Dreaming the Ancestors: An Investigation into Contemporary British Druidry and the Ritualisation of Death.

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation into the various ways in which Druids in the opening decades of the 21st Century think about and ritualise death. Section A begins with a detailed discussion of the nature of modern British Spiritual Druidry; tracing it from its origins at the end of the 18th Century to the diverse ways in which it manifests in modernity. It will attempt to reach some conclusions about how Druidry is best understood through a consideration of Druids' own understandings of their identity and their place in the modern world. In particular, it will consider the extent to which Druidry in Britain can be categorised as indigenous religion in Britain.

Section B consists of a broad overview of the ways in which modern Druids approach death. Particular consideration is given to the concept of Ancestors in Druidry, and the role they play in the spiritual lives and practices of Druids, as well as in funeral and other rituals concerned with the dead. The section concludes with an investigation into the phenomenon of 'new barrows' that are currently being built in various locations in the south of England. These are built in deliberate imitation of the chambered burial mounds of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages and are designed to take human cremated remains interred in niches in the walls. The significance of these barrows as funeral venues, both to Druids and in wider society will be discussed at length. The thesis will conclude that there are several aspects of the way that death is understood and ritualised in Druidry that are highly distinctive in contemporary Western society. It will further suggest that much can be learnt from both Druidry and the new barrows as models for the construction of meaningful and useful funerals.

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Table of Contents

Table of Illustrations

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all those, seen and unseen, who have kept, upheld and supported me in my life.

To Brigid of the Three Flames,
and to Andraste,
because ‘In the 21st Century, victory is not always about war.’

And particularly to my parents, Ian and Hazel Uzzell, and to my partner Keith

Thank You

Chapter 1: Introduction

Into the Mist

This thesis is primarily concerned with the ritualisation of death in modern British Druidry. In order to do this, however, it is first necessary to reach an understanding of what modern British Druidry actually is, and how it understands itself. Section A, therefore, concerns itself with the primary research question, **'What is modern spiritual Druidry in Britain; how is it best categorised and understood?**

Section B then moves on to a broad consideration of death, funerals, and death related ritual as it currently exists within modern Druidry. The key questions in section B are as follows: **'What is distinctive about Druidic approaches to the ritualisation of death?'** and **'What are the wider implications of Druidic approaches to the ritualisation of death to the field of Death Studies and to the bereaved?'** The latter question is addressed though a discussion of theories of death and bereavement as they can be applied to Druidry. The implications of this to the bereaved and to funeral practice outside of Druidry are specifically addressed in the conclusion.

Why now?

While the field of Pagan Studies has developed widely since its inception in the 1990s, there is still comparatively little research on Druidry as a lived tradition, rather than on its origins and history. Letcher (2001) has written on Druidry and the Bardic tradition at the beginning of the 21st Century; Lakey-White has conducted an ethnological study on OBOD[1] (2009), Gieser has written on the 'Life World' of Druids from the perspective of the phenomenology of perception (2009); and Davies has written on protest and pilgrimage in Druidry (2003). However, compared to Witchcraft and Wicca, Druidry remains underrepresented in academia and no study has previously been conducted that focusses on death and its ritualisation. Furthermore, at the time of writing there are an increasing number of funeral celebrants who are

[1] The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. This is the largest spiritual Druid order in the UK. It is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

themselves Druids and who are carrying out funerals for anyone who wishes to use their services as well as within the Druid communities. In addition to this, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids is now offering a training course in funeral celebrancy.[2] The renewal of a culture of climate protest is one factor leading to an increasing interest in natural burial, including among Druids. In addition, since 2014 the establishment of a number of 'new barrows' which are constructed to resemble Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds is opening up new possibilities for Druids and others with regards to funerals and the ritualisation of death. The time is therefore ripe for a study such as this to explore the ritualisation of death in its various forms at the start of the third decade of the 21st Century.

Why Me?

As an academic, a death professional[3] and a Druid I feel that I am uniquely well placed to carry out research of this kind. I am aware of the problems raised by this 'insider status', which are discussed at length in chapter 2 however, I also feel that this gives me an insight into all of aspects of this research that many others would lack.

There is, however, another element that feeds into my interest in writing this thesis. As a child, I can remember lying in bed late at night pondering the 'big questions' of life, as I suppose most children do. In my case, however, this included the persistent awareness that I was experiencing the moment that was 'now' and that each new moment that came along was also 'now'. This led to the uncomfortable realisation that at some point, towards which I was hurtling at the speed of time, the moment that was 'now' would also be the moment at which I was dying. When I was 16, this realisation, around which I had been circling in ever decreasing circles for a number of years, hit me with the force of a freight train. I can remember staggering numbly into my mother's bedroom, and when she asked me what the matter was I blurted out, 'I'm going to die.' I then burst into tears and didn't stop crying for two days. My mother, as it happened, had been expecting something similar for a while and took

[2] https://schoolofcelebrancy.com/p/serving-the-living-and-the-dead

[3] I am co-owner and director of a progressive funeral home in County Durham.

me to the doctor who completely failed to understand. He asked me what I thought was wrong with me and why I thought I was dying. I explained that I did not believe myself to be terminally ill, but that I was aware that at some point in the future, whether it was one year or ninety years in the future, I would die. The doctor then helpfully gave me some tablets for depression that my mother flushed down the toilet as soon as we got home. The next few days, weeks and months were not easy, but I did re-establish my equilibrium to the extent that I was able to 'get on' with life. The world, however, had changed irrevocably and this moment had a major defining impact on the rest of my life. It was a major factor in my decision to study Theology at university, and in the topics I chose to pursue during my MA (although in the case of the MA I did not fully realise this until after the event.) It has been central to my varied attempts at meaning making throughout my life, including those that led me to Druidry. It was a factor in the strange series of events that led me into the funeral service, and it is largely responsible for many of the events and ideas that have led me into this research. It is obvious that this intimate awareness of the 'presence of death' will have an impact in the way this research is conducted and in my reactions to it. I hope that my awareness of this facet of my own personality has mitigated the possibility that it has impacted on how I have understood what I have been told in interviews, and so that it has not negatively affected this research. I do feel, however, that the constant presence of death in my life has in some way qualified me to carry out this research.

Section A

In Section A, I will explore the concept of Druidry as it exists in modern Britain; looking at its history and the various forms that it takes; and asking some questions about how Druidry is best to be understood. **Chapter 3** will trace the history of 'Druid' as a type or trope in British cultural awareness, beginning with the little we can know of the ancient Druids encountered by Greek and Roman authors, and continuing through into the early antiquarian ideas about Stonehenge and Avebury, into the 'Celtic Revival'. I will trace the development of modern Spiritual Druidry from its paramasonic and cultural predecessors, and the writings of Iolo Morganwg. The chapter will conclude by painting a picture of what Druidry in Britain looks like at the

time of writing, including the main Druid orders and the ways in which they 'perform' Druidry. **Chapter 4** will focus on the experience of being a Druid in Britain, including a sketch of the 'typical' demographic in Druidry, and the ways in which Druids create and use 'sacred space' in ceremony and elsewhere. This will include a consideration of the ways in which Druid practice was changed by the effects of the lockdown in the Covid crisis of 2020-22. There will be a discussion about the various ways in which Druidry has utilised the internet for events, conferences, and ritual; the degree to which this has been effective; and a consideration of the extent to which it may have a permanent effect on the ways in which Druids think of community, ritual and the creation of 'sacred space'. Chapters 5 and 6 consider how Druidry might be best understood. **Chapter 5** considers the concept of religion, and the extent to which Druidry could be said to fulfil that category. **Chapter 6** extends this discussion into a detailed consideration of the claim made by some Druid groups that Druidry should be considered as an indigenous religion in Britain. There will be a discussion of how far Druidry can be seen to meet the most commonly agreed criteria for indigenous religion, as well as the difficulties that the term creates, and a possible solution. The question of indigeneity is an important one in the context of Section B of this thesis, which goes on to consider the relationship of modern Druids to death, death ritual and funerals. The central themes of the indigeneity discourse, those of kinship; relationship to the Ancestors;[4] and ritual as the reinvigoration of relationships with other than human persons as well as with the land itself; are all fundamental to a consideration of Druidic ways of death, which will be fully explored in Section B.

Section B

Section B consists of a detailed analysis of the various ways in which Druids in the 21st Century ritualise death. **Chapter 7** consists of an overview of the different beliefs that Druids hold concerning what becomes of a person after they die. The information for this is taken mainly from survey data. Chapter 7 also contains a detailed account of the concept of Ancestors in Druidry: who they are, how Druids interact with them and why they are important. **Chapter 8** deals with the ritualisation

[4] Throughout this work, 'Ancestors' is capitalised where it refers to a category of beings, individual or homogenous, that is honoured in Druidic ritual and used as a spiritual resource. Where the tern is not capitalised, it refers to genetic antecedents in a more general sense unconnected with belief or ritual.

of death that takes place on a recuring annual basis rather than during a funeral. This takes place mostly at Samhain,[5] a Pagan festival that occurs at around the same time as Hallowe'en and is concerned with the honouring of the dead and the Ancestors. The chapter will look at various ways in which this is done among different Druid communities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Mari Lwyd, a horse's skull on a pole, often decorated and covered with a white cloth. The origins of the Mari are discussed as well as the ways in which it is coming to be used in some Druid communities as a representation and embodiment of death. **Chapter 9** looks in detail at Druid funerals. It begins with a consideration of the Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust, which was active in the 1990s and which is foundational to much of what can be seen in Druidry today. The chapter goes on to deal with the rise of specifically Druid funeral celebrants, the purposes of a Druid funeral and the part played by the dead body. Following this there is a discussion about Druid funerals in crematoria, and of natural burial as an alternative to this. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the way in which Druidic values and identity markers are expressed through the medium of funerals, and the ways in which Druids seek to establish congruence between the way they live and the way they die. **Chapter 10** is a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of 'new barrows' built to resemble Neolithic and Bronze Age burial mounds and designed for the deposition of cremated remains. It falls broadly into two sections. The first looks at the tradition of ancient barrows in Britain and considers the ways in which they operate as something greater than their physical presence, that is as symbols with layers of meaning and cultural significance. The second part of the chapter looks at the rise of the new barrows and how they are understood and used both by Druids and the wider community. There is a particular consideration of the oldest of the new barrows at All Cannings as one that has particularly strong connections with modern Druid communities.

[5] The festival of Samhain in Druidry will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8

Conclusion

No piece of research is ever truly finished as time and ideas move on and data is obsolete, or at least out of date, almost as soon as it is gathered. This, then, is how and where I have drawn my line in the sand. I have captured a brief period in the development of Druidry as a religious tradition, and in the very early history of the new barrows. The ongoing effects of the Covid 19 pandemic will inevitably have far reaching effects on funerals and memorialisation that are beyond the remit of this research; indeed, memorial events and monuments are already taking shape at the new barrows at Willow Row and Soulton Manor. The barrows will continue on from here, perhaps for many centuries, and they will change and develop as they do. They will, I hope and suspect, prove to be a rich and fertile resource for researchers of many disciplines for generations to come.

No piece of research is ever perfect, and I am very aware of the flaws and limitations of my own. I hope, however, that by maintaining a level of self-awareness, and by taking what measures I could to mitigate or correct those flaws, that I have limited their impact and that the research presented here is as good as it is possible for it to be.

Throughout my writing I have tried to visualise myself as a weaver. As I am a textile artist, this is an analogy that seems particularly apt to me. I have seen my task as being to draw threads from many places and people and weave them together into something new that is beautiful, useful and meaningful. This entails active decisions as to what to include and what to leave out; where each thread should be placed, and to some extent, what the finished work should look like. This means that, inevitably, it tells only a part of the story as it is seen from my standpoint and from the relationships that I have developed with my research partners. There are other possible stories that could be told, but this is mine, and I hope that it will find a place in the tapestry that is Druidry, and in academic and wider understanding of it.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Walking Between the Worlds

Philosophical Issues

The Voice of the Researcher

The question of the 'voice' of the researcher in the academic study of religion has been the subject of much discussion (e.g. McCutcheon 1998; Headland et al. 1990; Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey 2004). For many years the assumption was that the ethnographer ought to write with a completely detached and 'scientific' approach to the religion or community that was being investigated. One of the earliest ethnographic investigations into contemporary British Paganism, that of Tanya Luhrmann, took precisely this approach. While she felt the need to completely immerse herself in the Wiccan community that was the focus of her study, to the extent of undergoing initiation, she also felt that it was important to maintain a strict cognitive distance and to return to the 'academic fold' once her study was complete. She believed that her academic and professional credibility would be under threat if she did not make clear that her commitment to a reductionist, and materialist worldview was 'untarnished'. 'I am no witch, no wizard, though I have been initiated as though I were.' (Luhrmann 1991, 18).

The 1990s saw an ongoing realisation that the researcher can never be a pure 'outsider', and that research can never be completely disinterested and detached. The choice of subject and the framing of the research questions, in and of themselves, reflect an interest in and attitude towards the subject. No researcher is free from the conditioning of gender, class, education and upbringing and these factors must, of necessity, influence the way in which a person conducts and responds to their research. Even apparently quantitative research methods such as the use of surveys are not exempt from the rule that the relationship between the researcher and the researched

is a reciprocal one, since by the choice or wording of questions, the researcher may suggest a new line of thought to the participant, thus leading their belief or practice in new directions (Griffin 2004, 66).

At the other extreme to the 'detached observer' model is an 'autoethnographic' methodology in which the author weaves an autobiographical narrative and a detailed account of his or her subjective reactions into the research; giving a very strong narrative and personal feel to the writing (e.g. Behar 1997; Denzin 2013). Whilst this brings a new and rich dimension to the practice of ethnographic writing, there is a danger that the experience of the researcher can be foregrounded almost to the exclusion of the subject of the research in a way that might appear almost self-indulgent. It is also true that some critical distance between the researcher and the researched is needed inasmuch as a researcher who is unable to view their material with some degree of detachment is unlikely to be able to carry out effective analysis or to have an overview of their material and its relationship to the wider concerns of academia.

In this thesis I have attempted to chart a course between these two extremes; to produce research that takes my own worldview, attitudes and values, and their relevance to the research seriously, while avoiding the temptation towards self-indulgence. I have aimed to be honest in my objectives, honourable in my relationships with those with whom I am conducting research and to produce work that is useful both within academia and to the various communities who have been my partners in this research.

Approaching the 'Uncanny'

Many Druids believe not only in an afterlife, but also in the possibility of maintaining relationships with Ancestors, spirits of the land, and a variety of divine and semi-divine beings. Some claim to have on-going relationships with the dead, both ancient and recent, and to routinely experience the presence

of a variety of ‘other than human persons.’ (Hallowell 1960).[6] The traditional approach to such beliefs within anthropology has been to analyse them in terms of functionalist, structuralist, or symbolic models, or at least to assume that such worldviews are fundamentally inferior to scientific rationalist models. In her work on the centrality of ‘the Otherworld’ to contemporary Paganisms[7] and magickal practice in the UK, Susan Greenwood summarises this approach particularly eloquently:

> At the heart of the issue is the co-existence of two incompatible physical theories, one of which is seen to be superior to the other because, since the Enlightenment, the magical has been progressively devalued by the rise of rationalism (Greenwood 2000, 13).

Douglas Ezzy notes that most Western anthropology assumes that supernatural experiences:

> …are understood to be a product of incomplete knowledge and errors of logic, or a product of a ‘primitive mind’ that does not comprehend the importance of the indirect sources and effects of religious belief in social experiences (Ezzy 2004, 115).

He suggests that this approach is indicative of a lack of humility that pervades much of the sociology of religion.

There are three reasons why this reductionist approach would be extremely problematic in the current research. Firstly, it fails to take seriously what research partners say regarding their own experiences. It makes the assumption that those who are the subject of the research are not actually experiencing what they think they are experiencing. This seems to me an entirely unhelpful approach to take if the aim of the research is to understand what is important to the individuals and communities concerned. Furthermore, it puts apriori constraints on the conclusions of the research that are incompatible with the true scientific method. Secondly, the subjects of this

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[6] This phrase, while originally devised by A. Irving Hallowell in his book on the Ojibwa, has been widely applied to contemporary Paganism and appears frequently in the literature pertaining to it (Harvey 2013, 125).

[7] In accordance with Harvey, I have used the term ‘Paganisms’ as the most appropriate way to refer to the various different religious traditions share certain features but are often very different to each other, where these are the subject of academic research.

research are people who inhabit a 21st Century Western European culture. Many of them are highly educated and well read. They do not have a 'primitive' or 'pre-scientific' understanding of the world. The subjects of this research are very well aware of the rationalist, reductionist narrative in Western society and have self-consciously chosen to reject or challenge it to a lesser or greater extent. This, in itself, is worthy of investigation. Finally, it seems likely that the rationalist model is not so deeply entrenched in Western culture as is often supposed in academic research. In her work with bereaved subjects, Christine Valentine discovered that many of those she interviewed continued to experience a strong sense of the presence of their loved ones after their deaths and felt that they were able to communicate with them. In describing these feelings and encounters, she found that her informants

> ...negotiated the competing discourses offered by modernist scientific rationality and those offered by religion or supernaturalist perspectives, sometimes switching from one to the other (Valentine 2008, 130).

This suggests that it may not be unusual in Western society for people to simultaneously use conflicting models of reality without experiencing this in terms of cognitive dissonance or existential discomfort. If this is the case, then to assume that the rationalist narrative is the 'standard' against which competing discourses must be measured seems somewhat difficult to justify.

Bowie (2019, 111) suggests that the usual ethnographic approach of 'methodological agnosticism' is in fact a form of 'imperialism masquerading as extreme cultural relativism' since the researcher, from a position of power and privileged knowledge, teases out the 'real' meaning of the reported phenomena, whether as deliberate hoax, misinterpretation, or symbolic or metaphorical performance, The assumption is that the reported experience cannot be a literal truth even if this assumption contradicts the embodied experience of the researcher. This approach assumes that there is a single 'right' way of looking at the world, and in recent years this has come into question. The 'ontological turn' in anthropology has sought to legitimise indigenous ways of viewing the world as being of equal status with those of the post-Enlightenment West. Bowie suggests steering a middle way between

these two possibilities through what she calls a ‘cognitive, empathic engagement’ (Bowie 2019, 112). This means that the researcher takes their own experiences and emotional reactions to fieldwork seriously and that these contribute to the sum of data. As an example, she refers to the well-known study of witchcraft in Normandy (Favret-Saada 1980) where the researcher found herself profoundly affected during her experience of exorcisms and even training as an exorcist. It is not necessary to share the beliefs or worldview of the people one is researching in order to be profoundly affected by experiences that one has. What is important, in terms of maintaining a rigorous academic approach, is that these experiences are treated as data and, as such, that they are reflected upon and analysed along with all the other data collected. This may not be possible immediately but may require distance of both time and space. It does, however, avoid the historical mistake of attempting to ‘bracket oneself out of one’s research’.

In terms of making sense of anomalous experiences Bowie (2019, 121–22), also refers to the ‘experiential source hypothesis’, which is the suggestion that beliefs, rituals and worldviews might, at least occasionally, have their basis in religious or spiritual experience (Hufford 1982; Shushan 2018). In the case of my research, this would make the experiences reported important not because of their veridicy or otherwise, but because of the roles they have played in shaping the worldviews of Druids. The question of whether reported experiences are ‘real’ or not is far less important than a consideration of the ways in which they impact beliefs, values and practices surrounding the dead.

Ezzy suggests that the academic study of religion has tended to foster a ‘false dichotomy’. Either spiritual and supernatural experiences and encounters are ‘…true and not influenced by social processes, or they are false, and simply a product of social and cultural processes.’ (Ezzy 2004, 123). He suggests a third approach, namely that both possibilities exist simultaneously. Since all action is influenced by cultural and social forces, this must also be true of spiritual experiences, but this does not preclude the possibility that they may also be ‘real’. Any event that has a real effect in the life of the one who

experiences it is, to that extent, true. This does not require the researcher to believe in the phenomenon, merely to acknowledge its reality in the social and personal life of the subject of the research. He suggests that anyone engaging in the academic study of religion should be prepared to 'suspend disbelief' and take the claims of respondents at face value as

> ...genuinely social experiences with social antecedents and social consequences. If reality is multiple, and I think it is, then may we have the humility to respect others' interpretations that differ from our own (Ezzy 2004, 124).

Hunter (2020a) suggests the term 'ontological flooding' as a useful addition to the debate. This is the idea that different and seemingly conflicting explanations for a seemingly analogous experience can all simultaneously be true. Thus, it is theoretically possible to be hungry, overcome by grief, affected by drugs AND to have a genuine encounter with the Ancestors; and a researcher should not seek to exclude any reasonable possibility.

This seems to me a sensible way to relate to such accounts and beliefs and one that successfully negotiates a path between a concern with academic rigour and a concern to deal authentically and honourably with the accounts of respondents. Whilst I have my own beliefs and opinions, and while I take full account of my own experiences, as Bowie suggests, I do not see the 'truth' or otherwise of anomalous accounts as being of any particular consequence to my research except in so far as such experiences may have affected the practices of my research partners. Interestingly, the question of absolute truth, or of 'right' or 'wrong' beliefs, is also one that is of little interest to most Druids. My method, therefore, has been to 'suspend disbelief'[8] and refrain from making any judgement on the afterlife beliefs or otherworldly encounters of respondents and research partners except in so far as they may directly relate to the concerns of the research.

[8] This 'suspension of disbelief' can be compared to the 'methodological ludism' proposed by Andre Droogers (Droogers and Harskamp 2014).

Insider or Outsider?

The categories of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ are problematic, given that any situation is bound to be far more complex than can easily be understood using these labels. In any given situation, an individual is both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ in a number of complex ways; and routinely negotiates a path between these roles. I am a Druid, and as such, for the purposes of my research among Druid communities, I could be considered to be an insider. However, as has been pointed out by Gregg and Chryssides (2019), the concept of insider/outsider is far from straightforward even within a single religious tradition, as there are different levels of belonging and engagement. These issues become even more pronounced in terms of a tradition such as Druidry which ‘lacks clear boundaries of belonging and which [is] non-salvic’ (Gregg and Chryssides 2019, 14). ‘Belonging’ could be classed as anything from deep personal or leadership involvement to attendance at an open seasonal ceremony. I will, therefore, now attempt to give some account of my position as insider/outsider with regard to Druidry.

I have lived at the boundaries of Pagan communities for at least two decades, and in the last few years I have felt comfortable in publicly identifying myself as a Pagan and as a Druid in particular. I am a member of OBOD[9] at the Ovate Grade, of the British Druid Order, at the Bardic Grade, of the Druid Network, and of the Pagan Federation, of which I am the Education and Youth Manager, and which I represent on the Religious Education Council for England and Wales. I have contributed to a number of community authored books on Pagan topics and I am a contact for both the Pagan Federation and the Pagan and Heathen Symposium to the Religion Media Centre. To this extent, I could be seen as an obvious insider; however, the situation is more nuanced than might at first appear. Firstly, I have not physically been present with large numbers of Druids on a regular basis as geographical restrictions prohibit this. There are simply not very many Druids near to where I live,

[9] The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.

although in 2022 myself and a friend co-founded and now run an OBOD Seed Group[10] (Mandua Briga).[11] Whilst I have attended Druid Camp, The One Tree Gathering and the Summer Gathering, as well as an AGM of The Druid Network, such occasions have been few and far between, meaning that I am not a particularly well-known face at such events. Most of my interaction with Druidry has, necessarily, been online. Furthermore, I have come to the tradition relatively late, meaning that I was not involved during much of the period over the last 30 years or so when relationships and value systems were formed. This positions me outside the close set of relationships, shared memories and incidents of identity formation, placing me as more outsider than insider. The overall position, then, is a complex and dynamic one with boundaries and expectations constantly being negotiated and re-formed.

My own status as a Druid, and particularly as an OBOD Druid has, inevitably, impacted on my research. It has, first and foremost, been instrumental in gaining the trust and co-operation of various Druid groups and individuals. In purely practical terms it meant that I already had access to and was known on many of the online groups where the survey was posted, meaning that it was comparatively easy to reach a large number of potential respondents. Members of the groups where I shared it also shared onto their own groups producing a snowball effect that carried it far beyond my expectations. The fact that I was known also generated goodwill and led to many people being prepared to engage with my research. My status as an OBOD member allowed me to publish information about both the survey and the research more widely in Touch Stone, the journal of OBOD. Again, this led to wide dissemination of the research and to a number of individuals contacting me directly.

[10] A seed group is one of two types of local groups that exist within OBOD. A seed group can be formed by members of any grade while a grove must contain at least two members who have been initiated into the Druid grade. The main difference between a seed group and a grove is that a grove can carry out initiations.

[11] www.manduabriga.org

While Druidry has always had a very positive relationship with academia, my own status as a Druid led to a particularly open reception. Those whom I interviewed, or who responded to the survey, also assumed that to some extent we shared a world view. This, I believe, led to very detailed and self-reflective responses. It also meant that they were willing to share both beliefs and experiences with me that they might otherwise have been reluctant to discuss through fear of having them disbelieved or explained away. A possible danger of this was that I, as the researcher, would make a misinterpret what had been said or written based on my own assumptions about Druidry, or about the topic on which a respondent was speaking or writing. I have tried to prevent this, by being aware of the possibility and so checking carefully to make sure I have genuinely understood, asking for clarification or further detail where necessary.

There is a degree to which a Pagan carrying out research into Paganism must be able to 'walk between the worlds of academia and Paganism' (Wallis 2004, 193). When conducting his research into Neo-Shamanism, Wallis found that this ability was necessary in order to be taken seriously as an academic researcher within the British University system while simultaneously being regarded as trustworthy and honourable by the Pagan communities that he was researching. As a researcher who identifies as Pagan there is a danger that my work might be perceived as having insufficient academic rigour and that is something that I would wish to avoid. There is an equal risk that as an academic, I might not have been trusted fully by Druids or Druidic communities as there might have been an assumption that I would not take their words or experiences at face value and might publish them in a way that appears condescending, or that I would use them to further a purely academic agenda. This possibility is mitigated by the fact that Paganism in general, and Druidry in particular, has tended to have a positive and reciprocal relationship with academia in recent years and has been enthusiastic in entering into conversation with it. OBOD, for example, hosts an academic conference (the Mount Haemus Conference) once every four years, and offers a bursary each year to a scholar producing a paper on a topic related to Druidry ('The Mount

Haemus Award' n.d.). In the event, the Druidic and Pagan communities have been opening and welcoming of my research and I have not been aware of any issues of distrust or discomfort. Where I have attended Druidic ritual or ceremony concerned with the remembrance of the dead, it has been as a full participant and this has, arguably, allowed me to have a deeper and richer appreciation of what is being experienced and embodied. This is an important consideration, not only with regard to treating one's own experiences and responses as significant data, as Bowie (2019) suggests, but also because 'knowing' is not limited to the academic or rational realms. Scrutton (2018), argues that ritual produces a particular kind of 'experiential knowledge' that cannot be gained through any other means. This knowledge, whilst not propositional, is nonetheless genuinely cognitive, and should be treated as such, rather than as some sort of 'other'. This knowledge, relational, embodied, narrative, diachronic and sensual, forms an important part of the research method.

The challenge, then, has been to walk a 'middle path' that will allow me to be fully and authentically both a Pagan Druid and an academic without falling into the trap of leading a double existence; in Wallis's words, 'walking between the worlds', fully and genuinely at home in each.

Another issue that deserves attention is that not everyone who was interviewed for this thesis was a Druid. In particular, the communities associated with the 'new barrows' are quite rightly proud of the different religious and spiritual strands that make them up, including those who are 'non-religious'. The research is partly concerned with the different ways in which these people experience the barrows and the reasons they give for their interest in them. This, then, requires that the 'voice of the researcher' in this work is not so closely associated with a Pagan Druid 'identity' that it is perceived as inaccessible or alienating to non-Pagan research partners who have something valuable and unique to contribute to the research. I have been open throughout the research about my own position within it, both as a Druid and as a funeral professional. Whereas my status as a Druid was

helpful to me when working with Druids as they trusted me not to dismiss their experiences out of hand, the opposite was potentially the case with non-religious members of the barrow communities. They may have perceived my position as too ‘alternative’ and might have been concerned that I would read a supernaturalist interpretation into what they said that was not there. Fortunately, there was no shortage of people from the barrow communities who were willing to engage with my research, regardless of their own religious perspectives. The fact that each interview partner was given a chance to see and, if necessary, edit the transcript of their interview helped to ensure that they were confident that they had been represented accurately.

There is a further layer to my relationship to this area of research that requires consideration. I am the co-owner of a progressive funeral home that has sought to contribute to a change in the way that families relate to ‘death professionals’ and the ‘funeral industry’. As such I have been deeply involved in the development of the most recent iteration of the Good Funeral Guide. I have developed my own approaches to the treatment of corpses and have helped and supported families in taking back control, to varying degrees, of their dead and of their funerals. This means that I am generally antagonistic to the routine professionalisation of death to the extent that it seeks to distance people from taking responsibility for their dead and their grief. This, inevitably, has had effect on the research presented here. While this approach to funeral ritual may resonate with some of the people among whom I have conducted research, it was equally possible that my association with the ‘funeral industry’ may have provoked a hostile response in some participants that might have affected their responses to me, or their willingness to take part.

In summary, I have, throughout the research, attempted to be conscious of intersectionality; the fact that I interact with my research partners not as a disembodied ‘objective’ distant researcher, but as a person grounded in a particular time, place and context. I am a well-educated, middle aged, white British woman, with a certain set of values, interests, and predispositions.

Those I work with also have a set of factors that contribute to their identities, and these will affect how we interact with each other. As noted by Hoel

> …the insider/outsider binary is limited and limit*ing* as it does not take into account the fluidity of real and enfleshed subjects and the multiple positionings that a researcher can embody in the field (2019, 97).

Ethical Considerations

Reciprocity, Reflexivity and Reactivity

The criticism has sometimes been made, as with the work of Tanya Luhrmann (1991) that the individuals and communities that are the subject of the research are essentially a means to an end and do not themselves benefit in any way from it. In more recent years, however, Druid and Pagan communities and organisations in the UK have tended to enjoy a far more reciprocal relationship with the academics who have carried out research into them, sometimes producing published works that are a collaboration between academics and religious practitioners (e.g. Cush 2015). There is an increasing acknowledgement within academia that the research process is not and should not be a one-way conversation. In the interview process:

> …both parties are necessarily and unavoidably involved in meaning making work. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies, it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter." (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 4).

Nowhere is this truer than in the academic study of Paganisms. Pagan religious traditions are comparatively new phenomena that have 'grown up' alongside the discipline of Religious Studies. A significant number of academics who have studied Pagan traditions are themselves involved in Pagan communities and conversely many Pagans who are not themselves academics are nonetheless aware of, and often well read, in academic works about Paganism. There are, therefore, many individuals and groups within the Pagan traditions that consciously and actively engage in an ongoing relationship with academia and allow their ideas and their practice to be

shaped by it. It is intended that this research should function as a collaboration between myself as researcher, and the individuals and communities who are my informants, in order to produce a thesis that will widen the knowledge of academia but also increase the self-knowledge and self-reflection of those that have contributed to it as Druidic ideas and practice around identity, death ritual and memorialisation continues to develop.

Reflexivity requires that the researcher is aware of his or her own pre-dispositions, attitudes and thought processes as they relate to the research, since there is no such thing as 'pure' knowledge within the fields of the Social Sciences. 'Knowledge production always is situated, that is, contextual and located in time and space' (Hoel 2019, 92) and is always generated relationally and reciprocally between the researcher and the participants. Throughout the research I have attempted to be conscious of my own predispositions and of the possible effect they may have upon the research. and to react in an appropriate way where this is helpful.

Reactivity is the process by which a piece of research has a direct impact on the social group that it seeks to investigate (Hutton 2004, 171). It is my hope that the research produced here will be widely read and discussed within Pagan circles. An awareness of this fact leads to two vital considerations. Firstly, there is a real possibility that this research will have a direct effect on the ongoing debate within Paganism and Druidry around death and funeral ritual and possibly on the development of Pagan funeral 'tradition' itself. For this reason, it is vital that the information gained through research is presented as carefully and as accurately as possible and that as many different opinions as possible are represented in order to give a picture of Druidic funeral practices in the UK. The second consideration is that one of my duties as a researcher is to ensure that the information and reflection contained in this thesis is disseminated as widely as possible and as clearly as possible within the various Pagan communities and made available for reflection and discussion. This will be achieved through lectures and workshops at a variety of Pagan camps, conferences, and gatherings, as well

as through publication in journals and magazines that serve the Pagan community, as well as through the more usual academic channels.

Working With the Bereaved

The majority of the research for this thesis was carried out with the founders and directors of companies and institutions concerned with the ritualisation and memorialisation of death, and with funeral celebrants, rather than with those who have themselves been recently bereaved. However, some interviews touched on funerals of loved ones that the interviewee had conducted or been present at. In order to mitigate the effects that this might have, it was made clear to all participants that they were able to suspend or withdraw from the interview at any point should it become uncomfortable for them, with no need for an explanation. Interview partners also had the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews prior to publication to ensure that their experiences, and any deceased persons they may have talked about, were not misrepresented. The survey did ask explicit questions around issues of death, bereavement, and attendance at funerals. Some participants might have found this to be upsetting. In order to prevent this, a warning was given in the post containing the link to the questionnaire advising that anyone under the age of 18 and anyone who has experienced bereavement in the previous 12 months should not proceed to the questionnaire. A warning concerning the nature of the questions also appeared. The same warnings appeared on the front page of the questionnaire and participants had to make a conscious decision to proceed past this point to the questions themselves.

Research Methods

The main research method used in this thesis was interview. Interviews were carried out throughout the research period with different categories of people.[12] The majority of these interviews were completely unstructured,

[12] See Appendix 3

allowing people to talk about what was most important to them, with regards to death and funerals. While I did ask some questions, these were not the same for everyone I spoke to, and the questions often arose organically from the conversation. Considerations of reactivity were important here as often I told the interviewees about things (such as the barrows, or what is meant by 'Paganism') that they had not previously been aware of.

One focus of research was on the leaders of various Druid Orders and communities, and those whose writings have shaped the ways that Druids think. These included an academic, and a storyteller as well as those in more obviously influential positions.

