly relies are ascribed to the sixth—Taliesin, Aneurin, and Merddin the Caledonian—so that they are divided from the presumed Druidical era by as great an interval of time as that which separates us from Magna Charta. Moreover, these assumed productions are in great part so mystical that an ingenious speculator may make anything of them he likes. Mr. Davies converts the bards into Druids by the simple process of calling them so, and treating the two as identical. His Druids are mystics, the shadows cast by the bards upon the dim background of the past; and in the influences of Christianity upon the old Keltic paganism, couched in mysterious phrase beyond ordinary comprehension, he sees—not the dawn of higher things, but the last days of a setting patriarchal faith.† The bard, the minstrel, the scald, the gleeman, are common to nearly every barbarous or semi-barbarous nation, and by no means necessarily connected with its priesthood.

If Welsh and Irish literature fail to support the modern Druidic idea, is there, however no trace of Druidism in the ancient Kornu-British, the language once, not merely of what we now call Cornwall, but of great part of Devon? The answer must be emphatically in the negative. Even the name does not occur in Cornish literature, speech, or legend.

Polwhele indeed asks his readers gravely to believe that in Drewsteignton we are to see "the Druids' town on the Teign,"

* On the 15th day of the moon, which was the Sabbath, adds O'Flaherty.

† Mr. Davies derives Druid from Der Wydd, "superior priest or inspector." Owen, in his Welsh Dictionary, gives "dryw" as both Druid and wren.

in utter defiance of the claims of its ancient possessor, Drogo, whose name was prefixed by way of distinction to that particular "Teign town." But there is hardly a fact more clearly established than the non-existence in the West of England of the slightest trace, even such a casual one as this, of Druidic tradition. Mr. W. C. Borlase, M.P., in his *Nenia Cornubia*,* quotes Professor Hunt and Mr. Bottrell as agreeing in the "verdict that the name 'Druid' does not enter into one single tradition which can be ascribed to a date anterior to Borlase's work." This is wholly inexplicable if in the popular sense the Western Druid ever had any existence, seeing not only the existing wealth of our folk-lore, but the fact that the old Keltic tongue of this peninsula lingered on in Cornwall until the last century. Another important point is, that there is no lack of other tradition. Most of our rude stone monuments have their legends, some evidently of great antiquity; and with regard to those very rock-basins which have caused so much controversy, you will be told on Dartmoor that they were used by the Jews to keep their money in when they paid their workmen in the tin mines.

My conclusions are, that the popular idea of the Druid has originated wholly in the speculations of recent and largely local writers, who have created in their imaginations a race of Druids out of the slender and contradictory materials afforded by classical and late writers and tradition, which they have asked the world to accept as historical. That, so far as Devon, and indeed the whole West of England, is concerned, neither history, nor tradition, nor folk-lore, nor archæology, afford the slightest trace of Druidic existence; whether in the sense of Cæsar and Pliny, of the Welsh bards, or of the constructive ideal of Borlase and Polwhele. That indeed the whole main argument for their existence when examined utterly fails, since neither Cæsar nor Pliny wrote concerning them from personal knowledge; since the professedly historical accounts are contradictory; since the mental and social condition of the races among whom the Druids are said to have lived renders it impossible that the high status assigned to the Druids can be true; and since neither survival of superstitions and customs nor archæology affords the smallest trace concerning them. There is, in short, no better foundation in fact for the Druidic idea than somewhat akin to the medicine man of North America, or the sorcerer of the negro races; and the name is clearly traceable, not to the oak, but to the presumed possession of magical power.

* Page 12.