I also conducted interviews with those who were connected to the story of the development of the new barrows. The landowners, developers, trustees, and builders who had seen the project grow from its first inception. Where possible and appropriate I tried to conduct the interviews in the barrows themselves. The owners of both All Cannings and Sacred Stones Ltd were interviewed in or near the barrows, although this was not possible at Soulton as by this time Covid restrictions were in force. There were a number of reasons for doing this; firstly, it maintained the idea of relationship with land, space and landscape that is central to this research project. Secondly, it enabled the interviewees to engage with the environment in real time as we spoke, pointing out features of the building or the landscape, as well as allowing them to interact with their dogs, (in both cases), who were also involved in the way that the space 'worked' at that moment in time. Finally, it helped the flow of the conversation as both people were clearly passionate about the barrows and enjoyed being there. In the case of interviews with people who had been involved in physically building the barrows, it was also useful in terms of discussing particular features of the construction process that were of importance. It also allowed me to see the place where the famous 'butterfly story' had happened![13] This was one of the great advantages of having very

[13] See p.247

little structure to the interview as it allowed for the possibility of ideas such as connection to place and the physicality of working with stone as an embodied religious[14] experience to emerge organically from the interview in a ways that they could not otherwise have done.

A further research group was comprised of Druids who act as funeral celebrants either within the Druid communities or who work more widely with funeral directors for anyone who asks for their services.

Finally, I conducted a series of interviews with people who have niches reserved in the new barrows, or who have family members interred there. Three of these were Druid or Pagan while the remainder were not. In this case the interviews were semi-structured, with a set of questions that the interviewees had been given prior to the interview.[15] This gave a basis for the discussion and allowed me to compare the responses with each other more effectively, while still allowing the conversation to develop organically and for the people I was talking to express their own ideas about what was important.

A second research tool was a survey constructed using 'Online Surveys' (formerly Bristol Online Survey Tool) which was available between 17th October 2017 and 8th May 2018. It contained 31 questions in total[16] and was mostly qualitative in nature, allowing respondents to give as much or as little detail as they chose for each topic. The survey was posted to around 20 Face Book groups connected to Druidry and Paganism and was shared by a number of individuals to their own networks. I was also interviewed by The Wild Hunt, an online magazine and newsfeed for all topics related to Paganism, and the link to the survey was posted there. When the survey closed on 8th May, there had been 1042 respondents making it, I believe, the largest data base currently in existence dealing with Pagan beliefs and

[14] I have used the word 'religious' here although it is not the one used by the person I was interviewing, and it is probably not one that he would acknowledge.

[15] See Appendix 2

[16] See Appendix 1

attitudes towards death. Of these 135 were British Druids, and it is this sub-set of responses that have been drawn on in this thesis. I am aware that a common problem cited in the methodology chapters of theses such as this is the difficulty in attracting enough respondents to surveys to make the data representative or useful and I was anticipating writing a similar paragraph here, explaining that since the contents are highly qualitative in nature it was less significant that there were only ten or so responses. However, luckily for me, Druids, and certainly the online Druid communities at whom the survey was aimed, are very happy to discuss their views and are both eloquent and highly self-reflective. I am extremely grateful to the hundreds of respondents from a variety of countries and Pagan traditions who gave so generously of their time and provided such detailed and insightful accounts of their beliefs and practices. I am hopeful that the resource that they have created will be of interest and use for many years to come.

As a part of this study, I have participated in various celebrations and rituals concerned with death or with the dead (such as Samhain rituals[17]). On all such occasions I was fully engaged in the experience and my reasons for attending were personal as well as academic. Some of my responses and insights arising from my attendance at these events were recorded in my research journal and have been drawn upon as appropriate in this thesis. A research journal was also kept during all visits to the new barrows in order to record impressions, observations and encounters that might not be included in the interview data. Photographic records were also be kept of these sites, some of which will be presented in the thesis. It seemed to me that a work that was so deeply concerned with landscape and place would be seriously lacking if it did not in some way seek to evoke a sense of the landscapes with which it is engaged. All photographs are taken by myself, or from the websites of the barrows- used with permission, and copyright is acknowledged where relevant.

[17] These are discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

I am extremely grateful for the support of two wonderful transcribers without whom I would not have been able to complete this thesis. Face to face interviews were recorded onto an audio recording device and occasionally interviews over distance were conducted on Skype. I purchased a piece of software that enabled me to record video on Skype and Face Time and either was used depending on what was most convenient for the interviewee. Towards the middle of the research period, the world went into lockdown due to the Covid 19 epidemic of 2020-2022 and as such all interviews had to be conducted online. One unexpected advantage of this was that the technology of video conferencing improved exponentially almost overnight, and as a result, many of the later interviews were conducted using Zoom. In all cases, participants were aware of the fact that the interview was being recorded and had given written consent for this. Whilst not a perfect solution, as nothing has quite the same impact as an actual physical meeting, the possibility of conducting video interviews meant that I was able to build a rapport that is not really possible with a telephone conversation since visual cues were possible, making it feel much more like I was actually there. This did leave me dependent on the technology working reliably, and there were a few close calls! Interviews were transcribed in full, although quotations used in the thesis have been 'cleaned up' for clarity, for example by excluding repeated words or phrases such as 'er' or 'sort of'. Where there is a longer omission from a quotation this is indicated by an ellipsis (…) and any words or phrases that I have added for context or clarity are given in brackets ( ).

Problems and Solutions

Throughout the development of this research I have, inevitably, encountered a number of problems. These are detailed below, along with an account of the ways in which I have attempted to solve or mitigate them and a consideration of the ways in which they have impacted on the research. I have also included a discussion of what I consider to be flaws in the research, and the ways I have sought to deal with them.

Time and Space

The largest single issue I have faced has been the management of time and resources. I am a mature student in my early 50s with several other demands on my time and energy. I have had to fit my research and writing around other commitments, and this has, at times, been very difficult both emotionally and logistically. It has meant that the research itself has taken longer than I might have wished.

My base is in the Northeast of England which is the exact opposite, geographically, to where the majority of Druidic activity in England, certainly on a large scale, takes place. It is also a significant distance from all of the new barrows currently in existence. All Cannings, in particular, is a very long way away from me, making visiting for the purpose of conducting interviews difficult and expensive. I did feel strongly that at least once, it was necessary to speak to the owners and builders of the barrows in person and in the setting of the barrows themselves. I therefore made this a priority. Furthermore, I was able to attend 'Druid Camp' on two occasions. Druid Camp is a major annual event attended by Druids of many different orders and none, as well as by other Pagans and people with an interest. By attending this event, as well as the Summer Gathering of OBOD in 2018, I was able to interview several people with whom it would otherwise have been difficult to meet. All were extremely generous with their time during a busy schedule.

The time limitation factor meant that I have not been able to speak to as many people as I would have liked, particularly in terms of the community of users of the barrows. Having said this, I am quite sure that ten years of full-time research would not have allowed me to speak to everyone who had something to contribute and would not have revealed all of the nuances or layers of meaning that are there to be uncovered. There has to be a moment at which one ceases to gather data, even when there is much more data to be gathered. I struggled to find that point, but I hope that I have done a

reasonable job of representing the main thoughts and concerns of the communities, at least as they existed in a particular time and place. The fact that I was able to gain additional information by sending a set of questions to those I was not able to interview was also, I hope, a way of minimising the effect of these limitations. I am extremely grateful to everyone who offered to carry out an interview with me, even when these did not ultimately take place always through my own limitations.

There is a way in which the fact that I have had no choice other than to work as a part-time researcher has been an advantage. I have had more time than most to observe the growth of the barrow movement and the problems that have inevitably arisen as it has developed, such as the tax controversy over All Cannings and its subsequent declaration as an official site of Druid worship[18]; which would ordinarily have occurred outside my period of research. In addition, I have had time to consider what I have seen more deeply than might ordinarily have been the case and as a result my research questions have changed and developed over time, as has the form that the research has taken. As a result, this is a very different piece of research to what it might otherwise have been, and, I hope, a better one.

I have also been changed by the time I have been able to sit with the people and their ideas, both as an academic and as a person. My commitment to a methodology grounded in an intersectional approach that takes seriously my own various positions as a researcher has strengthened during the course of the research, as has my awareness of the care this necessitates, such as being aware of my own assumptions. My own understanding of what Druidry is, and how it is positioned within the various discourses of religion, tribalism, indigeneity, and social activism has crystalised throughout this research in a way that is not only (I hope) of use to academia but also to my own personal understanding and practice of Druidry. This includes a new understanding of the potential for social change and radical creativity that Druidry possesses

[18] See p.239

which will inform my own Druidry in the future. With this, of course, is the understanding of what Druidry is not. While I have never understood it to be a direct continuation of Iron Age religion (nor, indeed, would I wish it to be) I now have a better appreciation of how the trope of the Druid has developed over the last two centuries alongside ideas of national identity, social activism and spiritual innovation, and the ways in which this trope has been used and adapted. My own personal practice and understanding of Druidry has also developed as a result of the conversations and connections made during the conduct of this research and is now more deeply rooted in a connection to the particular place and landscape in which I find myself rather than in more generalised ideas about landscape or nature.

The nine years during which this research has been undertaken have also been years in which I have gained experience of working in funerals and with the bereaved. As a result, my ideas about what constitutes a beneficial funeral experience have developed and along with that an appreciation, once again, of what Druidry and its approach to ritual has to offer to the bereaved. Likewise, what began as an interest in the new barrows purely as they might (or might not) relate to modern Druidry, quickly developed into an appreciation of the depth and complexity of responses that a wide variety of different people are having to them and to the impact they might come to have on the funeral traditions in the UK. Indeed, they are something I would like to be more deeply involved with in the future both academically and personally.

The Online Survey

One weakness with the survey was that respondents were self-selecting, and no account is therefore taken of possible gender or age bias. Participants are likely to be limited to those belonging to on-line networks of some sort, although many self-identifying Pagans of all ages are active on social media and many virtual networks exist. Because of the qualitative nature of the research, I did not feel that this necessarily presented a problem, since the people who contributed were those who felt that they had something to say on

the issues raised in the survey. I am aware, however, that there may be attitudes and beliefs that are underrepresented in the research.

There are also elements of the survey that I would, with hindsight, change. I would, for example, make more of the questions into multiple choice in order to facilitate analysis. There are also additional questions that I would have asked, if I had known then all that I know now. However, I do believe that the survey has provided a rich and fertile source of information which has contributed enormously to the quality of this thesis and opened up exciting avenues for further research.

Section A: What is Druidry?

Chapter 3: The Story of Druidry in Britain

'The Famous and Mysterious Druydae'[19]

A Brief History of The Druid

On hearing the word 'Druid' most people will probably imagine an elderly man with a beard (the longer and whiter the better), wearing flowing white robes, and, perhaps, exotic headwear, and carrying a wooden staff. Typically, he (and it is, almost always, a 'he') will be standing in a stone circle, usually Stonehenge, looking wise, solemn and mysterious. This image is largely upheld by references to Druidry in popular culture and fiction.[20] Whilst this stereotype is a long way from the Druidry of the UK in the 21st Century, it is not entirely without foundation in the ways in which Druidry has chosen to present itself over the course of the last three centuries.

Druids in Classical Sources

Druids today take their inspiration, to a greater or lesser degree, from the priestly class of the Iron Age Celts, as they are described by a variety of Roman and Greek sources; and, to a lesser extent, from sources originating in Christian Medieval Ireland and Wales.[21] These ancient Druids tend to be presented in one of two ways (or, sometimes, a combination of the two).

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[19] Elias Ashmole, Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum (London, 1652), sigs A2-3 (quoted in Hutton 2011, 65).

[20] For example, Midsomer Murders series 14, Episode 5 The Sleeper Under the Hill 2011, as well as numerous video games featuring more or less 'stereotypical' Druids.

[21] See Hutton for a thorough discussion of the limitations of these sources as reliable evidence for pre-Christian religion (2011, 30–48).

Either they are bloodthirsty barbarians who take a particular delight in human sacrifice, or they are wise philosophers and scientists who act as royal advisors, priests, and judges, often stepping in to make peace between warlike Celtic tribes. We know frustratingly little of the original Iron Age Druids of the British Isles, but what few sources have come down to us are as much concerned with the political interests of the writers as they are with the Druids themselves.[22] One example of this is the best known and one of the most detailed accounts of the Druids that we have; and the only one that seems to have been written by an eyewitness. This is Caesar's account of his conquest of Gaul in the 50s BCE. According to Hutton:

> His Druids were educated and wise enough to represent a society worth including in the Roman Empire, organized enough to present a serious potential political threat, and barbaric enough to make their conquest a mission of civilization….The reference to Britain as the heartland of their tradition made Caesar's own incursions into that land seem more significant and glorious.' (2011, 4–5).

In other words, Caesar was using his account of the Druids for his own political purposes, and he was by no means alone in this. Druidry, and its representation, has always been deeply bound up in politics and activism. Nevertheless, the Greek and Roman sources have provided the basic building blocks from which modern scholars and practitioners alike have constructed their image of ancient Druidry. These nuggets of information include that Druids were the wisest and most educated of their people, with training sometimes taking up to 20 years; that they were ritual experts without whom no ritual or sacrifice could be conducted; that they functioned as judges and peacemakers, able to stop a war even on the battlefield, and that they could carry out divination based on their reading of the natural world. The one thing on which many sources seem to agree is that they believed in the transmigration of the soul after death, although it is unclear whether this 'reincarnation' was believed to take place in this world or in an 'Otherworld' of some kind. Strabo adds that there were three types of people held in especial respect among the Gallic peoples. These were the *bardoi,* who were singers,

[22] For a detailed account of what is known of the ancient Druids refer to Ronald Hutton's Blood and Mistletoe (Hutton 2011).

poets and composers of praise and satire; the *o'vateis* or diviners and healers and the *druidai* who were moral philosophers (Strabo, *Geography*, quoted in Koch 2003, 18). While there is no indication in Strabo that these were different grades or types of Druids, or that they represented any kind of hierarchy or progression, these categories have entered the vocabulary and structure of modern Druidry at a fundamental level as we shall see below. Less prevalent in contemporary Druidry is any reference to the reported characteristics of Druids that are less savoury to modern sensibilities. The Druids were sometimes portrayed as cruel and bloodthirsty, presiding over human sacrifice where greater numbers of victims would lead to a better harvest. They are also depicted as making divinations by observing the death throws and blood flow of a sacrificial human victim who had been stabbed for the purpose. These features are, mercifully, lacking from Druidry as a modern phenomenon, although the textual evidence for it is at least as strong as for their more laudable traits. The Druids, then, are variously portrayed by ancient authors as wise astrologers and judges who are, by nature, peaceful; and as bloodthirsty priests who sacrifice humans in large numbers to propitiate the gods or as a form of divination. Always, however, the first concern of the author is not with historical accuracy so much as with their own political or polemic concerns. The best that can be said of the Classical and Medieval sources is that they provide a fascinating window into the concerns of the people who wrote them and the times that they lived in. As reliable historical evidence, however, they are close to useless. As Hutton points out:

> 'We may be in possession of a relatively large quantity of valuable data or we may have none at all….What must be obvious is that the classical sources have represented…the equivalent of colours on an artist's palette, to be selected and combined more or less at will to construct strikingly different portraits.' (2011, 22,23).

This tendency to see a reflection of the political and religious concerns of one's own time in the Druids continued into the 18th and 19th centuries, which became the true cradle of modern Druidry.

The widespread interest in Druidry among the British educated classes has its origin in the Romantic Movement and the 'Celtic Cultural Revival' of the late

18th and early 19th Centuries as well as in the works of antiquarians such as William Stukeley (Hutton 2011, 86–124).

Romantics, Antiquarians and the Celtic Revival

The Romantic poets were, to a large degree, attempting a project of the 're-enchantment' of the natural world and a movement away from the perceived dogma of the religious establishment. They speak of nature as divine, or at least as the most accessible route to the divine and suggest that 'God' is far more accessible in a forest than in a church[23]. This attitude, beginning in the early 18th Century with figures such as William Diaper, James Thompson, Thomas Grey, William Mason, Joseph and Thomas Warton and William Collins (Hutton 2011, 112–13), continued into the 19th Century with Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats as its most famous proponents. Druids had been appearing in poems since 1734, mostly as wise priests of a nature religion that prepared the way for Christianity; although by the later 19th Century they were more likely to be portrayed as bloodthirsty priests of a barbaric cult as the vogue for the Gothic took hold. Hutton suggests (2011, 112) that this association of the Druids with priests of an idyllic, almost Acadian nature religion of a past Golden Age combined with new feelings of national identity that followed the Act of Union in 1707, in which the Druid was a convenient and increasingly available symbol to represent an ancient, noble and pan-British symbol of resistance to the foreign Roman invader. Wordsworth, while he was ambivalent towards the Druids, was the most prolific in his use of them as an image in his poems, such as *The Trepidation of the Druids* and in his autobiographical poem *Prelude*. Like the other Romantic poets, his work demonstrates the fascination that pre-Christian religion, whether Druidic or Hellenistic, had on Romantic imagination. Like others of his time, however, Wordsworth was also influenced by the newly popular Gothic tradition and often presented Druids as barbaric and

[23] For example, *The Tables Turned* by William Wordsworth and *Auguries of Innocence* by William Blake.

bloodthirsty monsters. This was an ambivalence that ran through 19th Century England where representations of Druids were more usually negative (Hutton 2011, 204–8).

Despite this, the tendency to equate nature with the divine, or at least with a more authentic form of spirituality than that provided by the established Church, continued well into the 20th Century and provided a cultural milieu in which early Neo Pagan and Druid movements could take root.[24] Beginning in the late 19th Century and into the 20th, the idea of Druids as priests of a monotheistic religion deriving from that of the Patriarchs and so preparing their people to adopt Christianity began to undergo a transformation. As the religiosity of the past centuries began to wane, at least in certain quarters, it became possible to see the Druidic nature religion as something worthy of respect and admiration in its own right, rather than as a version of or precursor to the Biblical Faith. In this we see the beginnings of the ideas that finally took shape in the form of the fully Pagan Nature Religion of the late 20th Century (Hutton 2011, 332).

The fact that the figure or type of the Druid was so widely available to be used in such a wide variety of ways by poets and novelists in the first place, was almost entirely due to William Stukeley's publication of his works on Stonehenge and Avebury in 1740-43. These firmly established the identity of monolithic monuments as Druidic in the popular imagination and within academia. Henceforth, the Druids became available as a cultural icon to be interpreted according to the changing needs of the times. Stukeley himself, was almost a type of the newly emerging image of the Druid. He adopted the name *Chyndonax* from a Gallic tomb assumed (wrongly) to be that of a Druid, and, at least in his early career, adopted a panentheistic, Pythagorean religiosity that he believed to have been that of the original Druids. He even constructed a 'Druid temple' in the grounds of his home in Lincolnshire (Hutton 2011, 90–91, 93, 96). Such, indeed, was his enthusiasm for the

[24] See, for example, Beattie's review of literary works involving nature as a topic of mystical thinking (Beattie 2015).

ancient Druids, both in his scholarly and personal religious life that, despite the lack of evidence that he ever established any kind of Druidic 'order' or lodge (Hutton 2011, 128), he could reasonably be described as the earliest ancestor of the modern Druid.

The 'Celtic Revival' of the 18th-19th Centuries was a reaction against the perceived oppression of the English towards the 'Celtic' nations of Wales, Ireland, Scotland, and to some extent the Isle of Man and Cornwall. Its proponents attempted to recreate, or at least to re-imagine an ancient 'Celticness' of language and culture free from the corrupting influence of 'Englishness'. This was in part a reaction against the homogenising 'British' identity that arose from the Act of Union and that many in Wales and Scotland increasingly came to reject. The task of preserving the ancient and authentic Welsh identity was largely a work of inspired fiction. Two English ladies with a passion for Welsh heritage were responsible for the creation of the 'traditional Welsh national costume' (which contained nothing that was distinctively 'Welsh') around the 1820s. One of these, Lady Charlotte Guest, was also responsible for the translation of the Red Book of Hergest, which, together with her translations from a number of other sources, was to form the basis of the epic of Welsh literature, which she named the '*Mabiniogion*', and which was also to become central to modern understandings of Druidry (Hutton 2006, 6–7). The Welsh Cultural Revolution was also an attempt to recreate a sense of pride in the cultural achievements of Wales, particularly in the face of the increasing modernisation and industrialisation that was eroding any sense of distinctive Welsh identity. A significant development of this re-imagined Celtic identity was the emergence of a number of Druidic or Bardic movements, concerned with a sense of performed identity and a mythologised 'Celtic' history distinguished from the Germanic 'Saxon' identity of most of England. This sense of continuity with an imagined past and celebration of 'Bardic' skills, led to the establishment of *eisteddfodau* in various locations in Wales between 1792 and 1815 largely due to the work of Iolo Morganwg, a key figure in the history of modern Druidry.

Iolo Morganwg and the Druids of Pontypridd

Iolo Morganwg was the bardic name of Edward Williams (1747-1826), a Welsh stonemason, poet and scholar of medieval Welsh literature. His major work, the *Barddas*, was compiled from his jottings after his death and published in 1862 by John Williams (Bardic name Ab Ithel) who was a key figure in the establishment of the first National Eisteddfod held in Llandudno in 1856. the *Barddas* claims to be a translation of various lost Medieval poetic texts in which ancient Druidic teachings and ideas can be discerned (Hutton 2011, 266). These, taken together with Iolo's commentary, set out a coherent philosophical system and mystical cosmology that was foundational to many forms of spiritual Druidry and still carries huge influence today. Iolo also persuaded the editors of a number of works of collected Welsh poetry to include documents of his own invention which he claimed to have discovered, and which he further claimed represented an ancient Bardic tradition. In this way they entered the stream of academic awareness and Welsh national self-consciousness (Hutton 2011, 150–82). Not surprisingly Iolo remains a controversial figure in modern Druidry. Without a doubt, he is a foundational and a truly ancestral figure to modern Druids, to a far greater extent than the ancient Druids could ever be. His Druid Prayer and mystical symbol, the *nod cyfrin* (representing three shafts of light emanating from a single source and symbolising the creation according to Iolo's system) as well as his motto ('The Truth against the World'); certain aspects of public ritual; the grade system of Bards, Ovates and Druids, along with their associated colours,[25] (with some adaptations) and, his cosmology, remain key facets of Druidic practice today. However, the fact that there can be no doubt that he falsified his sources is a cause for discomfort, leading many Druids, particularly the American orders, to reject him outright. The light in which he is seen by modern Druidry can, perhaps, best be summed up in this quotation from the website of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids:

[25] Which he took from Strabo and to which he added his own adaptations and interpretations.

> Woven into Iolo's work are strands of inspiration drawn from his knowledge of Welsh folklore and literature, and his visits to many of the old houses and libraries of Wales. It took nearly a hundred years for academics to prove that he had fabricated his material, and even though no expert in Welsh literature now believes that Iolo drew on any pre-existing tradition, an increasing number are coming to respect and celebrate him as an original genius. He is now seen both as a literary fraudster and as a social reformer with a positive legacy that continues to this day.[26]

Following Iolo's death, a number of people took up his cause for a supposed past for the Bards and Druids, which could be re-established in order to create a better future. The concern was not only with re-imagining but also with *performing* 'Celticness' as it existed in a deep, mythic past and in reinterpreting this idea as a form of social activism in relation to the politics and concerns of the day. Most of those involved with the Druidry of the Welsh cultural revival were also radical in their politics and religion, opposed to the established church and in favour of social and political reform. The values and beliefs that they superimposed onto the ancient Druids, following Iolo's writings, suited these purposes perfectly.

In Southern Wales a number of eccentric figures grouped their activities around the Rocking Stone above Pontypridd (erroneously believed at the time to have been an important Druidic site - in fact it is a natural feature) and the New Inn beneath it. Of these, only one has retained a degree of notoriety and fame today, although his lasting influence on Druidry has been limited. His name was Dr William Price, and he is a key figure in the history of cremation in Britain and it is in this context that we will consider him in chapter 9. The other two figures active around the Rocking Stone at the same time have had no more influence on modern Druidry than did Price but were equally colourful.

Evan Davies, better known by his Bardic name of Myfyr Morganwg (The Scholar of Glamorgan) was the first person, at least in modern times, ever to claim the title of Archdruid of the Isle of Britain (Hutton 2011, 259). He and his successor, Owen Morgan, who took the Bardic name of Morien, were the first in recent history to work their form of Druidry into something recognisable as

[26] https://druidry.org/druid-way/what-druidry/recent-history accessed 06/07/20.

an alternative Pagan religion, albeit with strong, heretical Christian overtones. Their rituals called upon a variety of gods and goddesses derived from mythology; an interpretation of the writings of Iolo Morganwg: and, on occasion, their own imaginations. This was still a very long way from the Pagan Druidry of today, and since it disappeared from Pontypridd with the death of Morien in 1921, leaving no trace on the practices of local, or any other Druids, it cannot be seen as ancestral to modern Pagan Druidry in any meaningful way.

There is, however, one aspect adopted by Morien that did have huge consequences for modern Paganism and that was his use of an idea, popular in the scholarship of his day, that all ancient worship had been concerned, primarily, with the sexual union of a Great God and a Great Goddess as the means of creation and the fertility of the natural world. This idea had come about through the discovery of overtly sexual art in the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, which was wrongly assumed to be religious in nature; and through the discovery of ideas and artefacts from India that could be seen in this light. The idea was expressed in its most developed form by the French scholar Charles François Dupuis in *L'Origen de Tous les Cultes* in 1795. This idea, which was quick to catch on in the scholarly circles of its time, came to be of central importance to the development of modern Paganisms in the 20th Century, and in particular to Wicca. However, although Morien was among the first to use the idea in a newly devised religious system, he did not invent it and it did not enter into the Druidic imagination through him. Indeed, among modern Paganisms, Druidry is one that makes comparatively little of this idea.

During the time when Myfyr Morganwg was holding Druidic assemblies at the Rocking Stone of Pontypridd in the 1880s, William Price was holding rival meetings in the same place, disseminating his own idiosyncratic religious system that held that the universe had hatched from an egg laid by a serpent. While his meetings seem to have been better attended, he was no more successful than Myfyr Morganwg or Morien in leaving a lasting effect upon the religious ideas of modern Druidry (Hutton 2011, 271–86).

The Welsh Cultural Revivalist Druids of the 19th Century, however, were far more successful in terms of leaving a lasting legacy in the form of the National Eisteddfod; an idea that began in 1858 in Llangollen leading to the establishment for a National Council to organise it as an annual event in 1860. While Myfyr Morganwg was passed over as the Archdruid of the *gorsedd* that organised the Eisteddfod, he remained on friendly terms with it. William Price also attended the Llangollen Eisteddfod of 1858, although it is unclear whether he was invited or not (Hutton 2011, 266). The National Eisteddfod, however, moved in a different direction to the eccentric religious ideas of the Rocking Stone Druids, concerning itself with excellence in and conservation of the Welsh Bardic Arts, rather than with religious or political ideas. More than a trace can be seen today of the ideas of Iolo Morganwg in both the ritual and the Masonic style regalia of the National Eisteddfod, and certainly, this is one of the authentic ways in which the concept of the Druid operates in the modern world.

The Three Faces of Druidry

As well as the cultural Druids of southern Wales, the 18th and 19th centuries also gave rise to a number of fraternal orders of Druids, modelled on Freemasonry, which was growing in popularity during this time. The oldest of these that is still in existence, the Ancient Order of Druids, was founded in London in 1781 and was chiefly concerned with the appreciation and performance of music. In most of these orders the discussion of religion and politics was strictly forbidden (Hutton 2011, 132–33). By the end of the 19th century there were many such orders. Particularly in the industrial centres of the Midlands and the Northwest. While their regalia and some of the symbolism in their ceremony was derived from what was then known of the Druids, and influenced by the works of Iolo Morganwg, they did not seek to adopt Druidry as a spiritual system and their interest in ancient Druidry appears to have been superficial (Hutton 2011, 144–5). Some of these orders, including the Ancient Order of Druids, continue to be active today.

The situation at the end of the 19th century, then, was that not only was the Druid a popular motif of poetry and fiction that could be used to support a variety of political and religious agendas, but there were also a number of organisations and societies across Britain, that took the name of Druidry. Of these, some were Masonic in nature, structure and character; concerned with sociability and charitable work among and beyond their membership but not with religious or spiritual belief, which was a matter for the individual and was expected to be private. Like other Masonic style groups of their time, they were open to men only. Other groups, particularly in Wales, based their ideas and rituals on the writings of Iolo Morganwg and were often flamboyant in their clothing and behaviour. Their members were often radical in terms of non-conformist religion and in their politics, and unlike their fraternal counterparts they initiated both men and women and used the divisions of Bard, Ovate and Druid. These groups maintained the local *eisteddfodau* in various locations in which people competed for honours in bardic disciplines. It is these later groups, still visible today in the National Eisteddfod, and forming a sort of 'Cultural Druidry', that are ancestral to spiritual Druidry as it exists today, although elements of Masonic ceremony and regalia are also apparent. Both of these movements (Fraternal Druidry and Cultural Druidry) are, however, distinct from the Spiritual, Esoteric or Religious Druidry with which this work is primarily concerned, although the formation of the idea or category of 'The Druid' throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries has been foundational to all forms in which Druidry operates today.

As an account of the history of the idea or trope of 'The Druid', this has been necessarily brief. Its purpose is not to provide an exhaustive account of the journey of the idea of 'the Druid' from a poorly glimpsed Iron Age figure to the diversity of its expressions in the modern world. To do so would be a thesis in itself and that task has already been masterfully undertaken by Ronald Hutton (Hutton 2011; 2006), among others. Rather my aim here has been to demonstrate that Druidry is, and has always been, not so much a thing in itself with clearly defined boundaries and beliefs, but rather a category or a

discursive process,[27] used throughout history to express attitudes, allegiances and assumptions that are wholly rooted in the time, place, and situation of the individual. The Druids, by their very illusiveness are ideally placed to signify all things to all people. They have been drafted in, over the centuries, in support of political, religious and cultural agendas that are, frequently, fundamentally at odds with each other. This has been possible precisely because the Druids were, and are, both famous, and mysterious.

The Shape of Druidry Today

In 1964, Ross Nichols, whose Bardic name was *Nuinn*, made the momentous decision to split from the Ancient Druid Order (previously known as the Universal Bond) as the result of a dispute over the succession and the essential character of the organisation. The Universal Bond had been a new kind of Druid order, established by George Watson MacGregor Reid between 1909 and 1915, when he first used the word 'Druid' to describe his order. Prior to this he had explored a number of oriental traditions, including Buddhism and mystical Islam with a view to reclaiming an original universal religion of union with God through nature and universal brotherhood that had been corrupted and lost over time. His ideas were deeply influenced not only by the Occultism of the Golden Dawn, but also by the Theosophical movement, which was influential during this period (Hutton 2011, 348–56). Reid first celebrated the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge in 1912, along with 4 companions, all of them claiming Eastern personas. By 1915, Reid was claiming to be the Chief Druid and that Druidry itself was the primal universal religion from which all others were derived. He called people to its message of Universal Brotherhood whilst assuring them that in order to do so they did not have to abandon their former religion. His brand of Druidry retained a strong flavour of Universalist Christianity and he preached the second coming of Christ to establish a new era of social justice (Hutton 2011, 358.370). The Universal Bond contained elements of both the Welsh Cultural Druids of the

[27] Not unlike the word 'religion', as I have argued in Chapter 5.

eisteddfod movement and of the Fraternal Druid orders; It adopted the ceremonial robes of the Ancient Druid Order and organised itself into lodges (Hutton 2011, 361); however it was fundamentally different from either. While Reid respected all religions and increasingly assimilated Druidry with his universalist understanding of Christianity, his order was always primarily religious in character. It sought to teach universal love and brotherhood and preached an ethics that reflected Reid's own socialist ideals. The formulation of a practicing modern Druidic group whose chief concerns were religious was a new thing entirely and it is for this reason that the Universal Bond can be seen as the ancestor, directly or indirectly, of all Spiritual or Esoteric Druid orders as they exist today.

On his death his son, Robert became the new Chief, following a series of schisms and disagreements. Whilst Robert largely maintained the Universal Bond along the same principals as his father, he did include a strong emphasis on personal development, rather than political activism. He also made one innovation that had an impact on Druidry as it was to be practiced in the future. One of Iolo Morganwg's innovations had been the creation of a 'mystical word of creation'. This word was now assumed to be '*Awen*', a word used in Medieval Welsh literature to denote poetic inspiration and meaning something like 'flowing'. In the late 1950s the chanting of the word, now an almost universal feature of British Spiritual Druidry, was incorporated into the ceremonies of the Universal Bond. They were also, by now, regularly using Iolo's prayer in their rituals (Hutton 2011, 384).

The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD)

When Robert died unexpectedly in 1964, it was over the question of his successor that Nichols seceded from the Order.[28] He and those of the

[28] The Universal Bond continued under the leadership of Thomas Maughan and still exists today, although after the exclusion of both Druids and the general public from Stonehenge at the Summer Solstice in 1985 it disappeared from public view and remains private to this day, having played no further part in the development of Esoteric Druidry beyond its own teachings, which are not made available to outsiders (Hutton 2011, 410).

membership who followed him, formed the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), the largest, and probably the best known of the spiritual orders in existence today. However, the Druidry of early OBOD was still far removed from that of the modern organisation. Whilst Ross Nichols was concerned with 'Celtic' sources as a root of personal spirituality, his beliefs were still largely shaped by the panentheistic and broadly Pythagorean ideas that had been attributed to the Druids by Stukeley and his contemporaries. Nichols believed that Druidry had come to Britain via Egyptian and Phoenician travellers, and in the slow westward spread of megalithic culture across Europe. It represented, for him, a pure, broadly monotheistic system which made great use of sacred geometry in its megalithic monuments and temples. While he acknowledged the Gallic deities such as Taranis and Esus in his vison of Druidry, these tended to be understood in a symbolic way, correlating to cosmic and astrological associations (Nichols 1990). In short, his vison of Druidry did not differ markedly from that of the 18th Century antiquarians other than by the addition of some mystical Eastern elements gained through the rising influence of Occultism and the Theosophical Movement. Under Robert MacGregor Reid the Universal Bond had developed an increasing concern with personal development and reaching one's potential, again very much in line with the zeitgeist of the day, and this also Nichols incorporated into his view of Druidry.

One contribution that Nichols did make to modern Druidry was to adopt into it a unified system of seasonal celebrations known as the 'Wheel of the Year'. This calendar, based on ancient sources, proposes a system of eight seasonal festivals to be held throughout the year. The calendar was first devised in 1958 by the main Wiccan coven active at the time and passed to Nichols from here. Prior to this, the Druid groups had celebrated the solstices and equinoxes while Wiccan groups tended to celebrate the 'quarter days' or 'fire festivals' believed to have been observed by the Celts. The 'Wheel of the Year' incorporated these into a single system. While there was never a time or a place in the past where all eight festivals have been celebrated together (Hutton 2001a), the individual festivals were at least loosely based on

medieval or earlier sources and the calendar has proved to work well in a modern society.

Nichols was also involved with magic and occultism and had an interest in Celtic history. For him, as for Reid, Druidry was not just a matter for artistic performance or the actualisation of 'Celticness', or as a society after the model of Freemasonry, rather it was a deeply held religious and spiritual way of orientating oneself towards the world and the divine.

OBOD Reborn

When Nichols died, unexpectedly, in 1975 OBOD went into a period of hiatus for over a decade. In 1988, the Order was revived in a very new form, by Philip Carr-Gomm, a psychologist who, as a young man had been initiated by Nichols into the Order. As Chosen Chief, Philip Carr-Gomm, moved OBOD away from what was, essentially, a 'Celtic' para-masonic (Anczyk 2014) universalist monotheist mystery tradition, into something much more recognisable as distinctively 'Pagan'. This could be seen as the beginning of what Harvey describes as an evolution of British Spiritual Druidry away from an 'internalised esotericism' and towards a relational animist view of the world. The 'self' of Pagan Druidry is, according to Harvey, 'a relational self rather than an interiorised one.' (Harvey 2009, 7). The Order continues to encompass a wide range of beliefs and practices, welcoming people of any faith and none, whether or not they regard Druidry as their primary religion, or as a religion at all. In this can clearly be seen the inclusivist and universalist roots of the Universal Bond, which are still very much present in OBOD Druidry. The main difference from the time when Carr-Gomm assumed the role of Chosen Chief is that the majority of OBOD members today would broadly identify as Pagan.[29] This is, in part, a consequence of the rapid growth of a variety of Pagan religions and traditions in Britain beginning in the

[29] Although this is not universally the case, by any means. OBOD members can be, and are, of many religious persuasions including both atheists and Christians, and many would see themselves as having 'dual belonging'.

1950s as a result, among other things, of greater cultural awareness and relativism in Britain[30] in the years following the second World War; which saw a rapid increase both in immigration from countries such as India and so a greater awareness of Eastern religious ideas among the public; and greater numbers of Britons travelling in the wider world than had previously been the case. The counter-cultural revolution of the 60s also led to increased willingness to experiment with new ideas, including in the area of religion, where there was a move away from the more traditional forms towards experimental expressions of religion and spirituality that appeared to foreground individual experience and choice.

The revival of OBOD in 1988 under the leadership of Philip Carr-Gomm was part of a period of rapid expansion in Pagan Druidry. OBOD, is the largest order with members throughout the world. In June 2020 Phillip Carr-Gomm stepped down as Chosen Chief after 32 years and the title passed to Eimear Burke, also a psychologist. It is, at the time of writing, too early to speculate about the direction in which she will take the Order, although she has already expressed an intention to revise the correspondence course to include more of an emphasis on the mythology of her native Ireland.[31] This course is divided into the three grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid, based on the divisions mentioned by Strabo and incorporated into Iolo's system. The grades are accessed through completion of a correspondence course and through a mentorship programme. While the grades are sequential (it is not possible to take the Ovate course before completing the Bardic) The Order claims that they do not constitute a hierarchy. Members are sometimes split into grades for ceremonial purposes [32] and retreats may be held for particular grades,

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[30] While Eastern ideas had been a part of the awareness of the educated classes, including within the Fraternal Druid orders and as an influence in the growing Occultism and Theosophical groups from the late 18th and into the 19th Centuries (Hutton 2011, 131–32, 277), they did not enter the wider cultural awareness of the general public in the way that they did during the 1960s when yoga and meditation became established in the West.

[31] The course currently makes extensive use of medieval Welsh material, particularly the Mabinogi.

[32] As was my experience at the Summer Gathering of 2017.

however it is my experience that for most of the members most of the time, one's grade is not an issue. I have rarely, if ever, been asked for mine, and since the organisation is not, and makes no claim to be a democracy, the grade of a member has no bearing on their influence within the Order, with most decisions being taken by an inner circle of senior members. In practice, however, this leadership is very light handed and in contrast with the Universal Bond under both the elder and the younger MacGregor Reid, members are actively encouraged to question and test the material they find in the booklets (named *gwersi*, in yet another echo of Iolo's influence) and to accept only that which they find helpful. It is, however, necessary to have two members of the Druid Grade in a group before it can operate as a Grove rather than a Seed Group. Since OBOD regards itself as a Mystery School, the contents of the courses are private in so far as members are asked not to discuss them with non-members or with members of a lower grade, in order not to reveal anything out of the proper sequence and context. However, the contents are not secret, in the way that those of traditions such as Wicca generally are. [33]

The Order also sponsors the four-yearly Mount Haemus Conference. Each year a scholar is granted a bursary to write an academic paper on a subject of interest to Druidry. These are delivered at a conference every four years and published every eight years. While some are written by practising Druids, some of whom are academics, many are written by academics with no direct involvement with Druidry (e.g. Farley 2016). This demonstrates the largely positive relationship that exists between Druidry (including the other orders mentioned here) and the academy. Dialogue moves in both directions and Druids regularly respond to the findings of recent scholarship. This open attitude and willingness to engage extends into interfaith dialogue, in particular with the Dharmic religions with which it claims many common factors and possibly common ancestry. While this idea is not new to Druidry

[33] As a member of both OBOD and BDO I have access to the course materials of both, but I have published nothing here that is not openly available to the public, unless with express permission.

(Hutton 2011, 131–32, 277), it is one in which Carr-Gomm has taken a particular interest. One form which this takes, is the annual One Tree Gathering between Hindus and Druids for a weekend of fellowship, discussion, and shared ritual.[34]

The British Druid Order (BDO)

The British Druid Order (BDO), established by Philip Shallcrass is the second largest Druid order in Britain. It was preceded by the Grove of the Badger founded by Shallcrass in 1979 (Shallcrass 2019). BDO as it exists today is the result of Phillip Shallcrass' quest to make sense of personal visions and anomalous experiences in the context of the 'indigenous and shamanistic religion of the British Isles', which he understood to be the Druidry of the Iron Age Celts and possibly having much older roots in Britain and Western Europe.[35] While the Britain in which Shallcrass made these connections had been influenced by several centuries of speculation on the Druids, as discussed above; he was developing his own understanding of Druidry in 1974, prior to Carr-Gomm's re-founding of OBOD, and in a context less directly influenced by the Theosophy and 19th Century Occultism of the Universal Bond. BDO Druidry has a very different 'flavour' to the Universalism of OBOD, describing itself on its webpage as animist, shamanic, polytheist and Pagan ('About the BDO' n.d.), and stating its aim as 'rekindling the sacred fired of Druidry as a living, breathing, animistic, shamanic, life affirming, Earth honouring spirituality for the 21st Century' with an emphasis on building relationships with the ancient gods and spirits of Britain. Philip Shallcrass is also known as 'Grey Wolf', following a shamanic vision which he experienced during a sweat lodge, a ceremony which he also believes to be part of the ancient religious inheritance of the British Isles. He sees Druidry as the indigenous shamanic religion of Britain which the Order sets out to rediscover, through historical and archaeological sources, personal spiritual experience

[34] Information about One Tree can be found at: https://druidry.org/resources/one-tree-family

[35] Personal communication 5/10/2020

and through dialogue with other indigenous religious groups around the world. Thus, the BDO is more overtly Pagan in character than OBOD and sees itself primarily as a religious organisation in a way that OBOD does not. This is not a hard distinction, however, and 'sectarian differences' are rarely a feature of modern Druidry with many individuals belonging to two or more different orders and co-operation between the orders commonplace, for example in the campaign for ceremonial access to Stonehenge and over the debate concerning the reburial of the pre-Christian dead preserved in museums and universities. In 1995, Emma Restall Orr (Bobcat) became joint chief of the BDO and the Order became active in negotiations with English Heritage over the ongoing issue of access to Stonehenge. Emma Restall Orr remained joint chief of the BDO until 2002, thus becoming the first woman to have held such a position in any modern spiritual Druid Order. In 2002 she left to establish The Druid Network. In 2012 part of the BDO's Gorsedd ceremony was used in the closing ceremony of the Paralympics in London, thus making a significant impact on the national cultural consciousness (*Paralympics 2012 Druid Ritual* n.d.).[36]

Like OBOD, the BDO also runs a correspondence course, which allows members to progress through the grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid. Also, in common with the OBOD course, it makes extensive use of Medieval sources, such as the Mabinogi, although it reflects the BDO's distinctive character in its use of them. The BDO has played and continues to play a significant role in the development of modern Druidry, taking part in many of the discourses that have shaped it, including through the publication of The Druid Voice, from 1992, which has carried articles from prominent Druids as well as academics. Although the BDO is deeply rooted in what it sees as the traditional and indigenous religion of the British Isles, it is keen to point out that it is open to people of all ethnicities and does not understand ancestry in purely genetic terms. It sees all who have settled in Britain since the very earliest times until the present days, along with their gods and religious traditions as a part of the

[36] Details of the history of the BDO are taken from its published timeline available on its website. (Shallcrass 2019)

continually evolving and developing story of the land. Like OBOD, they have been keen to engage in interfaith discussion and leaders of both orders were present at a conference organised in 2014 at the Ammerdown Centre in Somerset in order to facilitate discussion and shared practice between Christians and Pagans (Cush 2015).

The Druid Network (TDN)

Established by Emma Restall-Orr in 2002, The Druid Network is a loose association of Druids who may or may not belong to other orders. It exists, mostly online, as a place for discussion and dialogue. In 2010 the Charities Commission granted it the status of a charity in view of its religious nature (Owen and Taira 2015). This was a significant step which had consequences not only for TDN, but for all Spiritual Druid orders in Britain.[37] Partially as a consequence of this, and following a discussion in the House of Lords, TDN was admitted into the Interfaith Network in 2016 along with the Pagan Federation ('The Inter Faith Network for the UK' n.d.). The effect of this has been to establish Druidry in official circles, if not in the public imagination, as a legitimate religious movement and has paved the way for greater involvement in policy making and government consultation. The Druid Network differs from the orders discussed so far in that it is not a teaching order and does not offer training or correspondence courses. It also rejects the division of members into grades, holding that the title of Druid belongs to all who choose to identify themselves with it. It does, however, include a great deal of information and resources on its website for those who are interested in Druidry. All of these are freely available, although a small annual membership fee gives access to an online forum and as well as the running of the Network, monies are used to donate to causes that accord with its stated objectives, in line with its charitable status. These include ecological projects as well as initiatives that educate the public concerning Druidry. At the heart of the Druid Network is the Order of the Yew, membership of which is through the acceptance by a

[37] See p.93ff for a full discussion of this.

committee of senior members of an oath of service to humanity or the world which the prospective member must write. Members witness and support each other's vows through silent meditation.

The Anglesey Druid Order (ADO)

The Anglesey Druid Order (ADO), founded in 1999, is unusual among contemporary Esoteric Druid orders in that its identity is closely bound up with a particular geographical location, with many of its seasonal celebrations centred on the Neolithic burial chamber at Bryn Celli Ddu. Whilst there are orders that have a particular connection to specific monuments, such as the *Gorsedd of Bards of Caer Abiri*, and of *Cor Gawr* at Avebury and Stonehenge respectively, these are tied to specific monuments, whereas the Anglesey Druid Order draws on the presumed significance of the Island of Anglesey to the ancient Druids. It was, according to Tacitus, the site of a Roman invasion (called short due to Boudica's uprising) in which the Druids played a prominent part (Tacitus, Annals 14:30 quoted in Koch 2003, 34). It was also the site, possibly due to the reputation generated by Tacitus' account, of the earliest Fraternal Druid order in 1772 (Hutton 2011, 130). As such, whilst the Anglesey Druid Order is comparatively small, it remains extremely influential in modern British Druidry. The purpose and intent of the Order, as declared on its website, is:

> '….to celebrate the historical significance of the Isle of Anglesey and the island's rich cultural heritage. It is an Order of learning and inspiration devoted to the rekindling of the old ways and creation of new traditions that sing in praise of Anglesey's Druidic legacy. The Order promotes the study of old Welsh literal (sic) and oral sources to facilitate a deeper connection to the spirits of this magical land.' ('Anglesey Druid Order | About' n.d.).

Another reason for the Order's influence is its charismatic Archdruid, Kristoffer Hughes, formerly a mortuary technician by profession, he is also a prolific author on Druidic themes, including Druidry and death, and in this context, we will return to him in chapter 9. The Order's particular relationship with its own landscape is also reflected in the fact that unlike the other teaching orders we

have considered, it does not produce a correspondence course,[38] but rather membership is by completion of a number of residential events over the course of a year, meaning that its teachings are not only highly personal, but also deeply rooted in the land in which it functions. The Welsh language is also deeply significant, being employed in many of its rituals. Whilst the ADO employs a system of grades, it is unusual in that it does not use the system of Bards, Ovates and Druids devised by Iolo Morganwg, drawing on Strabo. Rather its three grades are those of Open Member, *Awenyddion*, (for those who have completed the residential courses) and Executive (who function as a ritual priesthood).

GODS, SOD, and LAW: The Battle for Stonehenge

Whilst it is true that there is generally a high level of friendly co-operation between the different orders, this is not universally the case, and this was particularly true during the 1980s-90s with the ongoing debate with English Heritage and other Government bodies over access to Stonehenge and the issue of the reburial of human remains from the pre-Christian past.[39] Writing in 2001, Letcher suggested that the Druid groups of Britain could be loosely divided into two distinct groups which he calls ‘Personal Growth orders’ and ‘Counter Cultural orders’ (A. J. Letcher 2001, 44–45). The orders that we have already considered fall into the former category. The Counter Cultural orders were concerned with direct action against the perceived injustice of the government over the issue of Stonehenge and often used methods that could be considered confrontational. Hutton uses the terms ‘Spiritual’ and ‘Political’ to distinguish the two types, whilst stressing that this is not an absolute division, but one of emphasis (Hopman 2016, 188). The orders most commonly associated with this politically activist form of Druidry were SOD

[38] Although at the time of writing it is in the process of developing an online course, partially in response to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. This will allow people to access the course through online and video materteral rather than travelling to Anglesey, however the teaching is still personal, delivered through online conferencing rather than written materials.

[39] A discussion to which I will return in more detail in chapter 4.

(the Secular Order of Druids), GODS (The Glastonbury Order of Druids) and LAW (The Loyal Arthurian Warband). These orders do not stand in a direct line of descent from the Universal Bond but arose in part out of the ecological campaigning that became a part of the cultural backdrop of the 80s and 90s. This new ecological awareness and activism also played a large part in the development of Paganism in general and Druidry in particular during this period and remains important now.

In 1985, police were deployed to forbid access to both Druids and members of the general public to Stonehenge at the Summer Solstice, giving rise to a series of events that has become widely known in counter cultural circles as the 'Battle of the Beanfield'. Following this there were several Druidic initiatives to re-establish access. In 1987 Tim Sebastian founded the Secular Order of Druids which was deliberately provocative and did not appear to take itself seriously, although its aims were very serious indeed. In the following year he was pivotal to the founding of CoBDO (the Council of British Druid Orders) which was formed to enable the various Druid orders to work together in order to provide a more unified opposition to government legislation that they saw as detrimental to their aims and values. For a while this worked well, but in 1996, OBOD and the BDO (both 'spiritual' or 'personal growth' orders) withdrew from CoBDO over what they saw as the 'unreasonable behaviour of some of its officers' (Shallcrass 2019). This led to bad feeling on both sides and a significant division in Pagan Druidry, even while their shared aims of access to Stonehenge and the reburial of what they considered to be their Pagan ancestors remained intact. Rollo Maughfling, Archdruid of GODS saw this in terms of a class division, with Middle Class Druidic Orders in their white robes, who had read many books on both the history of Druidry and its spirituality, looking down on the 'hippy' 'traveller' Druids whose knowledge had come from prolonged and direct contact with the natural world (Hopman 2016, 146). The 'political' orders do not offer correspondence courses, holding that Druidry cannot be learnt from books but is a matter of living an engaged life in pursuit of justice whilst immersed in a sacred natural world. In 1996, Hutton expressed the hope that this division would not be permanent as each

form complemented the other, leading to a greater whole, with the one promoting ‘a distinctive form of religious and mystical experience’ while the other was comprised of ‘promoters of civil liberty through a very effective form of performance art’ (Hopman 2016, 193). This does, happily, seem to be the case and the bad feeling is not immediately obvious in Druidry as it exists today. Members of the ‘spiritual’ or ‘personal growth’ orders have become increasingly involved in political issues and environmental activism. Ecological activism in particular is once again becoming an important part of Druidry at the time of writing in the wake of the challenges of climate change and controversy over fracking.

One figure, however, remains notoriously controversial in contemporary Druidry with almost every Druid having a personal opinion about whether he is a hero, an embarrassment, or something in between. This is Arthur Uther Pendragon, head of the Loyal Arthurian Warband. Born John Timothy Rothwell, he came to believe that he was the reincarnation of King Arthur and changed his name by deed poll in 1985. He is a common sight at Stonehenge in his distinctive white robe with a red dragon emblazoned on it, a red stole and a golden circlet emblazoned with a dragon. Pendragon has been arrested on numerous occasions and has frequently fought his cases through the courts, including the European Court of Human Rights, with various degrees of success. Pendragon is a major media figure widely recognised by the public, if only as an eccentric, and as such, is often the first figure that comes to mind when Druids are mentioned, to the delight of some and the annoyance of others. He claims that his order is devoted to the upholding of truth, honour, and justice, even when this brings them into conflict with British Law. While OBOD and the BDO simply campaigned for access to Stonehenge at the Solstice and so, to that extent at least, were successful in 2000; CoBDO[40] continues to assert that as a place of worship, access to the site should be free and unrestricted during the seasonal festivals and continues to campaign for this.

[40] Since the death of Tim Sebastion in 2007 the key figures in CoBDO have been Rollo Maughfling of GODS and Arthur Uther Pendragon of LAW.

Conclusion

In addition to those discussed above, there are also a multiplicity of smaller Druid orders in Britain, many of them local in nature. There are also many Druids who do not belong to an order at all but who function as solitary practitioners, interpreting the ancient and historical sources as they choose in order to form a personal spirituality that is meaningful to them. What makes this group of people distinct from other Pagan solitary practitioners can be difficult to define. Generally, a distinguishing feature is a sense of connection to the ancient Druids of the Classical sources, either as a perceived continued line of transmission or as a source of inspiration. As with other Druids, there is often a strong connection to Ancestors, however these might be defined; to landscape as a source of enchantment and connection to the numinous; to artistic creativity as a religious or spiritual activity in and of itself and to a concern with Awen as divine inspiration. A number of resources are available in order to help these practitioners to develop both their beliefs and their practice (e.g. J. V. der Hoeven 2019; J. van der Hoeven 2014; Ellison 2013).

This, then is Druidry as it stands at the end of the second decade of the 21st century. The major change of the last 50 years or so, partially as a result of the countercultural revolution and increasing cultural relativism of the 1960-70s, has been the transformation of Druidry from a broadly Neo-Platonist monotheistic mystery tradition into a hugely diverse, and mostly Pagan movement. Further evidence if any were needed of the ease with which the type of the ancient Druid can be remodelled almost infinitely to fit the zeitgeist of the time, be it philosopher, guru, warrior, mystic or scholar.

Chapter 4: What is it like to be a Modern British Druid?

'And with Thee Fade Away into the Forest Dim'[41]

It will come as no surprise that there is no straightforward answer to the question of the lived experience of Druidry since every Druid will experience their Druidry differently. It is also true that people engage with Druidry on different levels, and to different degrees. Some may have an interest in 'Celtic spirituality' (Bowman 1995) and attend occasional seasonal celebrations as an observer, while for others, Druidry may be a central, or even *the* central component of their sense of identity. Some may regard themselves primarily as Druids, whilst others might simultaneously hold a different religious identity, such as Christian, or Wiccan. As discussed above, there are a variety of different Spiritual Druid orders currently active in the UK, and each of them performs Druidry slightly differently and with a different 'flavour'. It is, however, very common for an individual to be a member of more than one order at the same time, with no sense of dissonance or contradiction, although their level of commitment and involvement may vary between orders. It is also unusual for there to be discord or disagreement between the orders, and they have frequently worked together to achieve a common goal (such as to re-establish access to Stonehenge at the Summer Solstice, as described above) or taken part in shared ritual. There are, however, certain commonalities around the experience of being a Druid that can helpfully be discussed here.

[41] Ode to a Nightingale. John Keats 1819

Who are the Druids?

Firstly, we could ask, who are the Druids of today?[42] Unlike the Universal Bond, and similar bodies that could be said to be ancestral to modern spiritual Druidry, the modern Druid is as likely to be a woman as a man, and leadership roles are regularly held by either. The majority of Druids are middle aged or older, most are white, and most are from the professional middle classes. Many Druids hail from what might loosely be called 'caring professions' such as nurses, doctors, teachers and therapists; or else from a creative background: musicians, artists, horticulturalists and writers. Many are also IT professionals, archaeologists or academics. The typical Druid in the UK is likely, but not certain, to lean to the political Left, and many are involved with activism in the causes of ecology or social justice. A small minority may belong to alternative communities such as eco-villages. Druidry tends to be open and inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals[43], and most find a warm welcome within the Druidic fold. In data gathered from my survey, of a sample size of 135 British Druids who responded, 65% were in the age bracket of 46-55, with only 9% under 35. 47% were male and 45% female, giving an even gender balance, (7% either did not answer this question or responded with 'queer', 'transgender' or 'intersex'.) All of the respondents were white, with 5 of 'mixed' ethnicity of Hispanic, Italian or Jewish. Interestingly, 6 specifically reported their ethnicity as 'Celtic', possibly reflecting an emotive connection to the idea of performed 'Celticness' that could be seen in what Druids reported as being fundamental to their Druidic identity, and in the phenomenon of the 'Cardiac Celt.' (Bowman 1995) The three largest groups in terms of career were healthcare (17%) education (15%) and Creative, including artists, craft workers, poets and writers. (15%)[44] It is worth noting that, in keeping with my

[42] The data for this somewhat sweeping description is taken partially from my own experience of Druidic events, partially from the demographics represented on various Druidic social media sites, and partially from data gathered by survey.

[43] For example, QOBOD is a community within OBOD that serves the needs of LGBTQ+ members.

[44] There is some duplication in these figures as some respondents had a therapeutic or creative business alongside another career.

own age, the majority of my social media activity takes place on Face Book, and this is the medium through which the survey was distributed. It is possible that had I also used Twitter, WhatsApp or TikTok, I would have accessed a different and younger demographic. My experience of Druidic festivals and camps, however, suggests that this is unlikely to be the case and that the majority of British Druids in the third decade of the Twenty First Century would recognise themselves in the description given above.

Creating Sacred Space: Druid Communal Ritual

What, then, might a Druidic event look like? Many Druids belong to a local Grove or Seed Group[45], which may meet socially, and also hold ceremonies to celebrate the seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year, and, often, the full moon, where the central concern of the ritual is likely to be with peace. Meetings are usually held outside where possible, and while some are restricted to members of the order concerned, many are open to any interested and respectful members of the general public.

Some Druids prefer to wear robes whilst performing ritual, but it is rarely mandatory or even expected. At the Summer and Winter Gatherings of OBOD a public ceremony takes place on the Tor at Glastonbury, possibly the largest and most public ceremonies of the ritual year for that order. Those who have a particular role are expected to be robed, but there is no requirement for others to be. Where Druids do wear robes, these are most usually white, but beyond this there is little conformity either between orders or individuals. The length and shape of the robe may vary, some are hooded while others are not, and many are decorated with Druidic symbols, animals and plants in a rich variety of styles and colours that are meaningful to the individual. These may be connected to the traditional colours connected with each grade, blue for Bards, green for Ovates and white/gold for Druids, but equally they might not

[45] A ‘Seed Group’ within OBOD can be formed by any member, while a Grove must contain at least two members at the Druid grade.

be. This is in marked contrast to the Universal Bond and similar orders, where there was a high degree of uniformity between individual members, with different grades and hierarchies clearly differentiated and recognisable.

The form of the ceremony itself, while there is significant variation between groups and for different occasions, has a fairly consistent pattern which shares similarities with the ritual of other Pagan groups and draws on Wiccan and Occult practice of the 19th and early 20th Centuries, which may itself have been influenced by Freemasonry. There are, however, elements that are specific to Druidic ritual and many of these derive more or less directly from the work of Iolo Morganwg.

Firstly, participants process to the site of the ritual. This may be an ancient site, such as a stone circle[46], or even a modern stone circle such as Sentry Circle near Northallerton in North Yorkshire, although any large enough outdoor space can be used, including the gardens of members. Often, there is a fire, or at least a candle in the centre. They will process around in a circle in a 'deosil' direction (with the sun, or clockwise) often pausing in the East to give some form of salutation to the sun. In some orders the start of the ceremony is declared by a Herald. Participants might then be invited to take 3 breaths with the land, the sea, and the sky. These are a recurring feature of Celtic cosmology, on which oaths were often sworn according to the Classical authors discussed at the beginning of the chapter, and they continue to feature prominently in the Medieval sources of Wales and Ireland (MacLeod 2018). For many, these reflect the celestial or heavenly realm, the earth on which humans live, and the Otherworld or Underworld, represented by the sea.[47] They may also be associated with Iolo's three circles of creation: *Abred*, the world of living things, *Gwynvyd*, the source from which all things spring, and *Ceugant*, where there is nothing but the Divine (Ithel 2007).

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[46] The emotional and affective connection of Druids to archaeological sites, particularly stone circles and burial mounds will be discussed more fully in Chapter 10.

[47] In Medieval Irish sources the place of the dead was often associated with an island in the west, and Manannan Mac Lir, a deity associated with the sea, also functions as a psychopomp.

Following this, peace is given to the four Quarters, (North, East, South and West, generally in that order.) This takes the form of one or more participants, sometimes pointing a sword, wand or staff, declaring 'May there be peace in the North' repeated for each direction. Finally, all present respond 'May there be peace throughout the whole world'.[48]

Following this, those present unite in saying the Druid Prayer which is taken from the writings of Iolo Morganwg. One thing that is interesting about this, and indicative of the wide variety of beliefs surrounding deity within Druidry, is that while Iolo's original prayer begins with 'Grant, O God, thy protection…', Druids typically use a wide range of appellations. Thus, while some may address God, others might prefer 'Gods', 'Goddess' or 'Spirit' or 'Great Spirit' or Shining Ones'. This leads to a bit of a muddle at the beginning of the prayer, which quickly settles back into unity, only to divide again at the end. The Druid prayer, given below, is used in most Druid ceremony and embodies concerns often espoused by modern Druids, such as social justice.

> Grant, O Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es), thy protection,
> and in protection, strength,
> And in strength, understanding,
> And in understanding, knowledge,
> And in knowledge, the knowledge of justice,
> And in the knowledge of justice, the love of it,
> And in the love of it, the love of all existences,
> and in the love of all existences,
> The love of Spirit/Great Spirit/God(s)/Goddess(es) and all goodness.

In many orders the word 'Awen' is then chanted between three and nine times, often in cascade. As discussed earlier, this practice appears to date to the ceremonies of the Universal Bond at Stonehenge in the 1950s. The next part of the ritual is common to many forms of Wicca and Paganism, a circle is cast by being traced in the air or on the ground often using a sword, staff or wand. The caster moves in a deosil (clockwise) direction. The circle is then

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[48] This takes a slightly different form in other orders, most notably the Anglesey Druid Order, where this is done in Welsh three times. In translation the first of these is: 'The truth against the world, is there peace?' which derives directly from Iolo Morganwg. The response each time is '*Heddwch*' which goes beyond the English noun 'peace' being closer in translation to 'May there be peace' or 'there will be peace'.

blessed with water and fire, which are carried around the circle and offered to each participant. A participant standing in each of the cardinal directions will then ‘call the Quarters’, invoking the characteristics traditionally associated with each direction and asking for their blessings on the ceremony. The spirits of the local place and sometimes the Ancestors may also be greeted and invited to be present during the ceremony. Some, but not all groups, may also address particular deities, most usually those associated with Celtic pantheons. The associations of the Quarters are generally the same as those from Wicca, with the North associated with the element of earth and so the physical world and the senses, the Midwinter and Midnight and, often, the dead. The East is associated with dawn, the spring, the element of air and the intellect; South is associated with midday, summer, the element of fire and ambition or passion, and the West is associated with twilight, the autumn, the element of water and the emotions. It may also, for some, be associated with the dead. Unlike Wicca, however, Druidry often associates particular animals with the Quarters, addressing the Bear of the starry heavens in the North; the Hawk of Dawn in the East; the Stag in the heat of the chase in the South and the Salmon of Wisdom[49] in the West. These associations are not universal, however, and some draw on Irish sources, such as *The Settling of the Manor of Tara* which is concerned with the geography of Ireland, and which gives different attributes to the directions. In this system the North represents battle or conflict, the East prosperity and hospitality, the South music and poetry, the West knowledge and scholarship and the centre of the circle stands for sovereignty, stability and wholeness (MacLeod 2018, 17). Other Druid groups do not use the association with the four directions or four elements at all, but rather use the three ‘realms’ of Land, Sea, and Sky.

Following this, the main business of the ritual begins. This could be a seasonal or full moon celebration, a life-rite, a meditation, or for some other purpose. The ceremony often closes with an *eisteddfod* during which those present are invited to tell a story, sing a song, recite a poem, or play an

[49] The salmon is associated with wisdom in a number of Medieval stories from Wales and Ireland from which Druids draw inspiration.

instrument. On some occasions, if this is not done as a part of the main ritual, then bread and mead/wine or apple juice may be passed around to all present as a blessing. This may be accompanied by the words. ‘May you never hunger’ and, ‘May you never thirst’. Participants may then join hands and the Druid Oath be recited:

> We swear by peace and love to stand, heart to heart and hand in hand.
> Mark, Oh Spirits, and hear us now, confirming this, our sacred vow.

This is repeated three times, and more ‘Awens’ may be chanted. In OBOD rituals, the ceremony is then drawn to a close with the words:

> It is the hour of recall. As the fire dies down let it be relit in our hearts.
> May memory hold what eye and ear have gained.

The circle is then uncast in the opposite direction to that in which it was cast (widdershins, or anti-clockwise) and the Quarters thanked and closed. The ceremony closes with the words,

> I declare this ceremony to be closed in the apparent world. May its inspiration continue within our beings.

In the UK, almost all Druidic ceremony takes place within a circle cast for the purpose. This is regarded as a sacred space, removed from the quotidian world. In some groups within both Druidry and wider Paganism the circle is seen as ‘between the worlds’ or ‘between past and future’. In Druid ritual, the sacred space is also often located within the ‘Three Realms’, with the sky above, the earth beneath and the sea surrounding the circle. The degree to which the circle is believed to be literally removed from the ‘ordinary’ world and located in an ‘other’ or ‘inner’ world will vary from Druid to Druid. For many, perhaps in contrast to Wicca, the circle is very much located in the physical world, being connected to the physical landscape in which it is set, as well as to the other beings in the area, human and otherwise. For many, the demarcation of the circle is not so much intended for protection, or in order to remove it from the apparent world, as to create a psychological ‘head space’

in which people can detach themselves from everyday concerns and worries and focus on the ceremony.

What is clear, regardless of the interpretation, is that the circle is intended to function as liminal space. The concept of the liminal was first suggested by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal book on Rites of Passage (Van Gennep 1904). He proposed that many rituals involving a change of status involved three stages: a period of separation; a liminal 'in between' period and a period of reintegration to society with a changed status. The 'liminal' is taken from the Latin *limen*. Meaning a threshold. The liminal phase was further explored and developed by Victor Turner, who argued that the phase is defined by being in the condition of being neither one thing or the other, 'betwixt and between' as he puts it (Turner 1967). The idea has since been extended in popular usage to refer to any occasion or space that can be seen as 'neither one thing nor another' out of step with the quotidian, and in which transformation can take place. As has been mentioned previously, many Druids are well educated, and not infrequently have an interest in the anthropology of religion, as applied to the renaissance of Paganism in the 20th Century. Whilst their reading is sometimes out of step with modern research, Pagans often being more familiar with anthropological works of the early to mid-20th Century, many are familiar with at least the broad ideas arising from the works of Van Gennep and Turner, and so self-consciously use the language of liminality to describe what they are doing when they create ritual sacred space, for example through the casting of a circle. Jung, another scholar with whom many Pagans are familiar, uses a metaphor in which many Druids would recognise the ritual circle when he refers to a therapy session in terms of a 'temenos, a magic circle, a vessel in which the transformation inherent in the patient's condition would be allowed to take place.' (Andrews and Roberts 2015). It is clear that for many Druids, the ritual circle represents a liminal time and space in which the extraordinary is to be expected, and the usual rules, particularly with regard to interaction with the 'other' are suspended or re-written.

Following the end of the ceremony, participants usually spend some time socially, eating and drinking, and ‘grounding’ themselves back in the mundane world. This account is based on the form most often used in OBOD, while there are some variations between the various orders, this gives a good account of the general shape of a typical Druidic ceremony.

Solitary Druids

This, then, is the common form taken by a grove meeting of local Druids. Many, however, choose not to attend such events, or do not have one in their area. Many Druids are solitary practitioners and for these, their central experience of Druidry may be through the correspondence courses of OBOD or BDO, through reading other books on the subject, and/or through their own direct experience of nature and creativity. Some practise rituals alone or with their families, and the ritual booklets which OBOD produce for the seasonal festivals also contain a version intended to be performed alone. Some do not carry out traditional rituals involving the casting of a circle but may keep an altar in their home at which they might light candles, burn incense and offer various forms of worship. Many do not practise specific rituals at all but see walking in and engaging with nature as their primary religious or spiritual practice. For many solitary practitioners, as for others, online communities have become increasingly important over the last decade or so.

Temporary Tribal Zones: Camps, Festivals and Gatherings:

In addition to their personal practices or activities with a local Grove, many also attend national camps or festivals. These may be run by particular orders (such as the White Horse Camps which were, for many years, run by OBOD) or might be more generic, such as the annual Druid Camp in Gloucestershire. Even where camps are run by a specific Druid order, they tend to be open to all Druids and usually to others with a genuine and respectful interest. BDO camps often take place around the seasonal festivals and typically include a ‘closed’ period of two or three days during which people are expected not to

arrive or leave so that ‘deeper work’ can be done, involving periods of focused meditation or ritual drama. OBOD also holds the Summer and Winter Gatherings each year in Glastonbury, usually a week before the solstices. While guests who are not members may be able to buy tickets in some years, attendance is restricted to members if numbers are tight, as they were due to be in 2020 when a new Chosen Chief was to be invested (in the event, the Gathering had to be cancelled because of the Covid 19 Pandemic and the investiture was held online.) These events generally consist of workshops or teaching on topics of interest to attendees including Bardic skills such as music and poetry, and often craft classes as well, this being seen as an expression of *Awen* as creative imagination. There will also be ritual and ceremony on a larger scale than is usually possible in quotidian life; sometimes at sites of significance such as Stonehenge, Avebury and Glastonbury Tor. Musical performances are common and there is often a festival atmosphere. All of these events are ticketed and have an entry fee and often a camping cost element.

In his discussion of Druid festivals and camps, Letcher suggests that it is in such spaces that ‘Druidry’ is created for many modern practitioners: ‘It is through these gatherings, more than through the correspondence courses, that the sense of a Druidic identity is created; it is where vernacular Druidry emerges.’ (Letcher 2001, 45). Events such as these could be understood in terms of liminal space-time, in which people spend time away from the quotidian in ways that allow them to view both their ‘everyday’ selves and their assumptions about the world from a distance that allows for the possibility of change. Letcher mentions that such occasions may be deeply emotional as people ‘come out’ as Pagan for the first time, meet people they would not usually come into contact with, and perhaps even experience camping and outdoor life in a way that they have not done before. Some people even meet their life partners at such events. Such camps ‘enable or encourage the sort of experimentation with identity characteristic of the neo-tribe,[50] and more

[50] A full discussion of the idea of the ‘neo-tribe’ in respect of Druidry is given on p 125-128.

specifically of alternative spiritualities.' And allow people to 'engage in dialogues with other ways of being and free themselves, if only temporarily, from established patterns.' (Letcher 2001, 135, 141).

It could, however, be questioned whether such events are truly liminal. Turner himself argued that truly liminal states are possible only in traditional societies. Post-Industrial Western societies rather experience 'liminoid' events that are more properly categorised as 'leisure', a concept that is unique to the Industrialised West. Such events, which might include music festivals, sporting events and even holidays, do indeed represent time spent outside the societal norm, but differ from liminal times and spaces in that they do not involve a change in status, and are not truly transformational of either individuals or society (Turner 1974). The question then, is one of the extent to which Druid camps and large scale gatherings could be said to be genuinely transformative. While sporting events or music festivals might succeed in creating a feeling of communitas (Turner 1996, 132), they differ from Druidic festivals in that they lack a spiritual and ritual component. Druid gatherings engage with questions of identity and ontology through discussion and through performative ritual. This allows the potential for a truly transformative element. Douglas Ezzy has made a study of an Australian Pagan festival which deliberately set out to be uncomfortable and provocative in the ways in which it used ritual to force participants to engage with issues relating to both their sexuality and their mortality. Through confrontation of their fears and a direct engagement with issues that are often avoided in 'normal' society, many reported that they had experienced genuine transformation that impacted their lives and their sense of identity long after the end of the camp (Ezzy 2014). While British Druid gatherings are generally (although not always) less provocative than this, the intensive engagement with ceremony and, often, ritual drama, can have an equally transformative effect, arguably making such events more complex than simple 'leisure' activities. Also, there is often a strong ecological element involved in the teaching and ritualising, which in some cases leads to Druids engaging in 'Green' politics or environmental protest and campaigning, meaning that the 'ripple' effect spreading out from such events could be seen to have, over time and even if only on a small

scale, a transformative effect within wider society. For these reasons, I would suggest that it would not be unreasonable to see these events as genuinely liminal.

Letcher uses the term ‘heterotopic’ to describe Druidic gatherings (Letcher 2001, 131). ‘Heterotopia’ is a word first used by Foucault to describe places that are ‘other’ to the norm. They are disturbing, countercultural and transformative (Foucault 2001). To Foucault such places are often those to which the ‘undesirable’ elements of normal society are consigned; places such as prisons and brothels. It is not in quite this sense that Letcher uses the term, but more in the sense of spaces that are ‘dangerous’ to established society in that they allow free thinking that is unconstrained, or at least less constrained by societal norms. This is, I think, less true now than it was when Letcher’s research was carried out in the late 90s; many of the same people still attend the events, but they are now older, and often more resigned to conventional lifestyles. However, there is still a strong current of radical politics, counter cultural thinking and a refusal to accept the norms of Neoliberal Capitalism, which means that the term heterotopic continues to be appropriate. Letcher further associates the idea of the heterotopic with Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). These are times and spaces outside of the quotidian that are, by their very nature, acts of rebellion against the status quo. Bey also refers to them as ‘Pirate Utopias’. They represent times and spaces of ‘peak experience’ and are, by their very nature, transient and temporary, outside the norms and rules of society. Bey, an anarchist philosopher, suggests that change is brought about not by revolution, which historically always fails in that a repressive ‘state’ is restored, but by a series of TAZs in which the order can be temporarily disrupted and new ways of being experimented and ‘played’ with, leading to genuine and lasting transformations in individuals which can, in turn, seep into wider society (Bey 2003). Letcher does not fully adopt the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone, arguing that Druid gatherings could not be described as ‘autonomous’ in any meaningful sense, since they are dependent on wider society for their existence, in terms of catering, electricity and other amenities. Rather he suggests that a Druid Camp could be

described in terms of a Temporary Tribal Zone, (TTZ). Thus, a single heterotopic space may contain one or more TTZs, which are ordered according to the rules and conventions of the particular neo-tribe. Within a Druid Camp there might be fewer separate TTZs than might be at, for example, a music festival, however, there might be a number of different orders present, each with a slightly different habitus. In addition, the leaders or organisers; the performing musicians, workshop leaders, caterers and security staff (often referred to collectively at Pagan events as 'The Dagda') may each constitute a separate TTZ. The Camp then becomes a 'temporary spatial arrangement of a neo-tribe or neo-tribes, the 'temporary tribal zone' within the heterotopic spaces that large gatherings provide.' (Letcher 2001, 131). In this environment, he argues, strong emotional bonds and a neo-tribal identity are formed.

Can Cyber Space be Sacred Space?

In a typical summer, then, many British Druids would be attending various camps, gatherings, festivals and workshops; renewing and forging friendships and 'tribal' connections and taking part in rituals, discussion groups and bardic performances. The summer of 2020, however, was far from a typical summer. From March the UK, along with much of the rest of the world, was in a greater or lesser degree of lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This meant that all the events that were due to take place were either cancelled or moved online. In some ways Druids, along with other religious communities, could be said to be lucky that the pandemic happened at a time when the technology was such that it was possible to maintain a ritual and community life online; indeed, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, encouraging the rapid development and improvement of social media platforms and conference technology that maintains vital ties. Pagans, including Druids, are often very technically adept, and there were many online communities even before the onset of the pandemic. There are dozens of Facebook pages and groups devoted to various aspects of Druidry, as well as private groups for the members of various orders. For many, including those who prefer to practise alone, and those who live in areas where there are not many other Druids to connect

with, these groups are their main form of community making, and friendships are formed, often across the world. In this way Druidry has become a more genuinely international community than had previously been possible.
During the summer of 2020, all of this, of course, continued, however a largely new phenomenon of online events also developed, seemingly overnight. For people such as myself, living in the Northeast of England where Druidic events have always been sparse; and with limited financial resources for travel and accommodation, this had the rather counterintuitive effect that I actually attended many more events than I would ordinarily have been able to. For me, this began at Beltane (1st May) the traditional beginning of summer. Every year, a fire festival is held at the hill of Uisneach in Ireland, where a beacon is lit on a hill to celebrate Bealtaine (Beltane). Traditionally people travel from all over the world to be present at the festival, but as this was not possible, the lighting of the fire was instead livestreamed on the Uisneach Facebook page.[51] While this was obviously a very different experience to being there in person, it did make it possible for far more people to attend than would usually have been able to make the journey to Ireland; and as a drone was used to give a bird's eye view of the beacon, it could be said that visitors had a greater than usual sense of perspective on the event. For me personally, as one of the many who would not usually have been able to attend the event in person, there was also a great feeling of community, and of being a part of something greater than myself. This sense of community within Druidry (and Paganism more widely) was maintained through much of the lockdown in a number of ways. One of the more notable is the livestream Facebook concerts held every few weeks by Damh the Bard[52], which drew audiences of up to 1,300. While it is obviously not possible to see the other attendees, the 'chat' function fosters a genuine sense of community and togetherness that has been a major source of comfort for many. Since it draws a truly international audience, it also means that people who would not

[51] https://www.facebook.com/hillofuisneach

[52] Damh the Bard is a well-known musician within the Druidic and Pagan community having released several CDs, including retellings of the Mabinogi. He is also the current Pendragon of OBOD. https://www.paganmusic.co.uk

normally meet in person, unless very occasionally at major Druid gatherings, have the chance to interact. It is not uncommon to see people 'singing along' in the chat function, and Damh encourages this sense of togetherness, by inviting participants to imagine that they are all together in a field or marquee, and to join or raise their hands at appropriate moments. There have even been T shirts produced for the 'Lockdown Tour 2020' and another for 2021, engendering, once again, a sense of communitas and of having been a part of something special. There were also many online talks, story-telling events and conferences online within Druidry and the 'Druid-adjacent' communities during the summer, including the Women in Druidry online conference[53]. As this would usually have been held in America, moving it to an online format using Zoom enabled a far broader range of people to attend than would ordinarily have been the case, as well as facilitating a large number of speakers from the UK.

As well as more conventional events such as these, many Druids also experimented with various ways of conducting ritual online. The local Grove that I would usually attend did this during the first lockdown by uploading separate short videos to the members' Facebook page to mark the seasonal festivals. There was a variety of content including members reading poetry and playing instruments as well as the usual leader of the group conducting the ritual in his garden filmed by his wife. This was not entirely successful as there were technical issues uploading many of the videos so that they did not appear at the advertised time, causing a degree of stress and interrupting the flow of the event, and meaning that not everyone could watch at the same time as was the original intention. Having said this, it did allow the community to come together on the same evening as usual, and again, since I would usually have to travel for over an hour each way to attend these events, the online aspect allowed me to 'be there' when I would not usually have been able to do so. Other Groves used different tactics. For example, the *Anderida Gorsedd*, led by Damh the Bard and his wife, Cerri Lee, encouraged members

[53] http://ynysafallon.com/women-in-druidry-conference-2020

to perform the ritual at the same time, having adapted it to be more easily carried out by individuals. Members then posted photos of what they had done to the members' Facebook page.

As the pandemic restrictions extended beyond initial expectations, however, there was a move towards conducting more interactive rituals using platforms such as Zoom, allowing participants to see and speak to each other in real time. My own first experience of such a ritual came at Samhain of 2020, when I took part in an online ceremony using the OBOD liturgy for the Samhain ritual with the Grove of the Aether. This Grove was formed during lock down with the express purpose of taking advantage of the newly developed technology to allow people who do not live close to other Druid groups, as well as those who could not leave their houses due to the Covid restrictions to take part in group ritual. Members may belong to any Druid order or none, so long as they are in sympathy with the aims and values of the Grove; and they come from all over the world, forming what may well be one of the first international Druid Groves. Whilst it was formed as a direct consequence of the global lockdown and the consequent developments in communication technology, there are no plans to wind the group down and the intention is that it will continue to allow Druids who would not otherwise be able to do so easily to take part in group ritual.

The format of the ritual was that everyone joined with camera and audio to say hello (there were around 22 participants at the ritual I attended) and then those who were not taking an active part muted themselves and turned off their cameras in order to reduce distractions and free up band width. Participants had been invited to bring wine, bread, salt and honey.[54] Roles had been assigned in advance to different members, so that different people called each of the Quarters, and gave peace to the Quarters. When someone was speaking, their face filled the screen. At the appropriate time, participants

[54] I will be discussing elements of the rituals described here that are specific to Samhain, and so to Druidic concepts of death and Ancestry chapter 8. Here I am specifically concerned with the format of online ritual and its connection to ideas such as sacred space.

were invited to eat and drink the offerings they had brought, and when the *Awens* were chanted, everyone was unmuted, and a cascading sequence of three *Awens* was chanted by all present. This was a very different experience to being physically together, particularly with the chanting, as online platforms are not good at broadcasting several voices at once; however, the feeling of chanting together was a very powerful one, and it served to enhance the experience of the ceremony. Following the closing of the ceremony, everyone's camera was turned back on and a traditional *eisteddfod* was held, with participants volunteering to perform a piece of music, or a poem. Finally, there was a short period of chat before the meeting was ended, itself a very alien feeling as usually following a ceremony people will hang around chatting for quite a while, and drift away over a period of time, so the somewhat abrupt ending of the meeting when the screen goes blank can feel like quite a shock.

The circle was cast and uncast by a participant using a sword, who passed it around himself. It is also worthy of note, that there was no correlation between the people calling each of the Quarters and their geographical location. (That is, the person who called the North was not necessarily the most northern person there. Also, one of the Quarters was called by someone participating from America.) This means that the 'circle' that was cast had no existence in 'real' space but existed purely in 'cyberspace' and in the minds and imaginations of those 'present'. This idea of imagined 'space' in the context of online ceremony is also described by Damh the Bard in his blog post *A Different Kind of Samhain* in which he describes the first time the Anderida Gorsedd used Zoom to hold a ritual (Smith 2020). He explains how he asked people to close their eyes and imagine themselves in their usual ritual setting. When he cast the circle, he asked them to 'feel' him walking behind them with the sword, and to imagine and describe the view towards each of the Quarters as they were called. In this way, there was a deliberate attempt to connect those present, in imagination at least, to the physical space of the usual ritual site beneath the Long Man of Wilmington. The connection to this particular ritual space may be particularly important since it is an established ancient

and magical space in its own right.[55] In these ways I would argue that the ritual space created in cyber space during online rituals using Zoom and other similar platforms constitutes a heterotopic space in the same way as the physical spaces created during face-to-face rituals and in festival areas discussed above. In some cases, such spaces could even be said to constitute a TTZ in that the participants will have ritual tools or altars in their rooms or backgrounds that are familiar to the neo-tribe and modes of speech and 'tribal' conventions are used that cumulatively serve to designate the virtual area as tribal space.

Sometimes, the 'othering' of online space goes even further than the invitation to imagine a known physical space. In June of 2020, Philip Carr-Gomm stepped down as Chosen Chief of OBOD after 35 years, and a new Chosen Chief, Eimear Burke was invested. The intention was to have a ceremony of investiture at the OBOD Summer Gathering in 2020 which was to be held in Glastonbury. Obviously, this had to be cancelled. The decision was made to go ahead with the investiture ceremony as an online event. The format chosen was a live Facebook streaming, in audio only, of a pre-recorded ceremony involving the outgoing and incoming Chosen Chiefs, the Scribe and the Pendragon of OBOD. While the recording remains available, and is embedded in the OBOD website[56], the intention was for all members who were able to tune in and so 'be present' at the same time. Members were invited to prepare as they usually would for meditation or practice, and to close their eyes during the ceremony and so to imagine themselves meeting with other members from across the world in an 'Inner Grove'. The Inner Grove as a meditative tool is well established within OBOD and is often used in the weekly 'Tea with a Druid' online meditations led by Philip Carr-Gomm[57].

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[55] While the actual age of the Long Man is contested, there is a sense in which this is irrelevant to the affective sense of connection to a re-imagined past that is felt by many who visit the site.

[56] The recording of the ceremony can be accessed here: https://druidry.org/people/eimear-burke

[57] The Tea with a Druid You Tube channel can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=tea+with+a+druid

Hence the ‘Inner Grove’ as a tool for meditation is a practice with which many OBOD Druids are familiar and comfortable. The investiture ceremony, therefore, operated on one level as an online ritual, and on another as a collective meditation designed to bring the members together in a sacred space conceptualised as an ‘Inner Grove,’ which for many is conceived as a ‘place’ accessible to all OBOD Druids and having at least as much reality as the apparent and material world. Members were invited to meet and witness the transfer of leadership, which took place in a space that was both ‘virtual’ in the sense of occurring online, and liminal in the sense of being outside of everyday time and space, existing, for many, in an inner plane that is truly ‘Other’. The ceremony took place using the usual Druidic format, with those ‘present’ invited to witness the casting of the circle and to join in with the Druid Prayer and Oath, and with the chanting of the *Awens*. It could be argued that this format, which has a strong esoteric component, holds more emotional significance than the physical ceremony would have had, had it been able to go ahead. It also has more permanence in the sense that it remains accessible online as a resource to which members can return, and which will become a part of the history of the Order.

It can be seen then, that during the pandemic, the Druid, as well as the wider Pagan communities innovated in imaginative and creative ways in order to continue to perform ritual online. The extent to which this was successful could be debated. In one sense, the online rituals allowed communities to continue to meet, so reducing loneliness and isolation. They also allowed far larger and more geographically dispersed groups to meet, allowing for international conferences and rituals. In one sense, rituals became more inclusive as the time and expense of travelling to a physical site were dispensed with, as well as potential accessibility issues in sites that are uneven or difficult to reach. Conversely, however, the online rituals actually reduced accessibility for some others who did not have the resources or technical ability to access them. Online rituals also, occasionally proved difficult for those who were sight or hearing impaired. In many ways, the online rituals worked well to create a sense of shared sacred space, and for

activities such as meditation, guided visualisation, and liturgical ritual. However, they worked less well for the more embodied elements such as drumming, singing or chanting. Cascading *Awens* do not work well online as the technology is designed to project a single voice or sound at a time. Sensory elements that also form an important part of the 'embodied knowing' that is central to the experience of ritual (Scrutton 2018) are also missing from virtual events. For example, feeling the heat of the fire, hearing the noise of the wind or local wildlife, smelling the incense, and tasting mead or other food or drink are intrinsic parts of most Druid ceremonies and are, of necessity, missing from the online experience.

> It is not just the translation of 3d physicality to 2d screen communication that play a part in the experience of disappointment in zoom for ritual as opposed to meditation and learning etc. The psychical chemistry of being present, in all sensual modes plays a big part, with people reporting missing varied aspects of the physical closeness of a circle. Perhaps participants also miss the subconscious triggers they have internalised to the smells and feel of a group ritual, a tribal feel of belonging and familiarity with both the people and the magic (Harrington 2021).

Furthermore, much Druidic ritual is highly performative and theatrical. Participants take on the role of deities for different seasonal rites; there is a lot of movement within and around the Circle, with 'gateways' often being formed in a certain direction for people to pass through. Tokens are given to participants to represent the time of year, such as mistletoe at the Winter Solstice or the symbolic action of planting, watering and blessing a seed at the Spring Equinox. In some ceremonies, there is a moment of intimate and personal communication between each person present and a Druid who represents or embodies (depending on personal interpretation) a divinity. This sense of intimacy and immediate embodied involvement is impossible to replicate virtually and for many, this is a fatal flaw in online ritual.

Another question that Pagans could usefully ask about ritual conducted online is 'Does it work?' What it means for a ritual to 'work' will vary from person to person and from group to group. Within Wicca and Ceremonial Magic, the concept of the *egregore* is widespread. An *egregore* is a spiritual construct

arising from a group project or mind. For many, the *egregore* is a conscious being with agency and the power to bring about a desired effect, and there has been some discussion among practitioners as to whether an *egregore* can be created by a group working online. The *egregore* is an idea that is less common in Druidry, although it is not absent; however, much Druid ritual is concerned with contacting non-human intelligences, be they Ancestors, local spirits or wights, or gods and deities. The question could therefore be raised as to whether these connections can be effectively made online. Ritual and, for some, magic, are constructed using the body, the spirit and the mind. The mind is certainly present in online rituals but the extent to which body and spirit are involved could be, and no doubt will be debated. To some extent the effectiveness of online ritual will be decided by its results: does a ritual designed to effect healing, physical or mental, or to protect an area of landscape from the threat of development, or to influence a decision of government have the desired effect? It is far too early for a consensus on questions such as these to have been reached within Pagan communities and debate is likely to be ongoing in the coming months and years. Certainly, no questions have been raised within OBOD over the legitimacy of Eimear Burke's initiation as Chosen Chief because it happened in virtual online space.

There is a further area of concern for some Pagans and Druids in the question of how far the internet itself could be considered to be an *egregore*. Druidry is concerned, to a large extent, with forming networks of relationships between beings. This is precisely what the internet does, and therefore to some extent it can, for some, be understood as having sentience and agency in its own right. The consequences of online ritual must be considered in this context. Does a being that is invited to an online ritual, be it god, Ancestor or wight, continue to inhabit cyberspace once the ritual has ended and what might the consequences of this be? Alternatively, can an online ritual group create an *egregore*, and if so, does this also exist online? For some these possibilities are enough to dissuade them from undertaking ritual, as opposed to more social forms of interaction online. This may lead, in time, to new protocols and

forms of ritual protection being developed in order to interact with what is, to some, a new form of spiritual being. What can be said with certainty is that the necessary changes of the pandemic have given Pagans a new magical and ritual tool, which will be invaluable for some and dismissed as folly by others.

For Letcher, writing in 2001, modern Druidry is performed and constructed in physical heterotopic space, such as camps and festivals (Letcher 2001, 45). While there is a sense in which this remains true, it is also the case in a world emerging from a pandemic that has led to a surge in technology and a huge increase in online ritual and community that Druidry, perhaps increasingly, will be performed and constructed in heterotopic spaces that exist only online. In many ways, the online rituals that have developed over the summer have served to conflate the ideas of online 'cyberspace' with liminal 'inner' space that could be equated for many with the Otherworld, or an alternative plane of reality, which is of great importance in many Paganisms as well as to many Druids (Greenwood 2000).[58] Whilst there is a sense in which this has been true for Pagans since the development of the internet, the changes in technology and the increased familiarity with using social media platforms to create ritual space during the Covid pandemic represent a paradigm shift in the concept of sacred and ritual space, and indeed, in the concept of the Otherworld and what it means to be 'between the worlds' that merits significant future research.

It remains to be seen to what extent the huge surge towards online ritual will continue to influence the Pagan and Druid world in the years and decades following the pandemic. The technology enabling such events will continue to develop, although perhaps not at quite such a bewildering speed. The Covid virus will remain a part of everyday life for decades to come, and for some people it will be a long time before they feel confident again in a crowd, or sharing food in a ritual, if, indeed, they ever do. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that what it means to engage in Druidry will be

[58] Druids use many names for this concept, including Annwn, Tir Na Nog and the Summer Lands, as well as the Otherworld, but the concept remains important.

permanently changed by the events of 2020 and 2021. This was the subject of an (online) discussion hosted by the Pagan Phoenix South West conference, usually held near Bude in Cornwall, but, like everything else, moved online in March of 2021. The conference organisers hosted a number of Zoom panels, which were then uploaded to You Tube. One of these was a discussion about the future of ritual in a post-pandemic world and featured well known Druids Damh the Bard, Cerri Lee, Penny Billington and Kristoffer Hughes. One of the issues to be raised was that of inclusion. As discussed above, many people have been able to attend rituals and events online that would usually have been impossible for them due to cost or distance. Penny Billington pointed out that it would be irresponsible, if not immoral of the Druidic community to return to a situation where people who had, briefly, been included were once again marginalised. This meant, she thought, a way of ensuring events that were either entirely online, as well as face to face events; or events that were a mixture of face to face and live. There was also a discussion about the effectiveness and limitations of online ritual, with the interesting point being made that for a Grove that usually uses a particular sacred space for ritual (such as the Long Man of Wilmington) there is a connection between the Grove and that site and its spirits. Where ritual is to be online, it was suggested that participants visit the site beforehand (separately rather than together) to reinforce that connection, and to explain to the land what was going on. In this way, so far as possible, the connection can be maintained. There was an acknowledgement that those responsible for organising rituals would need to be aware that people will feel safe at different times with some very eager to get back to the full physicality of hugging, holding hands and sharing food, while others will still be nervous of meeting in groups for a long time. Rituals would therefore need to be organised sensitively and with a care not to exclude those who do not feel comfortable. Damh the Bard suggested that changes might be necessary for some time to come, perhaps dispensing with elements such as holding hands or passing round a drinking horn or chalice, and that perhaps new elements could be added such as people bringing their own picnic food so that communal eating was still an option. There was also an awareness that there

would be an impact on the *eisteddfod* that typically followed Druid ritual, as people might not be comfortable with singing or chanting together in a close group, even outdoors. Time will tell how far reaching and long lasting such changes might be. As Damh the Bard pointed out, from an animist perspective shared by many Druids, the virus is a living being that is now a permanent part of the network of relationships that Druids form with the wider than human world, and Druids must find ways to live alongside it (Pagan Phoenix 2021).

Chapter 5: Is Druidry a Religion?

'The Old Gods they are Coming Back'[59]

Before this question can be addressed, attention should be drawn to a paradox that complicates and clouds the issue. As I will discuss in detail below (p 93ff), Druidry has been officially demonstrated to be a religion by TDN, and legally recognised as such by the Charity Commission. OBOD, on the other hand, deliberately distances itself from the language of religion (although it does acknowledge that same Druids see Druidry as religion). OBOD's website states it to be a 'Nature Spirituality' and a mystery school consisting of a world-wide community of those who 'wish to follow a magical and spiritual way.'[60] The wide and ecumenical membership of OBOD depends to a large extent on this stance. These two positions cannot be satisfactorily reconciled and therefore, opinions within Druidry on the extent to which it can be described as a religion are polarised, with different Druid groups existing along a spectrum. This must be remembered when we approach the complex and nuanced relationship between Druidry and the language of religion. Religion itself is, of course, an idea that is far from being straightforward. The question of how religion is best defined and understood is, therefore, where we must begin.

What is Religion?

Various attempts have been made over the years to define religion in a way that can accommodate the almost infinite variety of 'things that look like religion'. Tylor's model of 'belief in spiritual beings' is clearly not applicable in all cases (Some forms of Theravada Buddhism being an oft cited example).[61]

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[59] From *Taliesin's Song*, Words and Music by Damh the Bard. Available at https://www.paganmusic.co.uk/taliesins-song/

[60] https://druidry.org Accessed 28/9/23.

[61] While many forms of Buddhism, particularly but not exclusively Mahayana, acknowledge spiritual beings and even deities in some form or other, this is not universal, nor is it necessary in order to acknowledge the key teachings of the Buddha. Many forms of Western

Furthermore, there are examples of people who believe in 'spiritual beings' including ghosts and fairies outside of any system that would normally be acknowledged as religion. However, OBOD itself espouses a Tylerian understanding of religion, since its claim to be a spirituality rather than a religion is based, in part, on its assertion that there is no necessity to believe in any kind of supernatural being in order to be a Druid. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) defined religion less in terms of individual belief, and more in terms of communal belonging and the strengthening of community identity through ritual and symbolic means. His definition of religion emphasised practice as much as it did belief. According to Durkheim, religion is:

> a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden…which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all who adhere to them (Durkheim 2008, 62).

Acknowledging that a short, simple definition is doomed to fail in the face of the sheer variety of religious activity in the world, Ninian Smart (1927-2001) proposed seven key dimensions of religion (Smart 1974).

1. Practical and Ritual
2. Emotional and Experiential
3. Narrative
4. Doctrinal and Philosophical
5. Ethical and Legal
6. Social and Institutional
7. Material

This definition is useful in that it moves further away from belief in a series of cognitive propositions as being the defining characteristic of religion and acknowledges the emotional, narrative and embodied aspects of religion as

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Buddhism dispense with any supernatural dimension at all and yet are still recognised as religion.

being at least as important. This is a model of religion that is a good fit for what we encounter in Druidry.

One further traditional definition of religion is worth considering. Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) who defines religion thus:

> Religion is (1) a system of symbols, which (2) acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973).

This definition is particularly helpful in that it moves away completely from the centrality of belief and roots itself in the idea of a lived experience in which symbolic systems function within a particular society in a way that is meaningful and emotionally engaging (Hunter 2020b, 3). However, the fact that it could, accurately, be applied to political schools as well as to religions suggests that it fails to get to the heart of what it is that gives religion its unique identity. Furthermore, points 4 and 5 suggest that religion is exclusivist in that to its followers a particular religion is the only one that seems credible. While this may be true for some followers of some religions, it is not universal and it is most certainly not applicable to Druidry. The idea that Druidry is the only valid spiritual path, or that there is only one correct way to be a Druid would be ridiculous to the majority of Druids.

Many modern scholars of religion are building on the idea of religion as a lived activity rather than as a belief system. The claim is starting to be made that belief is not a universally defining characteristic of religion and that the idea that it is, is due to a mistaken assumption that all religions to some extent resemble Christianity.[62] This is an issue that has arisen because the scholars responsible for the traditional definitions of religion were, as are we all, products of their time, who saw the world in terms of the dualism espoused by the Protestant Christianity that shaped their world. Because the Western

[62] As we have seen this assumption exists widely in society and is foundational to the definition of ‘Religion’ used by the Charity Commission.

world thought in terms of matter and spirit, they naturally assumed that this was the case globally. This had the unfortunate effect that anything the West encountered in its colonial endeavours that did not fit its own view of religion[63] tended to be categorised as 'primitive superstition' with deep reaching implications. In addition, Harvey (2013) suggests that we need to move away from a Post-Enlightenment concern with internalisation of religion as personal and private belief, and to engage with it as a social activity. Religion, Harvey suggests, is, at its most basic level, the process of living in relationship with the 'others', human and otherwise, with whom one shares one's environment, and whom one might be required to eat, or to eat with. He suggests, in fact that religion might have its origins in a sort of ritualised 'interspecies etiquette' (2013, 2). Harvey suggests that one of the biggest errors that scholars have traditionally made when defining what religion is, is over the issue of what is 'not religion'. In other words, what Durkheim classified as 'profane'. This is a distinction that is not universal. Harvey suggests that religion is about bodies, it is about the full engagement of the senses; for many it is about the whole of living, encompassing cooking, eating, washing, sex and the treatment of strangers. Most importantly it is performed.

Likewise, Ezzy (2014) offers a definition of religion based on what people do, rather than what they believe.

> Religion is a set of ritual practices that engage symbolic resources to provide etiquette for relationships and an emotional and cognitive sense of self-worth and purpose (2014, 22).

Both Harvey and Ezzy could be criticised on the same grounds as Geertz, that they fail to really get to the heart of what 'religion' actually is, since they could accurately be applied to things that we do not generally categorise as 'religion'. Harvey's definition could be applied to ecological ideologies, and Ezzy's to any form of formal etiquette or ceremonial such as that found in a royal court. However, both go beyond this to suggest that religion involves a

[63] Generally meaning something that had a God or gods, sacred writings and a clearly defined set of beliefs, teachings and ethics.

feeling of meaning and connection that are associated with something greater than oneself, whether or not this is conceived of as 'supernatural'. Religion, according to Ezzy, is that which allows a person to live 'soulfully', that is to say a life that is experienced as 'worthwhile and emotionally satisfying.' This soulful living is accessed in three ways: through relationships, which, as we have seen, may be with other human beings but need not be; through ritual, the embodied and sensual experience of dance, acting and ritual performance and finally through symbolic resources and shared cultural understandings. The latter may include story and mythology (2014, 19–20). Ezzy uses the term 'living soulfully' as opposed to 'meaning making' as the former is more concerned with embodied, performative life and less with inner cognition or philosophy, which, he suggests, are not fundamental to most peoples' actual experience of religion.

Mallory Nye (2000) proposes that the study of religion must now move into a 'post religionism', since the idea that religions can be observed as monolithic and bounded entities to which an individual does or does not belong is clearly ridiculous. As Harvey points out, religious identity is neither fixed nor binary. Religion, like culture, Nye suggests, has no abstract reality separate from how people perform it. It is not a 'concept' but a human activity. Thus, as with culture, 'religion 'cannot be observed or analysed other than through manifestation. Being embodied in persons, in actions, discourses and particular contexts (Lambek 1995, 275). Because of this, Nye suggests, it is more helpful to think of religion not as a noun but as a verb. The scholar of religion does not primarily study religions; rather he or she studies people who are 'doing' or performing religion within a particular place, time and context. In other words, they are 'religioning'.

> If we talk of religioning rather than religion, the result is a completely different set of expectations. Religioning is not a thing, with an essence, to be defined and explained. Religioning is a form of practice, like other cultural practices, that is done and performed by actors with their own agency…who have their own particular ways of making their religiosities manifest…The conceptualization of religioning, therefore, is intended to focus scholarly attention on the ways in which religious identities, manifestations and power relations are produced through practice and through performance (Nye 2000, 467–68).

This definition is not without its problems. While it is true that religion is manifested, and thus available to study primarily through the activities of its adherents, it is also true that it is ideas, values and beliefs that give rise to those activities so that the two are not easily separated from each other, and to say that there is no substantive reality underlying the actions of religious groups is clearly untrue. However, Nye's approach does give us a helpful tool for the study of Druidry since there is far more uniformity and cohesion to be seen in what Druids do than in what they believe.

It is apparent, then, that ideas about what constitutes a religion, or, indeed, 'religion' have changed significantly over the course of the last 150 years. Assumptions based on colonial attitudes arising out of the tendency of Post Enlightenment Protestant Christianity to perceive all religions as having been made in its own image are beginning to change. Scholarship is increasingly understanding religion as being rooted not so much in propositional belief as in embodied and connected activities and ritual. Furthermore, religion in Britain is no longer closely tied to a national idea of a monumental 'society'. Society is fragmenting (Bauman 2007), and religious identity is becoming pourous and fluid.

Asad argues that there can never be a single definition of religion that holds for all time, '…not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.' (Asad 1993, 29). In other words, what can be recognised as religion will change according to historical trends and is dependent on those with the power to define it for the rest of society. Jonathan Z Smith goes further and questions whether it is even possible to speak of religion at all outside of an abstract and scholarly context.

> Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes and for his imaginative acts of comparison and generalisation. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy (Smith 1988, xi).

However, it seems to me that this is a position that cannot be defended. Religion does exist, at least as a concept, outside of the academy in the wider political and economic world as Fitzgerald explains:

> What counts as 'religion' and does not count is controlled by secular (non-religious) government agencies for tax and other purposes under a general category such as 'religious charity'. This reminds us that what counts as religion (rather than, say, a business or a political party) is policed by forces beyond the academy. For these reasons 'religion', rather than being a kind of neutral category which can be created by the scholar for his or her own purposes is laden with cultural and ideological assumptions and interests (Fitzgerald 2010, 40).

'Religion' has political dimensions that are caught up in the dynamics of power and economics. The power of public bodies such as government or the Charities Commission to decide, based on agendas dependent on historical discourse, what is and is not religion means that 'religion' as a concept does have both political and emotive significance in wider society. It is in the context of this that the achievement of TDN in gaining recognition as a religion becomes truly significant; potentially challenging the dominant national narrative of what does, in fact, constitute religion. It should be noted, however, that the application succeeded because TDN managed to present itself in a way that could be reconciled with the existing and very limited definition of religion. It did, however, set a precedent that may open up a conversation around the suitability of outdated definitions of what is or is not a 'religion'.[64]

The Druid Network and the Charity Commission

The website of the Druid Network contains the following Mission Statement:

> The Druid Network aims, through connecting individuals and groups together, through coordinating efforts and initiative and through actively interacting with public bodies and the media, to Inform, Inspire and Facilitate Druidry *as a religion* (italics mine) [65]

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[64] As can be seen in the current efforts of the Pagan Federation to gain recognition by the Charity Commission.

[65] https://druidnetwork.org accessed 30/4/21

On 21st September 2010 the Druid Network (TDN) became the first, and to date only Druid order to be successfully registered as a 'a charity for the advancement of religion for public benefit' by the Charity Commission of England and Wales.

This was the result of many years of discussion, negotiation, and experimentation (the first application in 2005 having been rejected). The decision to apply for charitable status as a religion was inevitably a momentous one for all Spiritual Druids as it required the Charity Commission to recognise that not just TDN, but Spiritual Druidry in its entirety was, or at least could be considered to be a religion. For the founder of TDN, Emma Restall-Orr, this was a vitally important point; by having Druidry accepted as qualifying for religious charitable status TDN would also, *ipso facto*, succeed in having it recognised as a religion[66] (Restall-Orr 2011, 3). This, she hoped, would have the further effect of reducing the prejudice and persecution often encountered by Druids and other Pagans. It would also provide a helpful precedent to other Pagan groups wishing to apply for charitable status. To Restall-Orr it felt like a natural and reasonable thing to do since, to her at least, Druidry was quite clearly a religion rather than a spirituality or a philosophy. 'Spirituality', a word that many Druids prefer, did not seem sufficient to her, as it could not say anything beyond what one person 'felt' to be true, and had no application beyond the individual.[67] Religion, on the other hand, 'speaks of authority…For me as an animist, authority comes from sustainable relationship.' (2011, 3). She also speaks of awe, creativity, and inspiration; participation in ceremony and ritual; and of community as being

[66] There is no legal definition of a religion in UK law, neither is there any way to legally register as a religion. To be recognised as a religious charity, therefore, is the closest it is possible to come in England and Wales to being officially registered as a religion.

[67] It should be mentioned here that the majority of Druids, as well as OBOD itself, prefer the term spirituality, which to them speak of connection, without the dogma and hierarchy that they have come to associate with religion. These Druids would strongly reject the notion that spirituality refers only to the self and not to the wider world.

fundamental to her own understanding of religion. It is the sense of duty and obligation, however, that is the deciding factor:

> Religion reminds of what we are given, and what we must give in return. Whether we are giving to our ancestors, our community, our environment, our gods or our family, is determined by our specific religious practice; what matters again is that we are aware of the need to do so… So did I lay down my argument to Phil[68] that Druidry is a religion. An ongoing exploration, a provocation to study, it offers a way of living well as we seek our gods and seek to understand them, held by a community that shares our ethics and values. As importantly to my own journey, however, are its teachings that we must live in service to a wider community, working to make life easier for those who are in need of others' strengths, skills. or support.(2011, 4).

Having agreed that Druidry could, and perhaps should be seen as a religion, it then remained for TDN to convince the Charity Commission. This was not a straightforward task. There is no legal definition of 'religion' in the UK, and the definition used by the Charity Commission is deeply rooted in Protestant Christianity and the assumption that anything that is 'really' a religion will, to some extent, resemble it (Owen and Taira 2015, 94). The Charity Commission expects that a religion will have:

- Belief in a supreme being or entity
- Worship practices relating to that being
- Theological cohesion
- An ethical framework

This presented a problem to TDN since no such coherent set of beliefs exists within Druidry, and the language that Druids use is almost universally that of ceremony or ritual rather than 'worship' which, like 'religion' itself, is a word that has negative connotations for many Druids. In their analysis of the TDN application, Owen and Taira suggest that one of the key factors in the success of the application was the rhetorical choices made in the language used, including words that sounded religious, such as 'sacred', 'divine' and

[68] Phil Ryder is one of the Trustees of the Druid Network. He was originally opposed to the application as, like many Druids, he preferred the term 'spirituality'. He was, however, convinced by Emma Restall Orr's argument that Druidry was indeed a religion as she defined it.

‘worship’ even when these were not the words that would have more normally been used in Druidry (2015, 95). In other words, rather than challenging the very narrow definition of religion used by the Charity Commission, TDN sought to present itself as closely as it could to this definition. To a large extent, this was dependent on convincing the Commission that Nature itself stood in the position of a Supreme Being within Druidry and that the relationships that Druids sought to form with Nature through ceremony and through honourable relationship with and guardianship of it effectively constituted worship. There was no guarantee that the Charity Commission would accept this. It is true that they had accepted non-theistic Buddhist charities in the past, on the grounds that Buddhism is already widely accepted as a religious tradition (2015, 96). The same, however, cannot be said of Druidry, and indeed the application of the Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust was rejected in 1995, precisely because it did not fit the ‘accepted’ definition of religion.[69] In the final decision, the Commission accepted that reverence for nature was a reasonable interpretation of worship of a Supreme Being in the case of TDN.

> The sincerely held belief of spirit within and arising from nature as an essential and core element of belief within Druidry, as promoted by The Druid Network, represented a divine being or entity or spiritual principle for the purposes of charity law
> Article 32.

Another key factor in the Commission’s decision, was the production of an ‘expert scholarly report’ by Graham Harvey at the request of TDN supporting their claim to be a religion. In this he argued that Druidry qualified as a religion in so far as it was regularly an object of study and discussion in conferences and university departments concerned with the study of religion (Harvey 2009, 2). Furthermore, he stated that ‘There is sufficient coherence among the varied expressions and experiences labelled as “Druidry” to be certain that this is a religious Movement’ (2009, 3). It is interesting that one of the things that makes Druidry ‘religious’ for Harvey is its serious engagement in the

[69] The Trust did gain charitable status as a charity prior to its dissolution in 1998. We will consider the Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust again. See p191.

project of living in honourable relationship with a larger than human world and with community (2009, 4, 7–8); both ideas which were, as we have seen, foundational to Emma Restall Orr's understanding of Druidry as religion. Whilst Harvey's report concentrates on the animistic dimension of Druidry, he also acknowledges that many Druids do, in fact, believe in a spiritual 'Otherworld' beyond the physical plane:

> Spiritual representations are as rife among Druids as among devotees of more explicitly transcendentalist religions. Similarly, the prevalence of "otherworld" ideas in Druidry pushes the boundaries of the notion of celebration of "nature". It may, at least, chime more easily with the kind of definitions of religion that the Charity Commission is happy to utilise (i.e. those privileging non or meta-empirical concerns.) (2009, 6).

Whilst Harvey explained that there is no scholarly consensus on what constitutes a religion or, indeed, on how useful the term is, he concludes, 'In short, if anything is a religion, Druidry is.' (Harvey 2009, 2)

While the judicious use of religious language and the expert support of a scholar of the Study of Religion were certainly helpful, both could have been rejected by the Commission had it chosen to strictly enforce its more usual understanding of 'religion'. Owen and Taira suggest that in fact, the largest factor determining the success of the application was that the commission was already favourably inclined towards the application, and so were open to accept the report and interpret the language of the application in a way that allowed them to grant charitable status. This is most likely because they were convinced by the case made by TDN of its 'public benefit' through open ritual and ecological engagement (Owen and Taira 2015, 104). In other words, the Commission saw Druidry as benign and non-threatening. It was something that could fit the expectation that religion should be ethical and of benefit to wider society. It did what 'real' religion' was supposed to do. It was, in short, 'safe' (Owen 2020a, 213). In this context it is interesting that in clause 6 of the forward to their constitution, which defines Druidry as it is understood by TDN, there was a perceived need to re-define 'sacrifice' (a word, which has always been polemically associated with Druidry) explaining that for modern Druids it

meant the sacrifice of time, comfort and talents for the benefit of others ('The Constitution of the Druid Network' 2009, 2).

The key idea in this definition of Druidry is that of living in honourable relationship with the whole of the natural world, including Ancestors and, for some, deity. The point is made that diversity of belief is one of the strengths of Druidry and does not amount to a lack of cohesion due to these common themes of respect and relationship which see the world as inherently sacred. Clause 4 states:

> Though many shy away from the word 'religion' with its connotations of political monotheism and authority, preferring the word spirituality, Druidry is a religion. Its practitioners revere their deities, most often perceived as the most powerful forces of nature (such as thunder, sun and earth), spirits of place (such as mountains and rivers) and divine guides of a people (such as Brighid, Rhiannon and Bran) ('The Constitution of the Druid Network' 2009, 2).

As would be expected, the response from the wider world of British Druidry to the decision of the Charity Commission was mixed. Many saw it as a positive move that would lead to a greater acceptance of Druidry in public life, making it easier for them to sit on SACREs[70], join interfaith networks, serve as prison or hospital chaplains and generally make a greater contribution to wider public religious life. Indeed TDN went on to be accepted, not without controversy, as a fully voting member of The Interfaith Network in 2016 (Rosher 2020).

Others, however, were less pleased by the outcome, with some Druids expressing concern that TDN was attempting to define Druidry on behalf of all Druids (or at least all British Druids) in a way that made them uncomfortable (Owen and Taira 2015, 106). In 2010, Philip Carr-Gomm, then the Chosen Chief of OBOD, commented on his blog:

> I, and many other OBOD members have always liked the way Druidry has avoided being 'boxed' into one definition: a spiritual path to some people, a magical tradition

[70] Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. These bodies, which exist in all local authorities, determine the locally agreed syllabus for RE followed by all non-faith schools in the authority that are not academies. I myself have benefitted from the Charity Commission's decision in that it formed a part of my successful application to join, and indeed, chair my local SACRE in my capacity as a Druid.

> to another and so on. As soon as you start on the path of trying to define Druidry you run into problems…some Druids don't consider themselves Pagan, so you've got a problem right away. Not all Druids would agree with all aspects of the definition of Druidry that The Druid network have agreed with the Charity Commission (Carr-Gomm 2010).

The reaction from the media was also mixed, with responses ranging from positive, to mildly amused to outright hostility. One particularly strong condemnation of the Charity Commission came from Daily Mail columnist Melanie Phillips who described the decision as 'An attack on the very concept of religion itself.' (2010).[71]

Do Druids Consider Themselves to be Religious?

According to a Face Book survey which I conducted on 4-5 May 2021, the majority of Druids explicitly reject the terminology of religion. Two questions were posed in the OBOD Friends group, and the BDO group. Neither of these are 'members only' groups and so the assumption cannot be made that all respondents were active members of those particular orders. There is also an overlap in membership, with many belonging to both groups, although respondents only posted answers in one group or the other. The questions were also posted on 'Druidry & Christianity' (D&C)- a group that exists to discuss the overlap and relations between Druids and Christians in the modern world. The questions were as follows:

1 Do you consider Druidry to be a religion?
2 Do you consider what you are doing when you 'Druid' to be religious?

The BDO website presents itself in more theistic, or at least animistic terns than the OBOD site, so it might be expected that responses from that site would be more positive.[72] In all I received 120 responses from the OBOD site,

[71] It is statements such as this in the national media that disprove J Z Smith's assertion that the concept of religion has no reality or relevance outside the academy (1988, xi)

[72] It does, however, use the term 'spirituality' rather than 'religion'.

97 from BDO and 13 from D&C. In all cases the response was clearly negative, although more overtly so on the OBOD site, where 54 explicitly rejected the idea that Druidry was a religion and only 14 saw it in those terms. From the BDO site there were 20 positive and 40 negative responses and D&C gave 3 positive and 7 negative responses. Not all went on to answer the second question, although, interestingly, a proportion of those who rejected the idea of Druidry as a religion nevertheless considered their practice to be 'religious'. The majority of those who rejected 'religion' used the term 'spiritual' as a substitute, describing Druidry as a 'spiritual path' or 'spiritual practice'. 'Philosophy' and 'life way' were also very popular terms. The majority of Druids use the word 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' in clear opposition to 'religion' when describing their understanding of Druidry and how they relate to it. Spirituality was generally seen in positive terms as describing a personal path that is not directed by a higher authority, but that grows organically out of engagement with Nature or the divine. It does not necessarily consist of features that are significantly different to those encountered in religion; there may be a sense of connection to gods, Ancestors and spirits, and activities that are clearly ritual in nature are engaged with. These may include chanting, prayer, and ceremony. What is seen as distinctive, however, is that these are engaged with authentically and personally rather than through any sense of duty or obedience.

The major reason for the aversion to the term 'religion' within Druidry and within the wider Pagan world is that it has become associated in the minds of many Pagans with the perceived narrowness and oppressiveness of the Christian Church (Owen and Taira 2015). This was very clear in the responses to my questions. For many the term 'religion' was associated with dogma and a single organised belief system to which members were expected to comply. One of the most common reasons given for Druidry not to be a religion was the diversity of beliefs and practices. There was also the idea that religions have hierarchical power structures and priests or clergy through which one approaches the divine.

> I don't regard Druidry as a religion, but as an approach to Reality. It is a spiritual pursuit, but religion requires a hierarchical priesthood, a recognised dogma and/or text universally followed. Druidry is much more free and fluid. Not all Druids relate to the same gods/goddesses. Their practices can be very different. Some Druids are part of an ancient tradition, taught orally by more experienced Druids, themselves taught orally. Other Druids study with a more modern organisation. Some are self-taught. There is great variation from Druid to Druid, but many are well earthed in years of spiritual research and experience. (Response from OBOD FB Group)

Others, however, looked to the etymology of 'religion' for an answer, generally giving this as to 're-join' or re-connect' In this context several did see a religious definition of Druidry:

> I think it is similar to Buddhism in that it can be considered either a religion or a philosophy depending on the practitioner and depending on your definition of "religion." For me, Druidry is a religion or religious path, because I define religion as any path that helps a person connect with the divine or any higher power. The etymology of the word "religion" literally means "re-connect." A religion doesn't have to have dogma, such as Christianity and most Western religions have. A religion is simply a path of seeking connection with the Divine, however one defines it. (Response from OBOD FB Group)

Overall, there was a strong emotional reaction against 'religion', which was seen as something that is restrictive and spiritually 'dead', whereas the term 'spirituality' was seen as more dynamic and vital, allowing for personal responsibility and a personal journey towards connection with the divine, however it was understood.

A common response from the D&C group, although it was also present in both of the other groups, was an understanding of Druidry not as a religion in itself, but as a set of practices that could be understood as inherently 'religious', especially when combined with another religion. Thus, several respondents said that they would describe their religion as Christianity, Animism, Polytheism, Buddhism or Paganism, but saw Druidry as a set of practices that allowed them to engage more fully with that religion. One described Druidry as a 'spiritual amplifier' to their Christian religion, and another as 'something like an accompaniment to religion.' Another concluded, 'Perhaps you could say that Christianity is my religion, but Druidry is my denomination.' Druidry then, was often characterised as a 'life way' -something that one does, as opposed to a religion -something one believes. When considering the

question of the extent to which Druidry should be seen as a religion, or even as ‘religion’ it is important to take into account the clear fact that most Druids reject the label. However, what is rejected is a narrow and fixed definition of religion that is, nonetheless, still the one most widely used and accepted in society.

In terms of what could be termed ‘religious beliefs’, it is no surprise that there is a great diversity within Druidry, particularly with regard to beliefs about the divine. Druids may be monotheist, monist, duotheist, polytheist, animist or, indeed, atheist. Of these, two have emerged over the last 20 years or so as having particular importance to Druids and as such they deserve particular attention.

Polytheism

The simplest definition of polytheism is the belief in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses. Within modern Paganisms, polytheism may be described as either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’. A soft polytheist may integrate many deities into their ritual and religious lives, but they understand these deities either in terms of anthropomorphic representations of aspects of the natural world, such as storms or the generative power of the sun; or as symbols or archetypes of aspects of their own personalities. Hard polytheists, by contrast, see the gods and goddesses as having an objective existence in their own right, independent both of the belief of the one who worships them and of each other. In other words, to a hard polytheist the gods are not aspects of a single God or Goddess, or of a Universal Life Force, but are individuals with agency and with their own goals and desires. Druids who understand the gods in these terms will study their stories in surviving mythology as well as trying to develop a relationship with them through meditation and prayer. They will try to make suitable food and drink offerings to particular gods and goddesses depending on their personal preferences. Relationships with the gods are relational and reciprocal, and humans are always seen as responsible for their own morality and actions. Druids may choose to form relationships with

particular gods, and these relationships may be lifelong or may last only long enough for both to achieve a common objective. Many Druids adopt a Celtic or Brythonic pantheon, often supplemented with semi-divine characters from mythological works such as the Mabinogi.

Animism

Over the last decade or so, an increasing number of Druids have come to describe themselves as animists. Generally speaking, however, this is not animism as it has traditionally been understood by anthropologists. The term 'animism' was first used in the now familiar context by Edward Tylor (1832-1917). Tylor believed that 'primitive' people misunderstood dreams and 'spiritual experiences' due to a lack of scientific understanding. This led to their anthropomorphising features such as rivers, rocks and trees and ascribing 'souls' to them. Thus, animism came to be seen as a 'primitive' belief system that understood inanimate objects to have 'souls.' This view is deeply rooted in a Cartesian dualist understanding of the world that separates everything into either 'matter' or 'spirit'. Anthropologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries tended to assume that indigenous people saw the world in the same way. More recently, however, Harvey has suggested that a 'new' animism is required. Harvey is clear that this is not a new belief system, but a new way of understanding and interpreting how indigenous people actually see the world. Harvey defines animism thus:

> Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others (2020a, 34).

This concept of 'other than human persons', was first used by Hallowell in his relation to the study of the Ojibwa people (Hallowell 1960, 21), but due to Harvey's adoption of it[73], it has become widespread amongst modern Druids as well as other Pagans. The 'new animism' teaches that life is relational and negotiated. The animals and plants that we eat and live alongside, as well as

[73] Harvey's works are widely read throughout modern Pagan communities in the English speaking world.

the ecosystems they form are understood as ‘persons’ with their own agendas and needs, with whom we must negotiate in order to live well. For Druids, these ‘other than human persons’ might include Ancestors, gods, or land spirits, but they need not. For some Druids the ‘other than human persons are simply the animals, trees, plants and rivers with whom they share the world. Animists, then, are people who seek to live in honourable relationship with a variety of persons encountered in a more than human world (Abram 1997).

Another idea that feeds into modern understandings of animism is that of ‘dividuality’. This is an idea first used by Marriott (1976) and later developed by Strathern in the context of a study of gender issues in traditional societies in Melanesia (1988). The ‘dividual’ is understood in contrast to the ‘individual.’ The latter exists as a separate entity in isolation from those around it. In Postmodern thinking we encounter the ‘cult of the individual’, where the uniqueness of each person is prioritised, and individual choice is upheld as a fundamental virtue. By contrast the ‘dividual’ exists only in relationship with others, human and otherwise. The dividual is the product of community and relationship, and the ‘self’ exists only within this context. There is a very real sense in which the others with whom a person is in relationship become and remain a part of them. Thus, Harvey explains:

> We might say that in Tylor’s “old animism” people are imagined as individuals whose beliefs are definitive, while in Hallowell’s new approach, people are imagined as dividuals whose relations are generative (Harvey 2020a, 35).

Whilst many Druids would accept the idea of ‘spirits’ or non-material beings with whom they form relationships, it is equally possible to come across those who do not believe in anything that might be characterised as ‘supernatural’, but who see themselves in dividual terms, taking their identity from relationship with those around them both human and ‘other than human’; and understanding the world and their relationship with it as inherently sacred. The Druid Corwen Broch explains this viewpoint in this way:

> I tend to see myself as a rational animist. Animism is a broad church. Graham Harvey defines it as the idea that "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others." That doesn't

necessarily require any belief that non-living objects and things, like water, have any sort of soul or are literally alive, or even that living things have souls or immaterial components. Though of course it doesn't exclude those sorts of beliefs.
The concept of 'personhood' as it is used in contemporary animism neatly sidesteps those ideas and replaces them with a relational ontology - personhood is defined by being in relationship, rather than the sort of 'how like a human is this thing/animal/plant' competition we use to award things like 'sentience' or 'soul' to other beings and things.[74]

Conclusion

There are many ways of understanding and relating to the Divine in Druidry and they are not mutually exclusive. One individual may 'play' with different ideas and may move between different positions over time, or even hold more than one at the same time. The Druidic 'landscape' in terms of ways of understanding and relating to the divine has changed significantly over the last 20 years. In my survey I received 135 responses from British Druids who answered the question, 'What do you believe about the Divine?'[75] 27 responses (20%) talked about a divine energy that stood beyond the universe. This was sometimes described as a Great Spirit or a Life Force. 14 of these went on to discuss the idea that this single force could manifest in the form of individual deities. The largest single category at 25% was polytheism, with 20 respondents giving answers that clearly linked to hard polytheism and 8 to soft polytheism. Some of the same individuals also identified as animist, the third largest category at 19%. 10 respondents made some reference to a Goddess and a God (duotheism), but all of these did so in a metaphorical way, as a way of engaging with the polarities of nature or the harmony or balance of the universe. As is generally the case, these are crude tools for categorising complex ideas, and many described a standpoint that

[74] Corwen Broch, taken from a Facebook discussion 13/11/2020. Used with permission.

[75] In retrospect, I would not have framed the question in terms of 'belief' as this to some extent dictated the form of the responses; although several respondents explained that that they saw the issue in terms of how they related to the divine in practice (which could change in different contexts, for example, some 'believed' that the deities were aspects of a greater power but related to them in practice and ritual as individual beings with sentience and agency) rather than belief.

encompassed more than one of the concepts described above, proving, if proof were needed, that belief is not fixed, but complex, fluid, relational and context dependent. One example will serve to demonstrate the point.

> I believe nature is divine and sacred in itself. Divinity is immanent in nature. I see the God and Goddess as manifestations of the 2 polarities of nature, but that are also very real and conscient and can interact with humans and the world around us. I consider different gods and goddesses as aspects of a main energy, but also as archetypal figures through which we can understand humans, nature and the ways these function and react. I do believe in land spirits. My relationship with the divine is one of awe, respect, protection and understanding. (30113-303105-26091559)

Writing in 2001, Andy Letcher found that Duotheism was the most common belief in Druidry (2001, 42). This is belief in a Great Goddess and a God who between them represent the entirety of nature. Twenty years later this seems no longer to be the case. Hard polytheism in relation to Celtic and Brythonic deities, along with animism as defined by Harvey, have seen a huge increase in recent years. However, agnosticism and non-theistic standpoints are also not uncommon among modern Druids. All of this demonstrates that Druidry continues to change and evolve to suit the environment in which it finds itself, as it has done for at least the last 200 years.

To conclude, then, is Druidry a religion or is it not? If not, what is it? Owen suggests that we need to move beyond ‘Religious Studies’ in schools and universities and into ‘Religion Literacy’, which concentrates not on ‘facts’ and figures about particular religions, which, as we have seen, might be less reliable than might at first appear, but rather, on ‘knowledge and understanding of how ‘religion’ is constructed (by scholars, media, popular cultures etc.) the interests being served (issues of power etc.) and the implications of this construction.’ (Owen 2020a, 216).
If we reject some of the more traditional definitions of ‘religion’ and instead adopt Nye’s concept of ‘religioning’, Harvey’s notion of religion as performed and relational, and Ezzy’s explanation of religion as a way of achieving meaningful living through relationships, ritual and shared culture; then most Druids would recognise themselves and their activities. To this extent at least, then, Druidry could be described as ‘religion’, if not as ‘a religion’; and Druids

as ‘performing religion’ or ‘religioning’. However, like the term ‘Druid’ itself, religion is not so much a single definable thing as a discursive category. The word is used by different people with different agendas to mean different things as best suits their purpose, and what is excluded from any definition of religion is as significant as what is included. It is perfectly reasonable, then, to suggest that Druidry need not be classified once and for all time, and for all Druids in all situations as ‘religion’. It is, perhaps, most accurate to say that Druidry functions as religion, or indeed as ‘a religion’ for some Druids, some of the time, but need not be so, even for an individual Druid, all of the time and in all contexts. For the purposes of this thesis, whilst respecting the fact that most Druids, for very good reasons, reject the label of ‘religion’ or ‘religious’, I shall be taking the stance that modern British Spiritual Druidry is religious in nature, since it addresses issues of meaning and connection with something beyond the individual, and because it fulfils the functions of religion as understood by Harvey and Ezzy.

Chapter 6: Druidry and Indigeneity

'We are the Old People; we are the new people; we are the same people; wiser than before.' [76]

Is Druidry in Britain an Indigenous Religion?

There have been claims within certain Druid communities for the last twenty years or so that Druidry represents the indigenous religion or native spirituality of the British Isles. In this chapter I will examine these claims in some detail, considering the extent to which Druidry can be seen as indigenous, or as 'indigenising';[77] the reasons why these claims have become more prominent within Druidry; and the consequences or implications of understanding Druidry in Britain as indigenous religion.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the extent to which Druidry might be considered as a religion. The issues of indigeneity discussed in this chapter demonstrate one of the many reasons why this question is a significant one. In order to be understood as an indigenous religion, Druidry must first be understood in religious terms if not, specifically, as a religion. This point is made by Tafjord (2020, 152), who describes the process whereby something is presented as religion, either by practitioners or by scholars as 'religionizing'. By this he means, 'the assembling and translation of practices, practitioners, objects and ideas into representations or instances of "religion" or "religiosity." This, he suggests, is a process that scholars of religion engage in more or less consciously when dealing with phenomena such as Druidry; as without this process there is, in effect, nothing to study from their perspective. It is

[76] From the popular Pagan chant 'Cauldron of Changes' by Lindie Lila- frequently heard around the campfire at Pagan gatherings and emphasising the idea that modern Paganism is a continuation of a pre-Christian past, as well as highlighting the common Pagan belief in reincarnation.

[77] The term 'indigenizing' was used by Paul C Johnson in his work on Garifuna and Candomblé practitioners (Johnson 2002, 312). It will be discussed in detail below, p139-141.

also, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a process in which practitioners also engage, regardless of whether they choose to use the language of religion. The previous chapter has demonstrated that while many, in fact the majority of Druids actively reject the label of religion or religious, most commonly because they perceive religion in terms of dogma, hierarchy and control, there is still a vocabulary that can clearly be linked to religiosity. Druids may talk about deity, spirits, shamanism or ritual whilst avoiding the word 'religion'. The way in which Druids speak of what they do and believe retains the 'shape' of religion, and so can be coherently debated in terms of indigenous religion. For Tafjord, 'religionizing' and 'indigenizing[78]' are dual processes that must both be applied to a movement such as Druidry before it can be thought of in terms of indigenous religion.

The word 'indigenous' has its roots in the Latin *indigena* meaning 'sprung from the land.' As such, someone who is indigenous is someone who is native to a place, or has their place of birth or origin in a particular location (Puca 2020, 148); a particular species of animal or plant can be indigenous, as can an individual person. However, as Harvey has pointed out (2020b, 5) the term, particularly when capitalised as 'Indigenous', is not a neutral one, but rather one that is highly politicised, and it is for this reason that Druidic claims to indigeneity are controversial. Harvey writes, that when the word is capitalised, it, 'can indicate more specific projects of community or world construction in which colonialization, marginalization and the extinguishing, distancing and other maneuvers of so called "Modern Western" cultures are contested.' It is, to some extent, a self-designation that is used to differentiate a group from the colonialist, modernist culture of the West. In this sense it is indeed strange that it should be a term claimed by people who are ethnically and culturally a part of the West.

[78] In keeping with the use of English rather than American spelling throughout this thesis, I will be using the Anglicised 'indigenising' except when quoting from a scholar or book where the American spelling is used.

There is no universally accepted definition of an Indigenous people, as any possible definition is open to contention from both within and without. However, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues states in its 'working definition' that Indigenous peoples:

> Have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system (UNPFII 2004, 2 Quoted in Harvey, 2020b, 4).

This definition links Indigenous peoples specifically to ideas of colonialism and, at least by implication, oppression. Very few modern Druids would claim to belong to an 'Indigenous People' in this sense. While there is, as we have seen, an affective connection between Druidry and a Celtic identity, and while modern Spiritual Druidry owes much to the Celtic Revivalist Movement in 18th and 19th Century Wales, there is no requirement to demonstrate a 'Celtic' heritage in order to practise modern Druidry, and Druids do not form a distinct ethnic group that is different to the majority of Britain. While there are some Druids who claim that this definition could reasonably be applied to the native population of Britain at the time of the Roman Invasion, as we shall see below, the fact that modern Druids cannot necessarily claim to be directly descended from these people, and that there is no ongoing history of oppression[79] makes this irrelevant to the question of indigeneity. Furthermore, whilst Druidry itself may be marginal comparative to mainstream British culture, most Druids, as we have seen, are not; coming predominantly from educated, professional, and comparatively affluent backgrounds. Certainly, modern British Druids cannot claim a history of oppression that could be compared to that suffered by Indigenous Peoples that have been subjected to colonial violence. However, the fact that Druids cannot be seen as an Indigenous People, does

[79] I am aware that there is a history of oppression of the 'Celtic' parts of Britain by English speakers dating from the Middle Ages into the 19th Century, and arguably into the present, and that this is partially responsible for the Celtic Revival' in which modern Druidry has its roots, this does not represent an unbroken line of colonial oppression with the Roman invasion and domination of the Iron Age tribes of Britain.

not necessarily mean that Druidry cannot be seen as indigenous religion, and it is to this question that I shall now turn.

What is Indigenous Religion?

As we have seen above, both ‘religion’ and ‘Indigenous People’ are problematic and contested terms, making ‘indigenous religion’ by definition, equally problematic. Indigenous religion is most often defined as the religious and cultural traditions of Indigenous People, however, it is demonstrably the case that Indigenous People do not always follow their own ancestral religious traditions, but may be Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or any number of other religions; although they may bring indigenous or indigenising features into those religions (Harvey 2020b, 6).

Harvey also points out that the term ‘Indigenous Religion’ does not exist in isolation, but rather is relational. It is contrasted with ‘World Religion’, a term that is itself value laden. World Religions have historically been perceived as intrinsically superior to those things that are defined in contrast to them, such as ethnic, folk, popular, new or, indeed, indigenous religion (2020b, 7). Such religions have often been characterised as primitivist or ‘backward’.
World Religions tend to be understood as having certain characteristics in addition to an international presence, including belief in a creator deity of some kind, fixed liturgical forms of worship and long-established traditional places of worship, and, perhaps most importantly, a body of scripture. As indigenous or traditional forms of religioning often lack one or more of these features, early scholars of religion found it easy to dismiss them as ‘primitive’ forms of religion, and therefore they tended to be studied in terms of anthropology and ethnography rather than theology (Harvey 2020b, 7).

As indigenous religion has increasingly become a subject for scholarly attention, particularly in the context of the relatively new discipline of Religious Studies, scholars have had to engage with the complexities of the concept,

and even to attempt a definition. As with definitions of religion in general, most of these attempts have merit, but none are comprehensive or definitive. Ann Marie Bahr (2005, 4) defines indigenous religion as one that originates before a time of colonisation, and which is practised by those with a minority status. This creates a necessary connection between indigenous religion and colonialism which would exclude groups such as modern Druids who, while they may form a numeric minority, do not have minority or marginalised status within society. In fact, as Owen points out, this definition would make it impossible to describe any new religious movement as indigenous regardless of whether it originated from within a recognised Indigenous People (2013, 84). There are Druids who would claim that the religion of the original Druids predated the colonisation of Britain by the Romans and that it was suppressed by them, meaning that Druidry would qualify as indigenous religion by this definition (e.g. Shallcrass 2021, 41). Even if this is true, however, it does not follow that modern Druidry, which has no continuous line of practice or tradition, and which cannot reasonably be regarded as the same religion, could be classified in the same way.

An alternative way of thinking about indigenous religion is proposed by James Cox (2017, 61,65) who suggests that indigenous religion has the characteristics of being local, transmitting its traditions orally and ‘sharing a kinship based world view in which attention is directed towards ancestor spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice.’ While this definition is certainly not comprehensive, it does at least avoid the binary relationship that is often assumed between indigenous religion and colonialism, and as such, allows consideration of the question of whether or not Druidry in its current form in Britain could be said to possess these characteristics. If we understand these criteria in the straightforward way that Cox intended, it is clear that they cannot apply to Druidry as it exists in modern Britain. However, I would suggest that many of them are also problematic when applied to recognised indigenous religions as they are practiced in the modern world. If, however, we understand these tendencies in terms of a particular orientation towards the world that is distinctive from that embraced by the World

Religions then we can recognise many of them in modern British Druidry. While this does not, in and of itself, suggest that Druidry should be seen as indigenous religion, it does demonstrate a self-conscious tendency towards a set of attitudes and behaviours that are consistent with indigenous religion.

Druidry as Indigenous Religion

As stated above, there has been a tendency in some Druid circles in recent decades to regard Druidry as the indigenous religion or native spirituality of Britain. However, whether this is meant purely in the sense of a form of religiosity that has its origins in Britain, or in the more politicised sense of being in some way comparable to the religious traditions of colonised Indigenous Peoples around the world, varies depending on who is making the claim. It is important to draw a distinction between the two as the implications of the claim vary greatly depending on the sense in which the term 'indigenous' is being used. It is important to remember that not all Druids, understand Druidry either as religion or as indigenous; and among those that do there is significant variation in the use of the language of indigeneity, not only between individual Druids, but also between the various Druid orders.

The British Druid Order is, perhaps, one of the loudest voices claiming Druidry as the indigenous religion of Britain. In his 2021 revision of booklet 9 of the Bardic course material for the BDO, Philip Shallcrass discusses the issue of indigeneity and the connected risk of cultural appropriation at some length (Shallcrass 2021). The blog page of the British Druid Order describes Druidry as:

> Rekindling the sacred fires of Druidry as an *indigenous*, living, breathing, animistic, shamanic, life affirming, Earth honouring spirituality for the 21st Century drawing inspiration from the threefold stream of Awen's flow from its source (Shallcrass 2018).[80]

[80] Italics mine. Interestingly, the same description appears on the home page of the BDO website, but with the omission of the word indigenous.

While The Druid Network does not overtly make the claim to indigeneity, the concept is closely linked to the way in which it understands itself as a religion. In fact, the Forward to the Constitution of The Druid Network begins with the assertion that Druidry is indigenous to Britain:

> 1 Druidry was the native spiritual tradition of the peoples that inhabited the islands of Britain and Ireland, spreading through much of Europe. Though many consider it to have been a religion or political force that came to Britain with the influx of culture concurrent with the Iron Age, it is increasingly understood, and within the Network acknowledged, to be of an older, indigenous if ever evolving religious tradition sourced within these islands.
> 2(a) As an ancient pagan religion, Druidry is based on the reverential, sacred and honourable relationship between the people and the land. In its personal expression, modern Druidry is the spiritual interaction between an individual and the spirits of nature, including those of landscape and ancestry, together with the continuities of spiritual, literary and cultural heritage ('The Constitution of the Druid Network' 2009).

Claims to indigeneity within modern Druidry have generally rested on four assertions, all of which are present in the TDN constitution:

1. That modern Druidry is in some way connected to the religion of the original Druidry of the Iron Age and that there is some level of continuity with it.
2. That Druidry originated in Britain, either in the Iron Age, or earlier, being absorbed by the incoming people and culture.
3. That the ancient Druids can to some extent be considered to be the spiritual ancestors of, or to stand in an ancestral relationship with modern Druids.
4. That modern Druidry is primarily concerned with relationship with the land and with ancestors.

Whilst the TDN Forward does not explicitly state that modern Druidry is a direct, albeit evolved, continuation of the religion practised in Iron Age Britain, the implication is clearly there, not least in the smooth transition between the ancient and modern iterations of Druidry in 2a. The contention shared by Phillip Shallcrass (2021, 21) among others, that Druidry in Britain was present in some form even before the Iron Age and the advent of 'Celtic' culture is an important one in that it seeks to establish a connection between modern

Druids and the Neolithic sites such as Stonehenge, Avebury and West Kennet, along with many others, that have come to be sacred to them. This is a claim that has had wide reaching consequences to which I will return later in this chapter.

The claim that Druidry originated in Britain is based on a statement made by Caesar:

> It is believed that the training for Druids was discovered in Britain and from there it was transferred to Gaul. And now those who wish to learn the matter carefully depart for Britain for the sake of learning (De Bello Gallico trans, Lea in Koch 2003, 21–23).

Shallcrass, (2021, 21) takes this as evidence that in the Roman period at least, there was a general belief that Druidry had its origins in Britain, and that since by the time of Caesar, Druidry was widely dispersed through Europe. This is also evidence that it did not originate with the Celts but that it had much deeper and older roots in Britain, stretching back to the Neolithic. In this way, the link between the Druids and the ancient sites that was posited by Stukeley and discredited by the archaeologists of the 20th Century can be credibly re-established.

Whilst for some Druids, the fact that the form of Druidry practised in the Iron Age may have had its genesis in Britain is central to claims of indigeneity, this is not the only relevant factor. Indeed, even if the original Druids could be said to have formed the priestly class of an indigenous religion, it does not automatically follow that modern Druids can make the same claim. Nevertheless, Druidry as it is currently practised, in all of its forms, whether paramasonic, cultural or spiritual is born of the various ideas that have crystalised around the idea of ‘the Druid’ in the British Isles over the course of the last 300 years or so. In this sense at least, Druidry can certainly be said to be indigenous to Britain in the more general and purely geographic sense of the term.[81] The controversy, then, is over the more politicised aspects of the

[81] The history of modern Druidry in the United States is entirely separate to the development of Druidry in Britain and is beyond the scope of this thesis.

claim to indigeneity, including the question of why Druids might seek to make this claim, and what they might hope to gain through it. A key issue here is the extent to which Druidry can be seen to be congruent with other forms of religion that are commonly considered to be indigenous.

Belonging to the Land

As we have seen, one of the key factors in scholarly discussions of indigenous religion has been over an organic connection to the land (Cox 2017, 69; Johnson 2002, 306). This is clearly not applicable to Druidry in Britain in a straightforward sense since Druids are geographically widely disbursed and are often very mobile. However, connection to or relationship with the land is one of the features that is most commonly cited as being central to a ~Druid's sense of identity or practice. This may be conceived of in quite abstract terms, where 'land' is almost coterminous with 'nature'. As we have seen, some sort of connection to nature, whether in itself or anthromorphised into a deity, is one of the ideas that Druids themselves most often perceive as central to their idea of what it means to be a Druid. 63% of respondents to my survey identified a relationship with or reverence for nature as being at the heart of what they understood Druidry to be. The concept of 'nature' as something that exists independently of mankind and is in some way 'pure' and unrelated to the activities of humanity is one that is frequently encountered in Paganisms, particularly Druidry. However, 'nature' is itself a relational term that has no real force apart from 'culture' (Harvey 2020a, 44); humans are, in fact, a part of nature and inseparable from it. Furthermore, the idea of 'nature' in opposition to the industrialisation of the modern world is a romantic idea that took hold in the literature, art and philosophy of the 19th century, and, as Harvey points out, is a modernist understanding that would have been utterly alien to the people of Iron Age Britain (2007, 232). The idea, or ideal of nature, however, is one that is utterly inseparable from modern Druidic self-understanding and identity.

An alternative way in which modern Druids might conceptualise a relationship to nature is in terms of a particular piece of land, or feature of the landscape and the traditions or stories associated with. It. This is, of course, most common with highly visible and/or ancient sites such as Stonehenge, Avebury or the Long Man of Wilmington. Some Druids have gone so far as to suggest that a system of stories and songs connected the ancient sites to each other, and to particular tribes and trackways in a way that is reminiscent of the 'Song Lines' of Aboriginal Australia.[82] Particular Druid groups or orders may form strong associations with particular monuments or even natural features which go on to become vital to the sense of identity within that particular group, and which even come to function almost as a personality in their own right within the group. The most obvious example of this may be Stonehenge, which has become so closely linked with Druidry within the popular imagination, as well as within Druidry itself, that it is almost impossible to conceive of the image of the Druid apart from it. Other examples include the *Gorsedd of Caer Abiri,* which is closely linked to the stones at Avebury and the Anglesey Druid Order (ADO) whose ritual life is so deeply rooted in the landscape and mythology of Anglesey, particularly the Neolithic temple-tomb of Bryn Celli Ddu, that it is almost impossible to imagine the order existing outside of this sacred landscape. One is also reminded of the famous Rocking Stone of Pontypridd that was so central to one of the earliest iterations of Cultural/Spiritual Druidry in modern times. There has also been a growing trend among Druid Groves and groups to utilise local areas of landscape, from less well known ancient or natural sites, to local parks or the land or gardens of members, effectively sacralising them and developing a ritual and affective relationship with them (Harvey 2020a, 44).

In this way, while many Druids do not have the ancestral connection to the landscape in the way that Indigenous Peoples are usually understood to have,

[82] This is an idea fraught with problems and raises one of the key issues over Druidic claims to indigeneity, that of cultural appropriation. While the comparison is an attractive one which clearly has powerful affective resonances for many Druids, there is no evidence of any kind that anything of this kind has ever been a part of religious or cultural practice in Britain.

they do develop organic and ritual relationships with certain sites or areas in a way that offers a distinct contrast to the 'otherworldliness or transcendence' generally associated with World Religions (Harvey 2020b, 7). While it is true that in World Religions do have shrines that are rooted in a particular locale, a key difference is that these shrines tend to commemorate a particular event in the life of a person who is important to the religion, whilst for indigenous religion it is often a feature of the landscape itself that is intrinsically sacred, and indeed, the focal point of the religion itself. However, while there is no doubt that Druidic relationships with sacred landscapes are both real and powerful, they are also, to a large extent, romantic; based, perhaps, on a sense of loss or disconnection, perhaps even what is in Welsh referred to as *hiraeth*- a sense of longing or nostalgia for home, even if that 'home' never existed. People in modern Britain tend to move often for work or other reasons and often live a long way from family, to say nothing of the lands their ancestors inhabited. Owen suggests that it is this very sense of dislocation and alienation that leads to a desire to engage with the language of indigeneity (2020b, 82).

Modern British Druids are not organically and necessarily bound to the land in the way that Indigenous Peoples are generally assumed to be. Many indigenous groups effectively form a part of an ecosystem with a particular type or area of land, being, without the intervention of Western culture, dependent upon it for their survival. Harvey suggests (2013, 2) that religion itself has its origins in the need for negotiated and ritualised relationships between humans and the plant and animal people that they needed to eat, or by whom they might be eaten. While modern Druids may feel a kinship with the land and its animal or spirit inhabitants and may even try to honour the spirits of those they eat in a conscious defiance of modernist consumerism, as with the Bear Feast (Harvey 2020a); there is no real life and death urgency in this. Modern Druids cannot claim a symbiotic relationship with a particular ecosystem in the same way that some Indigenous Peoples can. Nevertheless, while the emotional relationship between the Druids and 'nature' or 'the land' may be a romantic one, it is real enough, and in striking contrast to that of

mainstream British culture. Druidry cannot claim to be 'local' in the way that Cox intended with his definition, in fact OBOD, in particular, is a global movement, with groves and seed groups all over the world. However, as Pucca points out, Indigenous Peoples are not static, frequently moving from their 'ancestral lands', and the suggestion that they cannot and do not is itself infantilising (2020, 150). While modern Druids may not be able to claim a relationship to a particular area that goes back many generations, or to be deeply immersed in a particular ecosystem in the way that some Indigenous Peoples are, many do have an emotive and organic connection to the land, and to particular parts of it. It is true that settlers to an area can evolve and develop just such an emotive connection to landscape. Indeed, many Druids, mobile as they are, could be seen as recent settlers in a particular area, and as such, as needing to develop a relationship with their new Ancestors of Place.[83] However, the fact that many feel the need to do this, and perceive their local landscape as something sentient and ensouled with which it is possible and necessary to establish a relationship could, in itself, be seen as an indicator of indigenous religion.

Oral Transmission

The second characteristic of indigenous religion suggested by Cox is that it transmits its traditions orally. This is an assertion that raises issues of its own. I would agree with Puca (2020, 152) that the suggestion that indigenous religions in the modern world must transmit their ideas exclusively by oral means is one that falls into the trap of primitivising and infantilising. While a concentration on the oral nature of indigenous religion serves well as a contrast to the dominance of scripture in World Religions, to insist upon it as a defining characteristic is to seek to trap Indigenous Peoples and their religions in an unchanging limbo in which movement and innovation are impossible. This is clearly not the case. As Puca asserts, Indigenous Peoples move from place to place over time, even if their foundation myths may suggest

[83] See Chapter 7 for a discussion of different types of Ancestor in Druidry.

otherwise. Their traditions may change and evolve, and their organisation and communication have evolved to take advantage of modern technology. Many First Nation Peoples have websites as well as using social media to communicate within themselves and to engage with the wider world. For this reason, I would argue against Cox that oral transmission in itself is not necessarily characteristic of indigenous religion in the modern world, although a lack of divinely revealed written scripture is.

Druidry is totally lacking in anything that could be conceived of as scripture. *The Bardas* of Iolo Morganwg, while it contains many of the ideas and rituals that were later incorporated into Druidry, is not widely known or read among modern Druids and is certainly not regarded as having scriptural status. Perhaps the closest thing to scripture within Druidry is the *Hanes Taliesin*, a 17th century manuscript included in Charlotte Guest's *Mabinogion*, which tells the tale of the birth of the legendary Welsh bard Taliesin. This, along with the Four Branches of the *Mabinogi*, is a primary source for Druidic belief, liturgy and ritual. Even so, it is not treated as scriptural in the generally accepted sense of the term. While the story of Taliesin is central to the teachings of several British orders, there is no absolute requirement or expectation that Druids will know or use it and it is not 'required reading'. While excerpts or ideas from it may be used in a ritual setting this is neither expected nor particularly common.

In his account of the Gallic War (De Bello Gallico 6.14), Julius Caesar claimed that while the Druids themselves were educated and literate, using Greek for most of their writing, their religious teachings were communicated only orally, since they were considered too sacred to be committed to writing (Koch 2003, 21–22). It would appear, then, that under most commonly accepted definitions, the peoples of Iron Age Britain would qualify as Indigenous People, and their religion as an indigenous one. Certainly, their religion, so far as can be ascertained at this distance, was tied to the land and to particular landscapes; Their teachings were transmitted orally, and their religion was repressed by a colonial occupying force.

While this may have been true for the original Druids, none of this can be said of the modern spiritual movements that have taken inspiration from them. As I have said, it is not reasonable to expect that any religion in the modern world, indigenous or otherwise, should communicate its ideas or teachings entirely through oral transmission. However, many Druid orders do wish to reflect the oral aspect of their history and heritage as they perceive it. The *gwersi* produced by OBOD at Bard, Ovate and Druid levels are available as written booklets, but also as CDs containing oral recordings of the teachings. This is done in order that those undertaking the courses can have an experience of oral learning, as their ancestors would have done. In 2021, an entirely online option was introduced for the Bardic course, incorporating oral elements such as stories and the music of Damh the Bard. This is an interesting example of the use of the increasing possibilities afforded in developing technology in order to incorporate indigenising[84] elements into Druidry. The Anglesey Druid Order (ADO) is another that makes significant use of oral transmission, this time face to face. Until 2020, it was necessary to spend several weekends in Anglesey over the course of a year, immersing oneself in the storied landscape and receiving the teachings and rituals face to face in order to gain full membership of the order. This has now changed, partly as a response to Covid, and partly because of increased interest from around the world, particularly the USA. Online courses are now available. However, these include video and Zoom tuition and are still, therefore, to some extent oral and 'face to face'. While it would be wrong to claim that modern Druidry is an orally transmitted tradition, there is still very much an attachment, albeit primarily a romantic one, to oral transmission and the value of face-to-face contact and teaching. The Bardic skills of poetry, music and storytelling are intrinsic to Druidry and its ways of making sense of and forming relationships with the living world. Druidry makes use of the rhetoric of oral transmission to the extent that this is practical in a Western, modernist society, and so in this respect there are clear points of contact with indigenous religion.

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[84] See p139-141.

Land Spirits, Ancestors and Kinship

The final criterion suggested by Cox is ‘sharing a kinship based world view in which attention is directed towards ancestor spirits as the central figures in religious life and practice.’ In this respect, Druidry makes a very interesting comparison with religions that are more traditionally characterised as indigenous. Druids in Britain, as we have seen, tend on average to be well educated, professional and comparatively well off. That is to say, they inhabit, and indeed, prosper in mainstream Western society. They do, however, frequently have a self-consciously different way of orientating themselves towards the world than the materialist agnosticism that is the norm. Druidry aspires to embrace a relational model of existing in the world, as opposed to the commercial, consumerist model espoused by the Neo-Liberal norm of mainstream society (Woolley 2017). Thus, the world, the creatures with which we share it, and the landscape itself are things with which Druids seek to establish relationships based on reciprocity, kinship, and respect rather than seeing them as commodities to be managed and consumed for personal benefit. We have already discussed the ‘new animism’ that is becoming increasingly common among Druids and its view of humanity as something that is always in negotiated relationship with the ‘wider than human world’ (Abram 1997).

Encounters with spirits of the land are common among Druids. While only 7% made explicit reference to ‘spirits’ as being central to their understanding of Druidry, 63% referred to nature, most of these in the sense of its being animate or ensouled in some way. Accounts of encounters with land spirits, or with trees and stones that are experienced as ‘other than human persons’ are common in Druidry, as demonstrated by the examples given below:

> I visited a lone standing stone in the Midlands. I meditated with her and got the impression of how much she misses her "sisters"- the other stones that used to stand with her but have since gone. I also saw where they originally were, but I haven't found any sources to verify that what I saw was accurate.

> I have met two very ancient trees with whom I felt connected for a few precious seconds. I felt they were aware of my presence, and I was aware of theirs.
>
> I met the “Lady of Mists & Sheep” on Cadair Idris. I have experienced the presence of the Genius Loci of Primrose Hill, who is best described as a large “Talbot” a red-eared hunting dog somewhat akin to an Irish wolfhound & about the size of the largest Great Dane you could imagine.” (Uzzell 2018, 76)

Ancestors[85] too, play a central role in the Druidic understanding of the world. One of the reasons why ancient monuments are so important and have such a draw on the imagination of Druids is because of a feeling of connection with an ancestral past and with the ancient ancestors who built them.[86]
As we shall in see chapter 7, there is no single understanding within Druidry of what or who ‘The Ancestors’ are, however, the idea of Ancestors is clearly of great importance within Druidry compared to other Paganisms, with 25% claiming that some sort of relationship with Ancestors is central to their idea of Druidry, and 95.6% claiming that the Ancestors take some role in their ritual or religious practice.[87] Shallcrass (2021, 24) summarises this affective connection with both land and ancestry when he says:

> BDO grew out of my personal quest to discover the oldest religion that was indigenous to the British Isles, where I was born, have lived all my life, and where my ancestors lived as far back as I can trace them. Part of the reason this mattered to me was because of Ancestry.

Owen, (2020b, 75) points out that in most Druid ceremonies the Ancestors are understood as a homogenous and indistinct group relating to the distant pre-Christian past, rather than to particular dead kin that are remembered. This may be due, in part, to the fact that it is necessary to go back far longer than living memory, or, indeed, reliable records, before one encounters ancestors from the pre-Christian past, with whom modern Druids may be more likely to feel a sense of kinship.

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[85] I have capitalised the word ‘Ancestors’ throughout this thesis where it is used to refer to supernatural beings with power to affect Druids, rather than simply to refer to progenitors.

[86] See Chapter 10 for a full discussion on this and the consequences of this for the ‘new barrows’.

[87] Information taken from my online survey.

In fact, many Druids do utilise rituals and meditations that help them to form connections with their recent ancestors, and some keep 'ancestral altars' which may include pictures of recent ancestors to whom offerings of various kinds may be made and from whom help may be sought. This is very much a matter of personal belief and practice within Druidry, although it is not uncommon. Forming relationships with Christian forebears who may have had or be perceived to have had very different world views, may be problematic, as may forming relationships with those who were morally suspect or with whom one may have had a difficult relationship in life. This means that veneration, or at least relationship with the more recent dead may be complicated or difficult, but not that it is impossible or undesirable.

Engaging with ancient Ancestors need not always be ritual or ceremonial in nature. It is quite common for Druids to engage in some form of re-enactment or reconstruction of ancient lifeways or practices. This might include wearing clothing that is seen to be in keeping with the Iron Age, or with an idea, accurate or otherwise, about what ancient Druids may have worn. Alternatively, it might consist of building a roundhouse constructed to resemble those of the Iron Age, such as that at Wild Ways,[88] in which the Bardic skills of poetry, song, music and storytelling may be practised in a way that is reminiscent of ancient times. Many Druids learn about and practise crafts and skills from the past, such as herbalism, music, or textile crafts. Owen, (2020b, 78), suggests that this engagement with traditional crafts is done in imitation, conscious or otherwise, of Indigenous Peoples, such as the Native American tribes, who often preserve traditional crafts as a part of their indigenous identity. I suspect, however, that the reason has more to do with cultivating an understanding of living in the past as it would have been experienced by their pre-Christian ancestors. My own experiences of historical re-enactment support this theory- there was often a feeling of excitement in working out, through research or experimentation, how something was done; or in being able to enlighten a museum as to the

[88] http://wildwaysontheborle.co.uk/wild-ways/4562022741

purpose of a particular artefact. One of the favourite sayings of the Ealdor of the society I belonged to was, 'It must have been just like this!'[89] For Druids too, the retrieval and cultivation of ancient skills and crafts leads to an affective sense of connection with the ancestors. We can, then, say that a kinship-based relationship with the wider world, including with ancestors is an inherent part of modern Druidry for most of its adherents and that to this extent at least, Druidry contains elements that could be seen as indigenous. This understanding of Druidry does, however, require a wider definition of 'kinship' than is more usual in discussions of indigeneity and indigenous religion. If we allow for Harvey's ideas of a relational animism based on a wider than human world for our understanding of kinship- rather than on one based exclusively on blood-ties, then modern Druidry can be included within Cox's criteria. There is, however, a further sense in which Druidry could be considered to be based on ideas of kinship. Letcher, (2001, 131), raised the question of whether Druidry could be described in terms of the 'Neo Tribes' of the post-modern world posited by Michel Maffesoli and it is to this question that I shall now briefly turn.

Is Druidry Tribal?

In *The Time of the Tribes* (1996), Maffesoli claims that the post-modern period is characterised by a decline in the importance of the 'individual' in favour of the 'person' or '*persona'* who exists only in relationship with those around them, and who may take on various different roles in different groups and contexts (Maffesoli 1996, 66). He further claims that the move away from institutions and organisations (such as the Christian Church) has resulted not in disinterest and disengagement with politics or religion but with a less organised and more fractured approach to social life, including religious life. People, he suggests, form 'affective hubs' based on mutual interest or the fact that they are thrown together by everyday life. These 'Neo Tribes' as he describes them, are 'emotional communities, motivated by the act of being

[89] The late Kim Siddorn on numerous occasions. Usually in a downpour or when something important had broken!

together' (1996, 16). They may express their membership of a group through dress, the use of particular symbols or use of speech and, sometimes, through secrecy (1996, 90–96). These 'tribes' are locally based and nebulous, forming and dissolving as people move from one to another. The nature of these emotional communities has, he suggests, a form of religiosity about it in the Durkheimian sense of a 'social divine' (Durkheim 2008).

Of course, the world has changed almost beyond recognition since the publication of *The Time of the Tribes* with the advent of social media allowing people to communicate in real time, face to face across continents. This means that the communities he describes no longer need to be locally based in order to operate effectively, and the movement of people no longer has a great effect on them, meaning that they may become more stable over time. Maffesoli suggests that there is a sense of longing or nostalgia for the affective communities that people believe existed in a simpler, less institutionalised past, and that this is one of the main factors influencing the development of these 'tribes'. He argues that they constitute a

> reactualisation of the ancient myth of community; myth in the sense in which something that has, perhaps, never existed, acts, effectively, on the imagination of the time. This explains the existence of those small tribes, ephemeral in their actualisation, but which nevertheless create a state of mind that, for its part, seems called upon to last (Maffesoli 1996, 148).

Modern Druids are drawn together through a common view of the world and a common ethos that emphasises relationality. Maffesoli's model of 'neo-tribes' seems to fit well with what we see occurring in Druid groves and seed groups on a smaller and more local scale[90]; and even with Druid orders on a larger scale. In the foreword to the book, Rob Shields notes that such tribes have

> ...strong powers of integration and inclusion' marked by 'initiatory rituals and stages of membership…wearing particular types of dress, exhibiting group-specific styles of adornment and espousing the shared values and ideals of the collectivity (Maffesoli 1996, xi).

[90] Although, as we have seen, there are now seed groups that exist exclusively online.

This works as a very accurate description of Druidry, suggesting strongly that this ‘neo tribalism’ is at least one way in which Druidry could be usefully understood. There is, of course, an issue for the modern scholar in using the term ‘tribe’ within the context of a movement that exists almost exclusively within the industrialised West. As with the term ‘Indigenous’, there are political implications to the term. ‘Tribe’, in the anthropological sense has generally been applied to Indigenous People who have often been colonialised and oppressed by the West. To use the term in the context of modern British Druids could, with some justification, invite accusations of cultural appropriation. However, as Rob Shields comments:

> The little masses of Maffesoli’s analysis are heterogeneous fragments, the remainders of mass consumption society, groups distinguished by their members’ shared lifestyles and tastes. Tribus are thus not ‘tribes’ in the traditional anthropological sense, for they do not have the fixity and longevity of tribes. Nor are they neo-tribes; they are better understood as ‘postmodern tribes’ or even ‘pseudo tribes. (Maffesoli 1996, x)

It would, perhaps, be better if a completely new term that did not carry the colonial baggage could be found to describe this phenomenon, the problem is that Druids themselves frequently use the language of tribalism. Many will say that in Druidry they have ‘found their tribe’ and will speak about festivals as a gathering of the tribe. As we have seen, Letcher suggests that Druid camps and festivals can be described as Temporary Tribal Zones (TTZs) becoming, for a while, the tribal territory of the Druids (2001, 131). The use of tribal language is in part because this is the word that most readily describes the feeling Druids have that they are bound beyond friendship into something resembling family or kin.

Druid groups of all kinds are often bound by common use of dress, symbol, language and semiotics. Beyond this, there is also, once again, the will to identify with the Iron Age Celtic tribes who were truly tribal in the anthropological sense and whom many Druids regard as Ancestors of tribe or culture.[91] We see, then, that there is a strong sense of ‘tribalism’ and kinship

[91] For the idea of Ancestors of blood, place and tradition, as well as of culture and tribe, see Chapter 7

evident in the lived experience of modern Druidry. The exponential growth of social media in recent decades means that 'kinship groups' can now be extended over vast distances of space, and very disparate groups can be brought together into a virtual TTZ. I would therefore suggest that in terms of having a kinship-based worldview which foregrounds the importance of ancestors within the kinship group, Druidry very well fits the definition of indigenous religion, provided only that we are prepared to broaden our understanding of 'kinship' beyond blood ties bounded within a closely defined location. In the modern world, with its almost infinite array of online communities and new ways of understanding and performing the idea of 'family', 'kinship' takes on a far wider and more complex set of meanings than is accommodated by 19th and 20th century anthropological understandings of the term. In traditional understandings of indigenous religion, kinship is very much related to bloodlines. Family group that extend into tribes and 'peoples' bound by physical connection to a particular place. The extent to which 'kinship' as it exists within modern Western society, could be seen as congruent with the idea of indigeneity can be debated. In Druidry, the basic model of tribe or kinship is not based on blood relation. Many Druids are the only one within their family to have embraced a Druid identity. The affective connections, however, are strong, even in online communities. The extent to which this can be seen as in indigenising factor will depend on the extent to which one is prepared to allow that 'affective' or 'neo-tribal' kinship is comparable or analogous to kinship in the anthropological sense.

Druidry as a new kind of Indigenous Religion.

Clearly modern Druidry looks very different to the religions practiced by Indigenous People around the world who have been subjected to colonialisation and oppression in recent history, but this need not mean that the term does not have relevance and meaning when applied to modern Druidry. As Puca observes (2020, 154):

> When ‘indigenous’ is interpreted and understood in a dynamic sense, devoid of misleading primitivist claims of pureness and immutability, it becomes clear how such manifestations of indigeneity and indigenizing do very well occur in the Western world.

In other words, if we are prepared to admit that Indigenous religion is not limited by Western expectations of immobility, inertia and oral transmission, and if we are prepared to accept a new understanding of affective kinship, then it is possible to see examples of indigenising movements and religions in the modern Western world. Harvey, (2007, 231), has defined indigeneity as

> to know where one is in relation to a place and an ancestry that are both conceived of in ways distinguishable from racially centred, individualistically consumed modernity.

We have already discussed Druidry as a movement that is self-consciously counter cultural in so far as it seeks (with varying degrees of success) to distance itself from the core values of consumerism and capitalism as they exist in the modern world. Ancestry, while it is central to Druid identity constriction, is not necessarily, or even usually understood entirely in terms of DNA or bloodlines.

Likewise, Owen (2013, 81) proposes a definition of indigenous religion as ‘a religion that relates to the land, the people (inclusively) and that which has gone before’. She continues, ‘This more inclusive, relational definition…allows a religion or tradition such as Druidry to be regarded as indigenous.’ She suggests that this definition avoids the necessity for ethnic criteria, relating as it does to the honouring of local places and people regardless of who is doing so. This raises the question of whether anyone who venerates a site local to them could be considered to be practising indigenous religion. As we have seen, there is no necessity for someone to belong to an Indigenous people in order to practise indigenous religion. What is important is that a person feels an Ancestral significance and connection to the place, even if Ancestry is understood in terms of place or tribe/culture rather than blood. This definition, however, does not overtly address the need for recognition of the movement as indigenous religion within the wider community or state (2020b, 71).

For many modern Druids, there is an effective or emotional connection to the idea of an ancient Druidic past. Owen suggests that modern life, with its breaking of traditional community bonds as people move for education and work, leads to a sense of disconnection and alienation. Thus 'indigeneity' becomes conscious when threatened.' (2020b, 82). In other words, there is a deep emotional need for 'belonging' and connection with an imagined past community defined by different values to those of modernity. An attachment to a 'homeland' that never was as 'an idea, an image and a memory.' (Johnson 2002, 327)

Finally, Shallcrass (2021, 22,25) raises a further argument for the consideration of Druidry as indigenous religion, and that is one of its connection and relationship with the indigenous gods,[92] spirits and Ancestors of Britain. He suggests that all spiritual traditions have their origins in the interaction between one or more humans, and one or more other than human beings who can reveal spiritual power and knowledge. Foundation legends form a link between people and the places in which these encounters took place. He suggests that stories such as those in the *Mabinogi*, even if they are Medieval, are memories of encounters with 'the Other' that are rooted in particular locations that are, by extension, sacred, and that modern Druidry, just as ancient Druidry was, is inspired by direct and ongoing contact with 'other than human beings of great power and wisdom.' From this emic perspective, at least, even if Druidry has changed beyond recognition in the last two millennia, yet there is a direct connection in that it is a negotiated and reciprocal relationship between humans and other beings deeply rooted in the British landscape in order to create a tradition that is vibrant and relevant to a connected and engaged life in the modern world. Furthermore, the belief in reincarnation is common among modern Druids, and for some this also feeds

[92] The question of which gods and spirits are, in fact, indigenous and/or naturalised to Britain is one that is well beyond the scope of this thesis. See chapter 2 for a discussion of the approach taken in this thesis towards 'supernatural' experiences and encounters.

into a sense of continuity, in this case, personal, between the ancient Druidry of the Iron Age and that of 21st Century Britain.[93]

There are then, many reasons to consider Druidry to be an indigenous religion in Britain, even if it looks very different to what we usually understand by 'indigenous religion'. However, the term remains contentious and there are many who feel that its use to describe Druidry is inappropriate at best and actively offensive and inflammatory at worst.

Indigeneity as a divisive term

The term 'Indigenous' as applied to both people and religion is far from neutral. It is relational, having no meaning except with regard to 'non-indigenous' people or 'World' religion (Harvey 2020b, 5), and it is highly politicised. The obvious issue is that is recent decades there have been attempts to mitigate the effects of centuries of oppression and colonialisation of Indigenous Peoples through the ways that they are treated by the law and the media. Claims to indigenous religion by people who are not oppressed and marginalised within their own states can therefore be seen as deeply problematic. It can distract attention from Indigenous Peoples with genuine grievances, and in some cases, there has been a demonstrable connection with far right, racist politics causing great concern not only to the countries involved, but also to Pagans.

Tafjord asserts that claims to indigeneity are of three kinds: colonial/anti colonial, romantic, and nationalist. Claims to indigeneity among new religious movements are almost always of the second or third type.

Druid claims are, he suggests, an attempt to

> Recycle old and invent new ideas about golden but oppressed and almost forgotten local religious pasts, about grand religious ancestors or rare noble others who can serve as exemplary guides to (post) modern seekers, and about nature worship and

[93] See chapter 7 for a discussion of Druidic concepts of life after death.

> nature religion that can be revived or imported. …Primordialism and primitivism are positively valued parts of their ideologies ethically as well as aesthetically (2020, 143).

While I would disagree with his final comment about primordialism and primitivism as positive ethical values in modern Druidry, what he says does have a great deal of truth to it. This would not, however, matter very much, were it not for his next point which is that Druids, even if they do see themselves as in opposition to mainstream culture, have chosen to put themselves there, and, unlike Indigenous Peoples, cannot 'freely abandon the positions that they are held in by colonial actors and structures.' (2020, 144) For this reason, he suggests that the Indigenous victims of colonial abuse and violence would be amazed and appalled at attempts by modern Druids among others to compare themselves to them.

Tafjord further makes the difficult but necessary point that there are nationalist movements in Europe and, to some extent, Britain, that thrive on the rhetoric and language of indigeneity. At its worst, this has led to those claiming to be representatives of an ancient 'indigenous' religion carrying out acts of extreme violence as a way of protecting 'indigenous culture' from a perceived foreign, often Islamic threat.[94] Indeed, the British Defense League often frames Christianity as a European indigenous religion that needs to be defended from Islam.

With regard to Druidry, Tafjord allows that Druids themselves do not appear to be xenophobic, and that they appear open to other societies and cultures, however, he warns that many of the arguments that inspire them also inspire right wing nationalism. He claims that the fact that several Druid websites feel the need to actively state that they absolutely reject right wing nationalist or racist ideas implies that they attract interest from such groups and individuals, suggesting that structurally, at least, they are aligned with right wind ideologies (2020, 147).

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[94] The worst recent example of this being the murder, by Anders Brievik, of a number of young members of the Worker's Youth League at a holiday camp in Norway on 11th July 2011.

Philip Shallcrass, head of the BDO, was extremely offended by this assertion and his response was rapid and strongly worded:

> 'Nationalists and white supremacists are morons. Tracing the origins of Druidry has nothing to do with their pathetic, stupid, nauseating racist agenda. The population of the British Isles consists of a multitude of folk of different origins who have made it their home since the end of the last Ice Age. (Shallcrass 2019)

The fact that this sort of discussion is possible, however, highlights one of the problems with the use of the language of indigeneity.

A further issue relating to the relationship between traditions such as Druidry and indigenous religions as they are traditionally understood is that of cultural appropriation. The claim is that in the absence of genuine knowledge about the shamanic and other religious practices of the ancient Celts, modern Druids appropriate practices such as the ritual use of drumming, sweat houses and 'smudging'[95] from contemporary Indigenous communities, and particularly from the American First Peoples. This is done, it is claimed, without permission and with no real holistic understanding of the cultures from which they are taken. In view of this, it is interesting that one of the strongest arguments for the acceptance of Druidry as indigenous religion comes from the Native American author Vine Deloria Jr. Speaking of European traditions such as modern Druidry he says:

> Whether present practitioners are precisely following ancient religious practices is less important than the fact that the religion has contemporary followers who are attempting to make the proper connections with what has gone before. That religions change is a foregone conclusion…nearly as important may be the fact that lands can apparently be consecrated by a particular religious group wishing to place its roots in the land (Deloria 2003, 288).

[95] This refers to the use of smoke from a bundle of sacred herbs to ritually cleanse an area. In the native American tradition, the herb is most usually white sage, which is now endangered in many areas due to over cultivation for the 'New Age' market. Many Druids prefer the term 'saining', which has its roots in recorded Scottish practice, and use herbs indigenous to Britain such as lavender and mugwort.

It should, however, be remembered that his chief concern was to dissuade Europeans from plundering his own tradition by encouraging them to look towards their own, even if those traditions were broken.

Shallcrass believes that the indigenous spirits of the Americas have recognised him as a *bona fide* representative of the indigenous tradition of Britain and that on this basis he has interacted with them in a way that is mutually respectful and constructive. He describes an event where a young Lakota was given a spirit song to bring to the Druidic *gorsedd* in Avebury (2021, 40). He also makes a strong case for practices such as smudging and sweat houses having a long history in Britain, potentially as far back as the Bronze Age (2021, 30). There is, however, an extent to which this is irrelevant. There is no doubt that genuine cultural appropriation can and does take place in modern British Paganisms, including Druidry, and that this is a matter for serious concern and reflection.

Given the fact that claims to indigeneity are so problematic, it is worth considering why it is that some British Druids are so invested in them. What is it that they seek to gain by being acknowledged as an indigenous religion? I have already discussed the affective and emotional pull of the idea of indigeneity and that should not be underestimated. For some Druids it is an important part of the way in which they construct their identity and make meaning of the world. There is also the possibility that it could afford them greater access to the media and so wider recognition as a genuine and relevant cultural force in society. The wider issue of indigeneity also played a not insignificant part in the fight of the Druid Network to be recognised as a religion by the Charity Commission.

One argument that has been made by many, including Emma Restall-Orr and Arthur Uther Pendragon, is that as representatives of an indigenous religion that has its origins in the Iron Age or earlier, British Druids are in some way custodians of ancient sites such as Stonehenge or the many burial mounds scattered around the British countryside, and also of the pre-Christian dead.

Both have made a case for these to be returned to the earth from which they were excavated, or at least to be treated with the same respect as the Christian dead. Whatever the merits of the argument that the pre-Christian dead deserve better, or at least different treatment, the claim that modern Druids should be custodians of such sites is deeply problematic from the viewpoint of appropriation. There is a case to be made that as people who care deeply about such sites and about the ancient dead, Druids and Pagans have a part to play in collaboration with archaeologists in the management and presentation of such sites, and indeed this has often been the case. However, the claim has sometimes been made that Druids stand in the same relationship to the ancient sites and dead of Britain as the aboriginal inhabitants of places such as the Americas and Australia do to theirs. There is, of course, no reason why Druids have any more 'possession' of such sites and remains than any other inhabitant of Britain. There is, as we have seen, nothing that makes them any more ethnically or genetically connected to them than anyone else. Crucially, they are not in the same position as Indigenous Peoples whose ethnic ancestors have been taken without their consent and against their wishes and living religious traditions to museums in Britain, Europe and America as part of a systematic program of oppression and domination. For this reason, to make this claim as something associated with indigeneity certainly comes dangerously close to appropriation and it is easy to see why Indigenous Peoples would find it offensive. However, this close and at times intense emotional sense of connection to ancient sites and their dead is an important part of Druidry and will be discussed at length in Chapter 10.

The issues discussed here are real and important. As Tafjord notes, until recently 'indigenous' as applied to an ethnic group was a pejorative term and it is only recently that it has begun to be seen in a positive light such that traditions such as Druidry seek to engage with it and 'sail under this flag'. The rights, privileges and formal recognition of indigenous religions on the international political stage have been hard won. It can be understood, then why Indigenous Peoples might be wary of Western groups from previously

Imperial nations seeking to use the same language and claim the same status.

It is therefore imperative, he argues, that scholars make a clear distinction between the Indigenous Peoples whose claim to indigenous religion is based on anti-colonialism, and those whose indigenising is 'romantic'. This is important, not least, because right wing nationalist groups are using much of the same language and rhetoric and they 'contribute seriously to a diluting and potential jeopardizing of the fragile anti-colonial project of the internationally recognized indigenous peoples' movement' (2020, 156).

It is beyond doubt that Druidry shares many of the characteristics of indigenous religion and that it is demonstrably different to World Religion, or to mainstream religion in general. It is also clear that 'indigenous religion' is a highly charged and problematic term. In the next section I will explore some possible solutions that would allow scholars to take the indigenous characteristics of Druidry seriously while avoiding some of the pitfalls associated with the term.

Indigenous or Indigenising? A Possible Solution

The problem is primarily one of semantics. We lack a way to speak of Druidry that avoids issues of appropriation and yet takes seriously the unique aspects of Druidry understood as religion. There are several possibilities that would allow scholars of religion to do this.

Firstly, Owen, (2020b, 76–79), has suggested that 'native spirituality' expresses the same ideas in a way that is less loaded with negative associations. As we have seen, 'native spirituality' is a phrase that appears on the website of the BDO, and Owen suggests that 'native' is a word that is in more common use than 'indigenous'. One can, for example, claim to be a native of New York without any associated assumptions or unsubstantiated claims. The difficulty with this terminology is that it is reminiscent of the 'Native

Faith' movements, particularly in continental Europe, which are closely linked to far right and nationalist agendas. In acknowledging this, Owen demonstrates unambiguously that Druidry in Britain cannot be associated with the same polemic. Druidry is, as she asserts, 'more concerned about respectful relations to the land and heritage than to nationalistic interests,' Furthermore, Druid leaders and writers actively promote 'respectful, internationalist, liberal and inclusive attitudes' and call out any who violate these values on social media platforms (2020b, 79). However, in the minds of many, 'native spirituality' simply sounds too much like 'Native Faith', causing associations and assumptions to be made that are damaging to the reputation of Druidry and for this reason 'native' seems to be as fraught with difficulty as 'indigenous'.

Another term that could be used, and that would, I suggest, circumvent some of the problems is 'ancestral' religion or spirituality. There can be no doubt that the religion of the original Iron Age Druids is in some way ancestral to the modern people of Britain in that it was practised in these lands people who once inhabited them.[96] Moreover, it should be remembered that 'Ancestors' does not refer exclusively to pre-Christian progenitors. Many of the folk traditions that have been incorporated into Pagan and Druid practice are ancestral. These include the ideas and liturgies of Iolo Morganwg discussed above, as well as the Mari Lwyd,[97] Morris dancing, the Jack in the Green festivities in Hastings and many others. These were often understood by 19th and early 20th Century scholars to be survivals of pre-Christian religion. While this idea has been widely discredited by modern scholarship the fact remains that they are ancestral to Druidry, and so to Druids, in the sense that they stand in a direct line of connection to modern Druid and Pagan practice. Those who originally practised them in the 18th or 19th centuries were trying to establish a connection with a their own romanicised rural past, even if they were mistaken in thinking that such practices were genuinely ancient.

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[96] At the very least in the sense of ancestors of place, and, for many ancestors of blood as well. See chapter 7 for a discussion of Druidic ideas of ancestry.

[97] See chapter 8 for a fuller discussion of the Mari Lwyd.

Furthermore, in recent decades they have been adopted into Paganism and Druidry as vibrant and meaningful practices, used in celebration of the gods, the ancestors, and the turning of the year. As Letcher observes, they may not have been Pagan, or, indeed, overtly religious, in origin, but they certainly are now (2013). 'Ancestors', in Druidic thinking, may or may not be those from whom one is directly descended. The term is also applied to those who have lived in the same place, either locally or nationally, or to those whose ideas have become central to the ways in which a person constructs their identity. Folk practices ritually incorporated into Druidry could, therefore, be linked to both ancestors of place and ancestors of tradition with no inference that anyone should be excluded based on their ethnic origins.

This is not, of course, a perfect solution. Someone taking a narrower view of 'ancestral' could still make the connection with nationalist or racist agendas, however, the term is not specifically linked to right wing movements in the same way as 'Native Faith' and it seems to me to say the sort of things that Druids want to say about themselves, while avoiding the problems of the language of indigeneity. I would, therefore, suggest that 'ancestral religion' or 'ancestral spirituality' is an appropriate way to think about Druidry in modern Britain.

Returning to the language of indigeneity, the Sacred Sites Project (Blain and Wallis 2007, 10) suggested the term 'new-indigenes' to describe

> ...those Pagans whose re-enchantment practices involve perceiving nature as animate- alive with spirits, 'wights' multiple deities and otherworldly beings, and who identify with pagan Iron Age and Early Medieval ancestors from ancient Europe, finding resonance with earlier pre-historic cultures and indigenous 'tribal' societies elsewhere, particularly those whose religion is 'animist' and/or 'shamanic'.

This is, as Owen points out (2020b, 80) a form of indigeneity that is strongly bound up in romanticism, and indeed, with the aims of the Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th Centuries. However, it is a useful term in that it takes seriously the extent to which many Druids feel themselves to be practising an indigenous religion or spirituality, while also making clear that what they are doing can be clearly distinguished from indigenous religion as it

is commonly understood. It also “acts as an extension, specific to paganisms, of Maffesoli’s ‘new tribes’” (Blain and Wallis 2007, 10). Many Druids, as we have seen, use the language of tribalism to describe their emotional experience of practising Druidry, and draw a comparison between seasonal camps and festivals and the seasonal religious gatherings of ancient tribes. The term ‘new-indigenes’ is useful in that it allows both Druids and scholars to take these modes of world building and identity making seriously without detracting from the very specific ways in which they are applied to previously colonised peoples.

Another productive approach to the problem arose with the publication in 2020 of *Indigenizing Movements in Europe*, edited by Graham Harvey. This book takes its cue from Johnson’s coining of the terms ‘extending’ and indigenizing’ to discuss the activities of the Candomblé and Garifuna peoples (Johnson 2002).

> Indigenizing discourses and practices have as their objective the configuration, at least imaginatively or discursively, of a pure group performing traditional practices on its original homeland. When outsider signs, symbols and practices are relied upon, they are quickly indigenized- given a culturally specific form that makes the outsider symbol “ours’, even traditional. Extending discourses and practices take as their objective the lowering of social boundaries, the circulation of religious knowledge and symbols into wider availability, and the overt assimilation of new forms acknowledged to be from outside (2002, 312).

Harvey (2020a, 33) argues that while Johnson is most concerned with the process by which practices and ideas are brought into traditions, ‘indigenising’ can also be applied to the importance of locality and localising. He (2020b, 8) proposes three modes of ‘being indigenous’ that modern Pagan movements have adopted:

- Claiming to be reviving or re-presenting ancient religious traditions
- Learning and adopting practices from Indigenous People, particularly Native Americans and Siberians
- An emphasis on localising rather than on universality.

These three overlap and particular groups might employ different strategies at different times. I would also suggest that a fourth mode might be included- that of the move towards animism and dividuality as a world view. We have already discussed the second of these, with regard to the dangers of appropriation, however, we have also seen how dialogue between Druidry and Indigenous Peoples can be conducted respectfully and fruitfully (Shallcrass 2021, 37–40). The ways in which some Druid groups and individuals have 'adopted' local sites of natural beauty, or even sites that have been damaged by human activity as sacred sites, regardless of whether they have any association with ancient peoples, can therefore be seen as evidence of indigenising. Druids may also use local deities in their rituals, so far as this can be done, or adapt the timings of the seasonal festivals to fit with local conditions, usually later the further north in Britain they are held (Harvey 2020a, 33). The increasing number of Druids who adopt an animist and relational view to the world can also be seen as an indigenising move, being more in line with the 'ways of being' that are common among Indigenous Peoples, as well as consciously opposing the individualistic commodity and consumer driven approach that is central to Modern Western world views.

Harvey suggests that the way in which ritual is understood and performed in some Pagan groups, including Druid groups, is fundamentally different to that of Protestant Christianity, which has become normative. 'Ritual' as it is often understood, points to, or is symbolic of a belief beyond itself. Within Druidry, as well as other Paganisms, ritual is often its own point and *raison d'etre*, without recourse to anything beyond itself. It engages with an emotional and bodily form of knowing that is beyond propositional belief (Scrutton 2018). Thus, ritual becomes 'enactment of inter-personal - and often inter-species – relationality. Ritual finds its meaning in the communication (to performers as much as to recipients) of respect and reciprocity.' When Druids engage in ritual in this way they are 'becoming more like Indigenous people in encouraging relational dividuation' so that 'what can be romantic, appropriative and in other ways colonialist, can also be radical and

contributory to strategies of resistance to consumer-capitalist Modernity.' (Harvey 2020a, 37, 46).

Indigenising, like religion, is performative. It is a way in which a person or group self-consciously constructs their identity in opposition to something else- generally the reductive, disenchanted consumerist world of Western Modernity. Thus, indigenising is not a matter of ontology. It is something that you do rather than something that you are. For this reason, the language of indigenising offers a possible way to speak about modern Druidry in a way that is not bound up with a claim to be, or to be treated as Indigenous People.

It is important to remember, however, that not all Druids see themselves as representatives of an indigenous or ancestral religion. Many display extending or globalising characteristics rather than indigenising ones, suggesting an inversion of the Wheel of the Year for the Southern Hemisphere, and generalising any reference to deity as 'Spirit' or 'Great Spirit' as a way of including people from any religious tradition. For some, the language of indigeneity serves to exclude those who might otherwise engage with Druidry, particularly those whose spirituality might be closely associated with 'nature' but not necessarily with pre-Christian religion in Britain. They might see their primary religious identity as Christian or Jewish but see Druidic practice as a way of connecting with the divine in nature.

Conclusion

In concluding this discussion, I would suggest that whilst referring to Druidry as an 'indigenous religion' in Britain is not without difficulties, it is, non-the-less more or less accurate for many modern Druids. The term 'new-indigenes' goes a long way towards clearing up confusion about who and what many Druids claim to be, and together with the concept of 'indigenising' as a thing that Druids do rather than are, it enables productive dialogue amongst and between Druids and scholars. However, I would suggest that Druidry in Britain lies along a spectrum. Harvey asserts:

> Johnson's terms recognize tendencies to emphasize resonance with and relevance to local and ancestral traditions (indigenizing) and tendencies to stress universal relevance or global engagement (extending). These exist on a continuum and are more likely to be matters of emphasis rather than opposites." (2020b, 2).

In the same way, I suggest, the Druid orders in Britain fall along a similar continuum in the extent to which they emphasise indigenising or extending tendencies. Thus, OBOD could be seen to be the least engaged with the language of indigenous religion, seeking to position itself rather as a spiritual set of practices and ways of orientating oneself towards the world that, while they draw on ancient British myths, are equally applicable to people of any religion and none, and can be practiced in similar ways anywhere in the world. When discussing the issue of indigeneity within British Druidry, it should be remembered that OBOD, with its universalising and global dynamics is by far the largest Druid Order in Britain[98], and that the Druids to whom the ideas of indigenous religion or spirituality are important are in the numerical minority; although they are very vocal and influential, particularly over the issue of custodianship of ancient sites and the treatment of the pre-Christian dead.

> I can't help thinking - there's no evidence for this so, this is my fantasy about the past - is that the Druids were the last flourishing of our indigenous shamanistic spirituality. If there were plant law; if there were star law; if there were philosophy, it resided in the Druids. And, therefore, I am really interested in trying to find our own indigenous spirituality from this land from which I can learn and apply in my life - both my academic life but my personal, private, spiritual life. And, to me, that's what I hope the Druids were and that's what the heart of Druidry is. And the reason why I'm not part of an order, it's partly cos I'm too much of an edge dweller. I'm not very good at joining things. I either like to be fully at the centre or thoroughly on the edge. So, I find the OBOD take on Druidry is way too psychological and not animistic enough. I'm much more akin, in tune with the British Druid Order. (Interview with Andy Letcher 31-08-2017)

Of the remaining orders, TDN does not make direct use of the language of indigeneity, although as we have seen, the implication is there in the claims to be a 'religion' as defined by the Charity Commission. The BDO very emphatically does use the language both of indigeneity and religion and has strong indigenising characteristics. I would argue, however, that it is the

[98] Although people do hold membership of multiple orders at the same time, and the views of individual member about the issue of indigeneity will, of course, vary.

ADO[99] that is most strongly indigenising in its practices. It is ontologically and ritually totally emersed in the sacred landscape and history of Anglesey. While it does have members worldwide, Anglesey remains mythologically, ritually, and emotionally at its heart. Much of its ritual is conducted in the Welsh language and Welsh families of deity are invoked in its rituals; the family of Don for the earth, Llyr for the waters, Bel for the sky and Gwyn ap Nudd for the ancestors and *Annwn*. Teaching is still primarily face to face, oral, and embedded in the landscape of Anglesey. For these reasons, despite the fact that it makes no claim to an unbroken link with the Iron Age Druids, Druidry as practiced by the ADO possesses all of the characteristics that are generally associated with indigenous religion. Thus, we can identify two trends within British Druidry, one, characterised by OBOD, is globalising and universalising. Its leaders generally reject the language of religion and indigeneity. TDN, BDO, and ADO, make emphatic use of the language of religion and indigeneity and possess all of the characteristics associated with indigenous religion.

[99] Anglesey Druid Order

Section B: Druidry and the Ritualisation of Death

Chapter 7: Druids and Death

Into the West[100]

Beliefs about the Afterlife

The ways in which Druids ritualise death depends, to a large extent, on what they imagine death to be. Consequently, it is useful to explore the range of beliefs about life after death that exists within modern Druidry. As we have seen, Druidry contains no sacred scripture, and no body of teaching or doctrine to which followers are assumed to adhere. Beliefs about life after death are, therefore, highly diverse and influenced by many factors, including beliefs an individual may have held before they came to Druidry; ideas influenced by scientific or spiritual ideas about the world; and personal experiences. Information about afterlife beliefs has been taken from responses to question 11 in my survey, 'What do you believe happens to someone after they die?'; as well as from interviews conducted with Druid leaders and celebrants. Of the 135 respondents to this question, 23 thought that something survives death, but did not know what. 6 believed that death is the end of consciousness and of the person, although 4 of these did feel it important to note that a person lives on in memory, or in the legacy of their work or creativity. For the purposes of this discussion, I have classified responses that had clear areas of similarity together into categories such as 'reincarnation', 'otherworld', 'merging with the divine' and 'multiple souls'. It should be noted that these are generalisations and that an individual may have been placed into several of these categories where their response was lengthy and nuanced. I have, used quotations from the survey and interview

[100] In Irish mythology, the land of the dead, Tir na N'Óg is believed to be an island situated to the West, and those who die are sometimes said to 'go into the West'. In Druidry, however, the North is generally associated with mid-winter, the earth, and death. It is for this reason that the Ancestors enter the ceremonial circle at Samhain through a gate in the Northwest of the circle.

material to demonstrate the variety and complexity of the beliefs expressed. These have been given at the end of the category to which they are best suited.

Reincarnation

By far the most common belief expressed by the Druids who responded to the survey was in reincarnation. This is a belief most widely adopted by Eastern Dharmic religions and in its simplest form is concerned with the soul leaving the body at death and being born into a new physical body in the material world. Of the 135 respondents to the survey, 58 expressed a belief in reincarnation of some form. There are a number of reasons why this might be so. Firstly, as we have seen, Druids tend to have an affective connection to the past, and particularly with the Iron Age Druids, whom many regard as Ancestors of tradition, if not of blood. According to the account of Julius Caesar the Druids believed in reincarnation, which is why they were fearless in battle (De Bello Gallico 6.14 Tr. Anne Lea. Quoted in Koch 2003, 22). Archaeological evidence may also support a belief in reincarnation. There are very few cemeteries dating from the early to middle Iron Age in Britain, rather the dead appear often to have been subjected to excarnation and the bones deposited in ditches. To the archaeologist Maud Cunnington, this ‘carelessness’ in the treatment of human remains suggested that the body was of little value, probably because the soul was assumed to be reborn (Melrose 2022, 27). Another reason for the popularity of belief in reincarnation among modern Druids may be its inclusion in the supposedly Druidic theology and world view developed by Iolo Morganwg in the 18th Century (Ithel 2007). The fact that reincarnation appears prominently in two of the major inspirations behind modern Druidry, the Iron Age Druids and the writings of Iolo Morganwg, has led to its inclusion in much of the literature about Druidry that has been written by modern Druids themselves, including the distance learning courses produced by some of the Druid orders. Taken together, these factors mean that belief in reincarnation is probably as close as it is possible to get within Druidry to ‘orthodoxy’.

While reincarnation was the single most popular belief, it was held by less than half of the respondents. Beliefs expressed about reincarnation were complex and varied, and opinions differed on what, exactly, was reincarnated. Some used the term to describe rebirth into an Otherworld or Ancestral Realm, with some suggesting that rebirth was possible onto different planets or parallel dimensions. For some, death was followed by a period of rest in a different realm or plane of existence after which a person might choose to be reincarnated in order to continue a journey of learning or might choose to remain in a spiritual state. A common idea was that reincarnation was necessary in order for a soul to learn and evolve, and that at some point it would 'ascend' to merge with the Universe, the Divine or a form of Universal Cosmic Energy. 4 respondents expressed a belief in 'soul groups', where a number of souls choose to be born together over multiple lives, although not always with the same web of relationships. These people expressed the belief that the souls involved in a group would decide collectively what they needed in each incarnation, and that this would be done in some liminal state after death, similar to the Tibetan Buddhist concept of Bardo. Some did not understand reincarnation in terms of the continuation of consciousness at all, seeing it more as a recycling of the physical and energetic components that make up a human being.

> Mostly reincarnation- though I am not wholly sure if everyone will reincarnate. I believe in a bardo state between incarnations where one life is assessed and the next one (loosely) planned. I regard the soul as having neither gender nor race nor species - so that it can experience in all these things through different bodies rather than always reincarnating in a particular type of body. The goal of these changes is to experience the cosmos from many different angles. 303113-303105-26090250

> I believe in reincarnation. When you die you enter a sea of souls and when it's your time to come back you do. You could be there for 3 sec, 3min, 3 years- you get my drift, and that accounts for déjà vu-some residual memory is still with you. But like comes back like- a philosopher in the 16th Century may well be a psychologist now; and bad comes back as bad. Sometimes you may have an overlap like a tape being used over and over again with voices in your head (multiple personalities) or returning in the wrong body for your journey. 303113-303105-26096159

The Otherworld or Summer Lands

The idea of an 'otherworld' is common in modern Paganisms, and in Druidry in particular. The idea is often linked with *Annwn*, ('not world'), or *Annwvyn/Annwfyn* ('very deep') which appears in Welsh mythological tales, and particularly in the Mabinogi. *Annwn* is an alternative world inhabited by a group of beings who are not gods, but who have abilities and characteristics that distinguish them from human beings. They are, perhaps, best understood as something similar to fairies, as they were known and feared before the Victorians reduced them to diminutive, winged remnants of their former selves. In the world view of Iolo Morganwg, *Annwn* was the innermost circle, and the source from which all beings arose. Although there is no suggestion in mythology that *Annwn* is a locus for the dead, the idea of an 'Otherworld' in which the dead reside has come to be a common one in Druidry and the language of *Annwn* is often used to describe it. Some support for this idea in Iron Age belief may come from the importance of water, in which the world is reflected reversed, as a site for ritual deposit. It is possible, although by no means certain, that water was seen as a portal to an Otherworld in which the dead resided. 'Summerland', or 'The Summerlands', an idea derived most probably from the Greek idea of the Fields of Elysium, is another term frequently encountered in Druidry, although it is most common in Wicca. It evokes an idyllic place free from suffering, where, as the name suggests, it is always summer.

It is interesting that in Irish tradition the dead are sometimes believed to go to an otherworld inhabited by the sidhe[101], who dwell in burial mounds. The mounds are, in fact, entrances to the underworld. We have no way of knowing how common or widespread this belief is, or, indeed, when it first originated, but it does provide another link for Druids with the new barrows discussed in Chapter 10.

> And the story of being taken away by the fairies into the west that is the story of death from that tribe at that time. And it's very clearly seen as a place of great pleasure: that, when you die, you go to a better place; it's Moy Mell. It's the plane of pleasure

[101] Loosely translated as 'fairy'.

> where it's a constant party; a continuous unending party of happiness and light and there are no lies and no deceit and it's just fabulous! It's the land of fairy. And that is quite a useful kind of picture to have as an idea of how our ancestors in the British Isles used to view death. I mean, that was, I say British Isles: that was Ireland. But I think the same remains true across quite a lot of the land. And this is why fairies live under burial mounds and so forth because it's actually - that's the entrance to the underworld where the fairies live which is also the land in the west beyond the seventh wave. You can see it when you look to the west. And you can see the clouds. And that's where the sun goes at the end of the day and all of those things. (Interview with Cliff Eastabrook 24/11/2020)

In total, 29 respondents made reference to '*Annwn*', 'The Otherworld' or 'The Summerlands' as a destination for the dead, making it the second most common belief. Of these, 15 believed that it is a temporary resting place where the person can rest and restore themselves in a safe and peaceful setting before deciding to embark on a new incarnation. One reason for the popularity of this belief may be the use of shamanic techniques and practices by Druids[102]. Shamanism is usually described as the practice of projecting one's soul out of the body and into the realm of spirits, typically in order to solve a problem to gain healing for oneself or another. Those who engage in such activities often experience a number of realms or planes of existence which may include an otherworld or underworld. Accounts of such journeys are not uncommon in Druidic literature and indeed many Druids have had such experiences themselves contributing to their beliefs about what happens to a person after death (See, for example, Matthews 2002, 143–68).

Merging with the Divine or Universal Cosmic Energy

The next most common category of belief expressed was that the soul, energy or consciousness of a person merges into something greater. This was suggested by 20 of the respondents who variously described the 'greater power' as 'The Divine', 'The Universe', 'Cosmic Energy' or, on one occasion 'The Goddess'. Most thought that this was the source or origin of individual consciousness and the thing to which it ultimately returned, possibly after a

[102] The term 'Shaman' is problematic as it is a technical term used by the indigenous people of Siberia to describe a particular type of religious functionary who engages with the spirits on behalf of the community. Use of the term is therefore often seen as cultural appropriation, particularly when used in the Industrialised West. For this reason, many Westerners may describe themselves as 'practitioners of shamanism' or a as 'users of shamanistic techniques' rather than as Shamans.

series of incarnations until the soul was ‘ready’. Opinions were divided as to whether individual consciousness was preserved or not.

> As stated previously, we are all deity in fragmented form. I believe (but obviously cannot prove) we return to the growing sense of self that is the 'verse, each adding our own pages to the story being written and read. 303113-303105-26363220

Multiple Souls

One idea that was expressed by only 6 individuals but was explored in detail by most of these was that the ‘soul’ has more than one part, and that these parts might have different post-mortem destinations. The concept of the soul is complex and contested. It is loaded with assumptions derived from its historical use in Christianity, where it is usually, although not always assumed to be the seat of consciousness, which is ontologically separate from the body, and which survives the death and dissolution of the body. The idea that a person can have multiple souls may sound strange to Westerners who have been heavily exposed to cultural assumptions influenced by Christianity, which teaches that an individual has only one soul. In fact, the idea that the human person has several components is common in many non-Western traditions. In Buddhism, there is the belief that a ’self’ is composed of five ‘skandas’ or aggregates. These are form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Together they give the illusion that there is a fixed and unchanging ‘self’. In some Chinese traditions an individual has five ‘souls’ attached to different organs. In ancient Egyptian thought, the Ka, Ba and Ankh were different non-physical aspects of a person, all of which had different functions and different destinies after death. The Ankh could best be translated as ‘life force’ and it dissipated over time following a person’s death. It was the Ka that required a mummy or, in extremis, a statue of the deceased to use as an earthly home. It remained in the world of the living and required food offerings. The Ba was the element that could travel between worlds, and which travelled on to the Duat or House of Reeds (Shushan 2009).

The idea of a composite soul is, therefore, not as strange as might at first appear. For many Druids, the source of this belief is a medieval Irish poem

called ‘The Cauldron of Poesy’. The poem suggests that each person is born with three ‘cauldrons’ inside them, the cauldron of incubation or warming which is upright at birth, and so fully functional; the cauldron of motion, which is on its side when a person is born, but which slowly rights itself with learning and experience; and the cauldron of wisdom, which is upside down at birth and can only be righted by a few, with practice, meditation and the grief and suffering that arise from long life. The poem is actually about *imbas* or poetic inspiration, but many modern Druids see in it a description of different elements of a person, that might have different destinies after death. Thus, one part of the person might be reincarnated while another goes to the Otherworld to become an Ancestor, and yet another might remain in the material world as a ghost, attached to a particular place.

> An aspect of our soul remains as an ancestor in the otherworld and another aspect of our soul is reincarnated. I like the three cauldrons idea in 'Three Cauldrons of Poesy' as explored by Caitlin Matthews and also being used by Philip Shallcrass in the British Druid Order work 303113-303105-32754634

‘Cosmic Recycling’

One idea that was very commonly mentioned was that of the elements of a person being ‘recycled’. This is perhaps not surprising, given that Druids are, as we have seen, often very invested in connection and relationship with nature and concerned with ecology. Of the 6 who did not believe in any form of post-mortem existence, 4 qualified this with the comment that the person would, nonetheless, ‘live on’ in the fact that the materials and atoms of which the body was composed would continue to exist and would be incorporated into other living beings, whether plant or animal. Some of those who used the word ‘reincarnation’ suggested that it might be in the sense of their physical bodies continuing in other forms, even if the consciousness did not survive. In total, 37 Druids discussed the continuation and ‘reuse’ of the physical elements of the body in some form or other. This made it easily the most commonly expressed idea, although it was usually incorporated into a wider discussion, and linked to other beliefs. A further 23 respondents (many of them the same individuals who mentioned the recycling of the physical body)

talked about the recycling of the spiritual or energetic components of a person, sometimes using the phrase ‘conservation of energy’ to explain this idea. Energy can neither be created or destroyed and so therefore at death the energy, spiritual or otherwise, that was contained within a person must go somewhere and be incorporated into other living beings or into other elements of the universe.

> When someone dies, the body returns to the earth through natural decay and transformation, whilst their soul or life force, is released back into the Earth's natural collective energy pool. I believe this recycling of both the physical and the spirit (energy) gives a form of immortality as both the body becomes food for other organisms, and the spirit energy is reused. The Summerlands is, in my view, a beautiful way of looking at this energy pool, waiting to be reassigned. Therefore, death is not a one-way ticket to any specific static place. 303113-303105-26106096

> I think that at the moment of death, we experience a massive release of dopamine which creates a feeling of infinite time. Bodies dissipate into the biological, mineral and organic world. Personalities live on in the memories of the beings who knew us. Our knowledge lives on in any culture and 'work' we leave behind. 303113-303105-34643268

> All our physical components will disassociate as decay (or cremation) acts on the body. My current thoughts are that my unique “spirit” is formed by the interactions of the spirit components of all the particles of physical matter that make me up. Just as my physical molecules and atoms will separate after death, so will my spiritual components but, just as the atoms will not disappear but merely be rearranged elsewhere, so will my spiritual components. I do not believe therefore that the unique “spirit” that associated itself with my body will remain as a separate entity after my death except in that it can be recreated as a “virtual” spirit by those who remember me. In this way, for example, I honour the spirits of my parents and recreate their virtual spirits whenever I remember them. I don’t know why but I feel that it is important to keep my ancestors’ spirits “alive” in this way, despite not believing that they survived as real discrete entities after death. 303113-303105-26176166

For Kristoffer Hughes, head of the Anglesey Druid Order, this cosmic recycling is at the very heart of Druidry, linking every atom to every other atom, and everything that ever has been on earth to everything that has ever been in a way that speaks to the very essence of the Ancestors and their central importance in Druidry.

> (S)ome people believe the apparent identity survives death and it moves on and it’s flapping around in some other world. I don’t, personally, believe that. I believe that I have a permanent identity and this apparent identity is a blip within that and, you know, it’s just a little [makes blip sound] and that my permanent identity will always remember the existence of Kristopher but you know that I have been dead for billions and billions and billions of years before I came into this life and I didn’t suffer any inconsequence because of it, you know, and that I’ve always existed just not as

> Kristopher. And then, when I'm dead, Kristopher's dead 'cos he's a product of his own reality and of his own relationships and then I'll just be an Ancestor and it doesn't matter then that I was ever Kristopher Hughes. I'll just be an Ancestor. A continuous element of the story of the land and I love that. And that gives me comfort knowing that my genetic, physical material will become digested wisdom: soil. And whatever my spiritual component is will just be part of the permanent expression of the universe, anyway, you know? And I find that immensely comforting knowing that, doesn't matter where I look, there's permanence; there's continuation. And we know, don't we? On a particle physics and quantum level, energy can't be created, and it can't be destroyed. It just changes shape and form and that goes exactly the same for my Ancestors, and for me, you know? And I love that I'm a part of that story; that I'm a part of that wheel; that, yes, I will die, but at the same time as an Ancestor, I will never die. We'll always exist, and I love that this place that I love so much, so much I will never leave, ever, ever, ever, ever leave; there's always gonna be a part of me here until that sun becomes a red giant and vaporises all the inner planets. Only then the story ends and maybe another one begins. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

Choice

A theme running through several of the responses was that what happens after death is the choice of the individual. Sometimes this choice is made collectively by a group of souls; sometimes it is made following a period of rest after death and is connected to an ongoing journey of learning and expectation; and sometimes it is not a conscious choice so much as what the person expects will happen to them. One respondent described it in this way (this respondent believed that they were able to see and communicate with the dead through shamanic journeying and in dreams, hence their knowledge of what had happened to those close to them).

> Depends what kind of life they have led. I tend to the ancient pagan belief that what happens to you when you die is, to a large extent, dependent upon how you live. My father died having lived all his life as a scientific rationalist with nothing but contempt for religion. When he died, he therefore saw himself as the rotting corpse he expected himself to be. My wife, on the other hand, had been brought up a Christian and also related to many aspects of Druidry. When she died, she passed across the Wasteland to an Otherworld beyond, where she was greeted by her mother and father who had predeceased her, and by many others. A feast had been prepared for her in a lush garden surrounded by summer trees. 303113-303105-34648558

Summary

It should come as no surprise that there exists such a variety of opinion concerning life after death. What is, perhaps, surprising, is that there is very little mention of God, Goddess, or deities of any kind in these accounts,

despite the fact that polytheism is common within Druidry. Many Druids who believe in deities and incorporate them in their ritual lives do not seem to believe that they will be with the gods when they die. There is also no suggestion that what happens after death could be described in terms of reward or punishment. The emergent themes are of a journey of learning and personal evolution driven, to a large extent, by personal choice. There is no feeling that afterlife destiny is the most important part of life, or that people should be living their lives with a view to the hereafter. What is apparent, however, is the concern with ecology and the natural world, which we have already encountered. To many Druids the idea that the elements of their bodies will live on in the plants and animals around them is a source of great comfort, and this is also reflected in the preference for natural burial which we will encounter chapter 9. Most Druids do seem to accept the concept of the soul in the generally understood sense of the true essence of a person that is spiritual in nature and is ontologically separate from the body. Some see this as plural in nature and opinion is divided as to whether it retains the personality and memories of a person after death, or whether these things belong to the body rather than the soul.

Two quotations in particular, one from a respondent who is a shamanic practitioner and teacher, and one from Philip Shallcrass, also known as Greywolf), head of the British Druid Order, demonstrate the complexity and fluidity of Druidic afterlife beliefs, which can encompass different ideas with no sense of dissonance or contradiction.

> I believe our spirits go to a place I call the summerlands to have a good think about things before reincarnation. I believe we work through a series of lessons in our lives and eventually can join some universal bliss/wisdom/Gaia spirit. My experience of working with the dead is that our spirits are in at least two parts - one is that which goes to the summerlands, the other can be around those left behind, provide strength/guidance/or just presence. 303113-303105-32312580

In the second quotation, Shallcrass is speaking about the death of his wife, Ellie:

> And, after her last breath had sounded, there was a gathering like gold glitter dust, it looked like, around the centre of her chest around, sort of, just by the solar plexus. And it formed itself into a butterfly and the butterfly flew from her chest and out

through the closed window and into the rain outside and faded into the air…So, yeah, what happens when you die? Well, I say, I sort of made that journey to the edge of the other world. The other reason that I did it was to find out what awaited Ellie when she got there… and I got far enough that I could see a path that led towards a garden and I could see the garden through a gateway of trees and there was a tall hedge around it with flowers growing in it and, in that garden, there were tables set out with white cloths on them that were set for a feast and her mother and father - who had passed before her…and they came up the path to see me and they told me that they'd be there to greet her when she arrived. So, I knew that was good and it, you know, tied in with what I'd learnt from reading the old mythologies and the poems and things like The Voyage of Bran.

The idea of the islands of The Earthly Paradise, the place that you go to be healed and to be reunited with those that have gone before…There's a really ancient idea that crops up in Babylon which is that part of your place in the Otherworld depends upon the memory of your friends and relatives. And, if they continue to honour you after you died, then that indicates that you were a good person and that, kind of, partly, defines how good a place you get in the other world.

I'm fairly sure, and increasingly sure - the more I, sort of, look into it and think about it - that there are a number of different aspects of the self and that they have different destinies. I think the persona that we carry around with us that people see that we are to others and that we are to ourselves, most of the time, I think that that's the one that goes to the islands of The Earthly Paradise. But there's an inner core being which is - it's a kind of spirit within that is the core of whatever strength we have. And I think that deep spirit goes beyond the personal and I think it's probably that spirit - for the most part. I mean that's, like that spirit is in your core, so is aware of who you are on the outside so there are aspects of personality that it carries with it but it's not the persona. It's a kind of an inner core spirit and I think that core spirit may be what comes back. And I think, when you get to the point of merging with the universe, which is, as far as I'm concerned, the point of all spiritual paths; I think when you get to that point it is that core spirit that does the merging. So, I dunno, I think that, like, there's not, like, one soul that has one destiny. I think there's one that goes to one place, stays there as long as it needs to; maybe moves on somewhere else. I don't know, but I think there's this other one that does come back until it's time for it not to, which is when it merges with the universe. (Interview with Philip Shallcrass/Greywolf 30/07/2017)

The Ancestors

'Ancestors' as a concept are a common theme in modern Druidry. Ancestors are invited into the circle in Druid rituals, particularly at Samhain, and they are discussed in much of the literature produced by modern Druids, including the distance learning courses. In my survey, 129 of the 135 respondents (a staggering 95.6%) said that their magical or ritual practices included the Ancestors in some way. But what exactly do Druids mean when they refer to the Ancestors, and why are they so important? In this section I will consider the role that Ancestors play in modern Druidry and in the way Druids make sense of death and of their own place in deep time.

Who Are the Ancestors?

The most straightforward definition of an ancestor is someone from whom one is descended. Druids would generally agree with this, although what is meant by 'descended' can vary greatly. Many Druids conceive Ancestors as those who have in some way contributed to making them who and what they are today. Druids tend to speak of three distinct classifications of Ancestors, referred to as Ancestors of blood, place and tradition (Brown 2012). In response to the question, "What does the term 'Ancestors' mean to you? 72 respondents (53%) made specific reference to this idea, although many prioritised one over another, and several pointed out that the line between the different categories is not always clear cut, as will be apparent from the quotations below.

> Everything, going back to the first helium atom. Every single atom and particle is part of the ancestors for me. Like Taliesin, I've been a cabbage, a squirrel, mountain, tree, rock, drop of water, molecules of air, every element in the periodic table…etc, blah. And I will be again, 303113-303105-26109215

> In the broadest sense, everyone who has come before me, that has enabled my life to exist and to be what it is. Including primate and early mammal ancestors and beyond! On a daily basis I remember ancestors of:
> My blood- my family tree, as far back as I can imagine.
> This land- how they shaped my environment.
> My spiritual tradition and teachers (not only Druid). 303113-303105-26139905

> There are three types of spiritually important 'Ancestors':
> Ancestors of blood- our genetic forebears
> Ancestors of place, those who have dwelt and laboured in the same place that we now do.
> Ancestors of spirit or inspiration are the ones who have inspired us and formed our ideas even though there may be no genetic relation. 303113-303105-26095947

Ancestors of Blood

The most straightforward way of conceptualising ancestry is the idea of Ancestors of blood. These are the people from whom one is directly descended and who have contributed towards one's DNA. Some respondents talked about 'bloodlines' going back into distant history. This was the category that was mentioned most often with 63 respondents (47%) saying that they understood and honoured ancestors in whole or in part as those from whom they were directly descended by blood. The idea was not entirely

straightforward however, with quite a few respondents pointing out that if we go far enough back in time then all bloodlines intermingle and combine making every human being who has ever lived effectively into an Ancestor of blood. Opinions were also divided on whether the recent and known dead were of different importance to the ancient dead. For some, it is the pre-Christian dead with whom they feel the strongest sense of connection. The honouring of the ancient dead can be understood in part as an indigenising practice, establishing a sense of continuity and kinship with the peoples who built sites such as Stonehenge or West Kennet, or with the original Iron Age Druids. Others keep altars with photographs of family that they can remember, or from three or four generations ago; people whose stories and characters are still knowable. This, inevitably, raises issues for some, as recent blood relatives may be problematic, even sources of trauma and abuse within a family (Brown 2012, 95–104). Druids deal with this in a variety of ways, some choosing only to count those whom they deem worthy of honour as Ancestors, others by engaging in healing work with the difficult Ancestors in order to reach some sort of resolution. For those who look predominantly towards the Ancient Dead for their ideas of Ancestors this is obviously less of an issue. Interestingly, none of my respondents, or those I interviewed, dealt with the fact of a Colonial and Imperial past in Britain as an issue that needed to be engaged with specifically through work with the Ancestors, although some did draw attention to the fact that the Ancestors did not always act in ways that we would consider to be ‘good’ today, and that it was necessary to honour what was good in them without ignoring or obliterating the bad.

> Direct blood ancestors. I have occasionally called on the ancestors of a tradition but deep down I’m not sure ancestors was the right word in that context. 303113-303105-26105007

> Recent Ancestors- this body’s bloodlines. Ancient Ancestors, the land’s bones and stones. 303113-303105-26323806

> I am the culmination of thousands, I’m the head of their spear and I will join my ancestors in the collective when I move on and will become my children’s ancestor, and an ancestor of this land I live on. 303113-303105-34648337

Ancestors of Place

The next largest category to be mentioned was Ancestors of place, mentioned by 33 (24%) of respondents. In her recent study of Druidry throughout the world, Larisa White found that British Druids, and specifically members of BDO and TDN were more likely than other Druids to acknowledge Ancestors of place as being particularly important (White 2021, 137). This is perhaps not surprising, given the affective connection that British Druids in particular often have to ancient sacred sites such as Stonehenge and Avebury; as well as to the idea of Druidry as indigenous religion in Britain, an idea to which, as we have seen, BDO and TDN have a particularly strong attachment. Ancestors of place are those who have inhabited the area in which a Druid is currently living. If a Druid moves, therefore, they may find themselves needing to build relationships with a new set of Ancestors of place. It is not surprising that this idea is closely bound up with the ancient sites that might be local to a Druid, where the Ancestors may be seen as having shaped the very fabric of the landscape and to continue to form a part of it. As we shall see in chapter 10, this idea is foundational to the stories that have formed around burial mounds across history and one of the reasons that they are so attractive to Druids. Not all Ancestors of place are human, however. They may also be the animals and plants of the ecosystems that formed a particular landscape and, for some Druids, the local spirits and deities that give the storied landscape its particular character and form.

> The land, the spirit of our distant ancestors. I was a prehistoric archaeologist and offer walks in Cumbria and County Durham deliberately to connect people to the ancestors of the land in the megalithic remains. This is a vital and deeply important aspect of my academic, working and spiritual life. The ancestors are me, my bones, flesh, life from the swamp to this embodiment. Ancestral lines of flesh and of memory and cultural heritage are vitally important to me. 303113-303105-28566644

> Both directly the people who I have a maternal and paternal lineage from down the ages, and the people who have died in the locality where I live, especially in Pre-Christian times. 303113-303105-26097642

Ancestors of Tradition

Ancestors of tradition or spirit were mentioned by 27 respondents (20%). These are the people from whom one is not descended by blood, but who have been foundational to the person one has become. For many Druids these would include the foundational characters within the modern Druid movement, many of whom we have already met. People such as Ross Nichols, Iolo Morganwg, William Stukeley and William Price. However, there is no requirement for such figures to be Druids, or to be associated with the development of Druidry. For musicians or writers an Ancestor of tradition might be someone from whom they have drawn particular inspiration. For some it might be a teacher or mentor who had a strong positive influence on their life.

> All who have gone before us that have influenced our environment, history, folklore and customs, our songs and stories. 303113-303105-26171711

> Ancestors of spirit may or may not also be ancestors of blood. Ancestors of spirit left us with records of their lives and beliefs in many forms, including the Mabiniogion, the nearest thing British Druidry has to a set of holy books, and ancient sacred sites. 303113-303105-34648558

Ancestors of Culture or Tribe

A fourth category emerged from the material offered from respondents to my survey. This is a category that crossed and often transcended the traditional 'blood/place/tradition paradigm and often merged all of these ideas together. This is a category that I have called 'cultural' or 'tribal' Ancestors. This seemed to be closely linked to an idea of 'Celticness' and connection with the ancient and usually 'Pagan' dead. Not surprisingly, Druids felt an affinity with those in the past whom they saw as having shared a similar worldview, now lost, and a 'Celtic' identity (Bowman 1995). These 'tribal' or 'cultural ancestors often merged and confused the categories of blood, tradition and place, combining them into a single idea, and were also closely associated with the feelings of indigeneity that we have already encountered. In all 25 respondents (18%) referred to this category in some way. This would support the argument of

Blain and Wallis that the affective connection between modern Pagans and the ancient 'tribal' ancestors is indicative of new indigenes (2007, 10).
5 respondents linked Ancestry to belief in reincarnation, making the point that we are, in fact, our own Ancestors. This raises the interesting question of how one can venerate the Ancestors if they are, in fact, not 'there' but 'here' in the living world. As we have seen, for some the answer to this question lies in the idea of the multiple soul, with different aspects of a person having different destinies after death. For others the question is unimportant as they see the Ancestors not as individual beings possessed of personal consciousness and agency, but rather as a homogenous collection of ideas and wisdom that has led us to where we are and that can be drawn upon at need.

> I believe that a part of each person exists outside of the death and reincarnation cycle as ancestral spirits. Possibly just an amalgamation of the wisdom of our ancestors. 303113-303105-26115158

> To me our Ancestors are the Warriors/Druids and Witches who walked our path before us…I see them as soul family. We are all connected and our Ancestors' blood runs in our body. I feel when we communicate with the same powers and deities as our Ancestors the bond is even stronger. 303113-303105-26252594

The Community of Ancestors

For many Druids, the individuals who proceeded them are less important than the homogenous collective of those who went before, who can never be known as individuals, but who are foundational to the world as it exists today. As we are comprised, physically and energetically, of everything that went before us, everything that exists or has existed in the past is ancestral and can be honoured as such.

> Nothing here truly ever disappears, you know. And water. Even here on planet Earth, there isn't a single drop of new water on Earth and water carries a memory. So, every time we drink water, or wash ourselves in water, we're washing ourselves in Ancestral memory that's coming from everything that's ever been an expression of life; whether it's human; blade of grass or a rock. So, we consider that the very soil itself where that holds the ancient monuments of our Ancestors, that the soil is the digested wisdom of everything that's ever existed. So, it contains the bones of our Ancestors and that all of that wisdom is held in soil… We don't need to lift our arms up and consider they exist in some kind of other worldly reality 'cos they might do; they might not. We don't know that. But we do know that they're in the soil… We know that nothing has ever disappeared here; they're there. the Ancestors are always a permanent fixture of our landscape and that the individuality of the individual ceases to exist but when that ceases to exist, we become a part of an eternal

> community; of a permanent community of Ancestry. So, you know, when I die, and whatever is left of my body, will be put into the soil of this island and in fifty thousand years nobody is going to remember my name, but I'll still be an Ancestor; a component of the - not even a component; a communal expression of community; of Ancestral community and that, essentially, the name of the individuality isn't important, it's the fact that they're still here and they're here, communally. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

How do Druids Honour the Ancestors?

The unifying idea that seems to exist within Druidry about the Ancestors is that they are the persons, human or otherwise, who have, by their actions, words, or existence, made us into what we are. They are, therefore, worthy of gratitude, respect and honour.

Most of the Druids who responded to the invitation to explain how they honoured the Ancestors said that they did so as part of their usual Druidic ceremony by inviting them into the circle (10%), honouring them specifically at the beginning of a ceremony (4%) or mentioning them with gratitude and honour at some point during the ceremony (27%). Of these, only 4 individuals specified that they included their recent blood ancestors who had been personally known to them in these ceremonies.

> In all my rituals I call upon the Spirits of this place and those who have walked this way before to share with us the ritual Merriment and love generated 303113-303105-26131521

The OBOD ceremony for Samhain[103] specifically invites the Ancestors into the circle to join in with the ceremony to receive offerings, companionship, and gratitude. 33 respondents (24%) said that they honoured their Ancestors either exclusively or particularly at Samhain. 11 Druids suggested that *Alban Arthan* (The Druid festival of the Winter Solstice) was also an appropriate time to honour and remember the Ancestors as it is a time when the veil between the worlds may be thin. At this time, Druids might make offerings to the Ancestors, or approach them though prayer, meditation or conversation.

> Ancestors are honoured and with us all the time through our connection to the universe. I always remember them in ritual and invite them in, but they are especially

[103] I will examine in detail the ways in which Druids observe Samhain in Chapter 8.

> remembered at Samhain and Mid-winter, the places of death and rebirth. 303113-303115-34648337

> Depending on the celebration, I sometimes open or close my ritual circle with a call to the Ancestors. In meditation I sometimes ask for help or advice from the Ancestors. At Samhain I always open the NW[104] Gate to invite them in to share in the ritual, or to speak to them through the NW gate, especially if it is someone who has passed on that year. 303113-303105-26106096

> I include prayers and offerings to ancestors in ritual, especially at Samhain, but also throughout the year too. 303113-303105-26092828

> At two sabbats I call on the ancestors: Alban Arthan and Samhain. That, to me, is the true time to honour and communicate with them. 303113-303105-26095947

Only 7 Druids specifically mentioned that they kept an altar to their Ancestors. Such altars often contain photographs or pictures of known Ancestors, often including pets and artefacts that are associated either with particular Ancestors, or with the concept of ancestry in general. Candles may be lit and incense burnt on the altar to honour the Ancestors and offerings and libations of favourite food and drink may be made. However, 13 said that they made offerings to the Ancestors, or poured drink libations for them, and often it seemed to be understood that this was done either at an altar, or at an ancient sacred site.

> We call to them in each Grove rite and honour their memory. I also have pics of some on my altar and will journey to ask their advice or find comfort each Samhain or as needed. 303113-303105-26088413

> Call on the spirits of the ancestors to be with us in the rites. See our own deceased friends and relatives as part of our altar work. 303113-303105-26153382

> At the moment this is not as regular a practice as I would like, but I brew a fresh pot of tea (loose leaf) and pour out a cup for the ancestors and a cup for me and sit in silence communing with my ancestors and sharing time and space with them. I try to do this at the new moon at least. 303113-303105-26145137

> I actively worship my ancestors, offering them food, light, water, alcohol, song etc. on a weekly basis. 303113-303105-32249834

[104] The Northwest is the direction in the ritual circle from which the Ancestors are invited to enter to join the ritual, and respectfully invited to depart back to their own place when it ends.

6 respondents said that they would make special journeys to places that they associated with Ancestors, frequently Neolithic burial chambers. For many Druids, these sites, despite the fact that they predate the earliest known Druids in Britain by three millennia, are places of great power and connection where it is easy to connect with the Ancestors through shamanic journeying or meditation, a practice specifically mentioned by 11 respondents. This concern with the physical location of the remains of the ancient Ancestors, and the affective connection that can be made with them through such sites is reflected in the interest which some Druids have shown in the newly built round and long barrows used for cremated remains which I will examine in detail in chapter 10.

> Honouring them annually at Samhain. Remembering family members who have died, but also visiting my local burial chamber (Neolithic) to remind the ancient ones that they're not forgotten. Even though they're not actually there to listen, but it just feels good. 303113-303105-26779616

> Respect for the path they have trodden and wisdom left. A recognition that we are connected through the web of spiritual reincarnation. Often at sites important to them. 303113-303105-26849159

For 7 respondents an important part of honouring the Ancestors, both ancient and recent, was through telling their stories and singing their songs. Not surprisingly, the Mabinogi were mentioned more than once in this context. Singing folk songs as a way of thinking (or singing) one's way into the heads of those who lived in the past was seen as a way of experiencing the world in the same way as the Ancestors and so connecting with their day-to-day concerns. Connected with this is the idea of learning crafts and skills that would have been practiced in the past as a way of connecting with the Ancestors in a very pragmatic and embodied way. This is a practice that was also significant in the discussion of indigeneity in chapter 6. Indigeneity and indigenising practices such as singing songs, reciting poetry, playing instruments and learning crafts that are perceived as ancient or ancestral are intimately connected with the way that Druids think about Ancestors, particularly the class of 'Ancestors of culture' that I have posited above.

> The ancestors are with us always and so we honour them and through them seek to understand ourselves. We honour them through story, song and increased understanding. 303113-303105-26171711

> As a folk song enthusiast, I often see my singing songs of ancestors and their lives as a form of Bardic service.303113-303105-26176166

> At the beginning of every ceremony, we call upon our ancestors of spirit to be with us, to share with us their wisdom, songs and stories. At ancient sites we may seek to commune with the ancestors who constructed or used them. 303113-303105-34648558

Why are Ancestors important to Druids?

The ancestors are clearly foundational to Druidic ritual practice in a variety of ways, as we have seen above; but what is it that makes them such a fundamentally important part of the Druidic sense of identity and way of being in the world? Not surprisingly, there are different possible answers to this question some of which are explored below.

Firstly, for many Druids, the Ancestors are honoured primarily because they are worthy of respect and gratitude. This is because they are responsible for forming the person that Druid is today, either through their genetics, or because of the way that they shaped the thoughts and feelings of the person or the physical environment in which they now live. There is an idea that we are, because they were.

> At full moon peace intention I honour the fallen who fought for what they believed right, and in daily practice I thank them for making me me. 303113-303105-26087609

> Because I do things they did, so I'm thinking about them. Anything that refers to the past refers to my ancestors, so all living beings who preceded me are my relations. 303113-303105-34643268

For many that gratitude is expressed in a desire to live their life in a way that will bring honour and be pleasing to the Ancestors.

> I acknowledge the ancestors in ritual and try to live in a way that the best of them will be satisfied with. 303113-303105-26095947

> To honour and acknowledge them shows deference to their knowledge. Not to try and live as they lived, that wouldn't be possible, and lacks thought on your own life.

> But to remember both their triumphs and tragedies. To remember also their daily lives. To know that I'm here today with knowledge gifted by their time before me. 303113-303105-26110418

> How can I watch the land of my forebears and the land of my descendants be polluted. We are guardians and stewards not owners. We would shame the ancestors (gone and to come) if harm was done on our watch. 303113-303105-26169386

> I ask them for advice and assistance when needed and make them offerings. I also attempt to uphold their heritage as best I can in the modern day, whilst removing the mistakes of the past. 303113-303105-34656090

Another way in which Ancestors are important to many Druids is as a source of healing and resolution. This may be colonial or patriarchal injustices perpetrated by Ancestors in the past or Ancestral trauma or wounding that may be deeply embedded in a family. Many believe that such trauma can be healed by engaging with the Ancestors so as to resolve conflict and bring forgiveness and resolution where this is possible.

> At Calan Gaeaf[105] we celebrate the Ancestors both recent and Ancient. We heal the wounds of individuals backwards and forwards. We are always aware that we are the sum totality of those who came before us. 303113-303105-26323806

> I am a shamanic practitioner and engage with the ancestors when practising. I believe in working with the ancestors of people who have become disconnected from their history. I also work to heal ancestral trauma that may still be impacting on the living generations. 303113-303105-26177514

Many Druids regard the Ancestors, either as individuals, or as a homogenous and amorphous category, as a source of knowledge, wisdom, advice and guidance that can be accessed at need. This might be though prayer, meditation, journeying or simply asking for help.

> In each ceremony I call in the spirits of ancestors for guidance and wisdom. Some of the ceremonies are specifically focused on honouring or otherwise communing with the ancestors. 303113-303105-26115158

> I speak with them. I ask for their help. I try to appease those that aren't that keen on me! I give them offerings -food and water mostly as that's what I've been guided to do. Sometimes alcohol if I feel urged to. 303113-303105-32312580

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[105] The Welsh term *Calan Gaeaf* means the first day of winter. *Nos Calan Gaeaf* is the night before the first day of winter and is a time for connection with Ancestors. Orders that make use of the Welsh language, such as the Anglesey Druid Order often use this term as an equivalent for Samhain.

Perhaps most fundamentally, though, the Ancestors are important because they allow Druids to root themselves in a continuing narrative of time and place. They foster a sense of connection, not only to what has gone before, but also of what is to come. Respondents spoke about connection to the past and to all those who had gone before and so of not being separate from Ancestors, whether human or otherwise. The honouring and remembrance of Ancestors grounded them and allowed then to see and acknowledge their place in both history and in deep time, as a part of the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth. Thus, rather than envisaging afterlife destiny as being soteriological, and concerned with the transcendence of the material world, rather they saw themselves as deeply connected to this physical world. The idea that they would themselves become the 'bones and stones of the land' (303113-303105-26323806) was one that many found deeply comforting. It was also a way of locating and rooting themselves within a particular bloodline and family, acknowledging themselves not just as individuals, but as a part of an ongoing story.

> Mostly it is a sense of continuity with them. Occasionally I have sensed the presence (possibly the echo) of people who have lived in a place or shared an experience, but this is quite rare. 303113-303105-26115158

> I believe ancestral energy remains within the universe/creation and thus is involved in everything. Specifically, though, I make a point to revisit and honour photos of my family history and research those who came before in that particular lineage. I post them on social media to relate who they were to who I am, write about them, draw on their stories etc. Also, at Samhain I make particular connection, or at birthdays and anniversaries of immediate family who are gone now. And when I have a memory surface, of loss or of moments of connection, I lean into them and make those moments significant. 303113-303105-34644626

Not only this, but since we breathe the same air, drink the same water, and are comprised of the same atoms as the Ancestors, then we are, ourselves, their physical embodiment. Quite apart from any belief in re-incarnation, for many Druids we are our own Ancestors as well as the Ancestors of those still to come. In this sense, there can be no separation from the Ancestors, they are in the air we breathe, the land we walk on, and indeed in our very selves.

> If I want to speak to my ancestors, I just push my fingers into that grass and beyond until I can feel the moistness of the soil and they are there; indisputably there. And yes, you know, if I wanted, I could go off on path workings or vision quest to try and identify a single individual, but I also think that that kind of misses the point cos it's community. It's a community of ancestors that I am the sum totality of, you know. And every single molecule of them that exists in this land, on this tiny little island, has gone into the making of me. So, they've never gone away, you know I am still them; they are still me and when I consciously, you know, with intent, push my fingers into that soil suddenly, there's a bam! [claps hands]. There is no time; we are connected and that's when I honour them and revere them as the very foundations of the song of my existence and that's tied in, and I can't separate that from my Druidry or from the teachings of the Anglesey Druid order. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

Conclusion

We can see then that there are no beliefs concerning life after death or the Ancestors that unite all Druids. This should not be surprising as we have already established that belief is not the defining factor within Druidry. There does, however, seem to be a strong consensus that there is no fundamental or ontological separation between the living and the dead. We have already encountered the anthropological concept of dividuality, that a person is only truly a person in relationship with others, and for Druids these 'others' include the Ancestors. Not only are Druids in an ongoing relationship with the Ancestors that is fundamental to their identity formation and way of making meaning in the world; they also embody the Ancestors, carrying their legacy on into future generations.

> We don't feel the need to leave bread down or pour mead down. Pour it down your own neck 'cos it still goes to the Ancestors 'cos you're still gonna pee it out. If you want to think it's going somewhere, put it into yourself because all your Ancestors exist within you and if you wanna honour them, drink the bloody mead, you know? (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

There is no particular concern with salvation or afterlife destiny; rather life and death are seen as a continuity; two sides of the same coin. The Ancestors are venerated as a source of knowledge and wisdom in the ongoing journey of both the individual and humanity in general. Everything is understood to be relational and connected; and the rituals with which death and the Ancestors are surrounded within Druidry serve to reinforce this idea. It is to the ways in which death and the dead are ritualised that we will turn in the following two chapters.

Chapter 8: Ritualising Death

'What is Remembered, Lives'

Introduction

In the next chapter I will consider the funeral traditions that are emerging in modern Druidry, but before doing so, it is worth noting that Druidry has many other ritual resources for dealing with death and the relationship with the Ancestors. Most of these take place during the festival of Samhain and so have a seasonal and recurring quality that allows an ongoing relationship with the dead, including the 'beloved dead' that were personally known. In this way an ongoing familial relationship with the person who has died can be maintained. In this chapter I will take a close look at some of the rituals that Druids take part in at Samhain and what we can understand from them about Druidic attitudes towards death and the dead. The examples I have chosen are by no means exhaustive and have been chosen either because I have personal experience of them, or because they have something significant to add to our understanding.

Samhain/Calan Gaeaf

Samhain, (in Welsh, Calan Gaeaf) is the third harvest in the Ancient Celtic year and marks the beginning of winter and the dark half of the year. The word 'Samhain' literally means 'summer's end'. It falls around the 1st or 2nd of November, around the same time as the Christian festival of Hallowe'en. It is a common belief within modern Paganism that Samhain is a pre-Christian festival of the dead and the Ancestors, appropriated by Christians in order to make Christianity seem more familiar and attractive to Pagans. However, there is no good evidence to suggest that the pre-Christian festival was associated with the dead[106] (Hutton 2001b, 360–85). In all probability this association originates with the Christian festival of All Souls. Whatever the truth about its history, in modern Paganisms, including Druidry, Samhain is

[106] Although in Irish mythology at least, both Samhain and Beltane seem to be good times for meeting otherworldly beings, so perhaps the boundaries between the worlds were thought to be thinner at these times.

one of the most important festivals, and is strongly associated with the dead. For many Druids, this marks the start of a ‘dark’ time in the year lasting approximately from Samhain until Imbolc[107], when the veil between the worlds is thin, and time is, to some degree, suspended, or at least ‘out of joint’. At this time, the Ancestors are believed to be closer than at other times of the year, which is why, for some, Midwinter (Alban Arthan in the Druid calendar) is also a good time to remember and seek fellowship with the dead. Many also consider Samhain to be the beginning of the new year. During the days around Samhain, many Druid groves and groups hold ceremonies and rituals designed to honour and remember the recently dead, and to seek connection with them. The first part of this chapter will examine some of those practices in detail, in order to see what they can teach us about Druid beliefs about death, dying and the Ancestors.

Figure 1- An altar set up for Samhain

[107] Imbolc is an early spring festival that falls on 2nd February and is associated with the goddess Brigid.

OBOD at Samhain

The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids publishes booklets containing both solo and group ceremonies to be used by members at each of the eight seasonal festivals. The booklet for the Samhain ritual states that this is the most inward focused of the ceremonies and is not generally performed publicly; it is open only to members of the Order and their invited guests. All quotations taken from the ritual here are used with express permission.

The ceremony is framed as a conversation between the 'Ancient' representing wisdom and experience, and the *Mabinog*, generally the youngest person present, who represents a new initiate[108].

The *Mabinog* questions the Ancient about the mysteries of Samhain and asks, if time alone is responsible for the wall that separates the living and the dead, what happens to that wall when, as the Ancient has explained, 'time ceases to exist' at Samhain. The Ancient replies:

> Like time, its builder, it is abolished whilst three times the Sun, the Eye of the World throws his brilliant glance from East to West….then and then alone, time will be reborn…It was during the celebration of Samhuinn[109] that Cuchulainn[110] penetrated the realm of the dead, and it is during these three nights and days, each time a year dies and the dark hours begin, that the veil between the worlds is thinned, and the dead may walk with us once more, and the living may cross to the Otherworld. (Carr-Gomm 2001, 14)

The Mabinog is terrified at the prospect of encountering the dead, but the Ancient comforts him:

> …Each one of us is on a journey- a journey of the Soul that passes many times through life and through death. We are each a different stage on this journey, and there is no need to fear those who have forged the paths before us- even if they stand now in the Otherworld. (Carr-Gomm 2001, 14)

The Ancient explains that the dead can be shown love and respect through the offering of ritual gifts of bread, honey, and wine. The dead are represented in the Circle by a sprig of yew, a tree associated with death in Druidry; a

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[108] 'Mabinog' means 'youth' or 'child'. One possible translation of Mabinogi is 'stories for children'.

[109] An alternative spelling for Samhain.

[110] A legendary Irish hero

sword, representing warriors, and a hammer representing builders and craftsmen. These are cleansed with water and placed in the centre of the circle by the fire. During the ceremony a ‘gate’ is formed by two Druids in the Northwest of the circle, through which the Ancestors are invited to enter with these words:

> O Ancestors, known and unknown, ancestors of our bodies, ancestors of our spirits, all those who have given form to our lives, who have made us what and who we are, body and soul. Mothers of ours! Fathers of ours! Teachers! Guides! Healers! Nourishers! Showers of the way to go…and of the way not to go! All you whose Fire is in us, whose Water is in us, whose Air is in us, whose Earth is in us. All you whose Spirit is in us! On this night of Samhuinn we feel you near. At this time of no time, we call to you. Come, dear Spirits! We welcome all of you who come in love and friendship, who share our quest for the Truth, and even as you move amongst us, we shall remember those of the departed who are most dear to us. (Carr-Gomm 2001, 18)

At this point those who are present are invited, if they wish, to step forward and name those who have died that they wish to honour. Bread, honey, and wine are thrown into the fire as offerings to the dead and also shared amongst those present so that there is, in effect, a meal shared between the living and the dead.

The other main ‘event’ of the ritual is the arrival through the Northwest gate, of the Cailleach. The Cailleach is a figure who appears in the folklore of both Ireland and Scotland. The name means ‘veiled one’ and in Druidry she has come to be understood as a goddess of winter and death, and as a psychopomp. The Cailleach is represented in the ceremony by a Druid wearing a veil who has been apart from the circle from the beginning and who does not speak, withdrawing from the ceremony again as soon as her role is done. Having taken the part of the Cailleach twice myself at a Samhain ceremony, I can concur with others who say that taking the role brings a strange sense of detachment and timelessness; as being, for a brief time, something wholly other. For this reason, the person who has taken the role is encouraged to eat and drink as soon as possible after the ceremony in order to ‘ground’ themselves once more in the world of the living.
She is greeted as she enters the circle:

> North: The Cailleach approaches! Do not be afraid, Companions. One of the faces of the Great Goddess is the Cailleach, the Hag. Her work is little understood, but without her process of destruction and decay, the Earth would be barren of all life…
> Ancient: …At this time of Samhuinn she moves among us, offering us the gift of purification…Now, if you wish, you may, in the company of your Ancestors, offer to the transforming cauldron of the Cailleach all that you wish to let go of, to release. (Carr-Gomm 2001, 19–20)

The Cailleach then moves around the circle with a receptacle representing a cauldron into which any who wish to may place a piece of paper they have brought with them and on which they have written anything they wish to let go of for the coming year. The Cailleach then moves to the centre of the circle where she burns the pieces of paper, either in the 'cauldron' or by placing them in the central fire before silently leaving the circle.
The ceremony ends with the Ancestors being thanked for their presence and invited to depart in peace and friendship.

Damh the Bard is a musician who is very well known within Druidry. He is also the Pendragon of OBOD and, together with his wife, Ceri Lee, runs the Anderida Grove of OBOD, which meets at the Long Man of Wilmington. This grove uses a slight variation to the usual OBOD ceremony in that when the circle is cast at Samhain, it is cast as the rim of the cauldron of *Annwn*. Those present are then invited to imagine the mists of *Annwn* filling the cauldron, dissolving the veil between the living and the dead, so that they actually enter into the Otherworld for the duration of the ceremony. The names of the dead are called out by those present so that they can be thanked, remembered, and honoured. For the Anderida Grove, *Annwn* is not only the place of the dead, but also the source of the *Awen*, and of all magic, imagination, and creativity. In his blog, Damh says that the veil is necessary for the normal functioning of the world, but that to lift it in ritual at Samhain allows not only fellowship and connection between the living and the dead, but also the renewing of the magical and connected self.

> Do we pass through the Veil when we die? Ask 10 people this question and you'll get 11 different answers. To me, our physical world feels as if it is one of individuality. Our Souls are born into physical bodies and for the Journey of Life, we have a sense of I, of the Self. But I don't think it's like that beyond the Veil. There it feels like anything is possible. There can be a sense of self, but also a re-joining with consciousness. I think that I actually still exist as a part of that One on the other side

> of the Veil, even though I am also walking around as a Druid and musician in this physical space. The consciousness within me is the same as that beyond the Veil, and maybe when I am working Magic, holding ceremony, watching a beautiful sunrise or sunset, feeling love, I am connecting within to that part of me that knows Magic and exists all of the time within the Flow. So I am not saying Magic doesn't exist in our physical world, but that the connection to the root of Magic lies in our consciousness behind or within the physical being, and that consciousness is the same as that beyond the Veil and thus can connect directly with it, and work with it physically. (D. Smith 2021)

The cauldron is a motif that appears multiple times in the mythology of Wales and Ireland. In the *Hanes Taliesin*, Ceridwen prepares a brew in her cauldron, three drops of which give the gift of the *Awen* to Taliesin who becomes the greatest Bard that ever lived. In the Second Branch of the *Mabinogi*, a magical cauldron is gifted by Bran the Blessed to the Irish king, it has the property that dead warriors placed in it will return to life, whole and healthy, but unable to speak. In the Medieval Welsh poem, *The Spoils of Annwn*, Arthur and his followers travel to the Otherworld to retrieve a magical cauldron. The cauldron seems to be associated in mythology with the Otherworld and with the dead, as well as being a source of inspiration; and so it is fitting that the Anderida Grove imagine the circle at Samhain as the rim of the great Cauldron, giving them access to the Otherworld, the Ancestors and the source of inspiration and of life itself.

Within OBOD ceremony, then, we encounter once again the idea that while the dead exist in the Otherworld as Ancestors with whom we can connect, the soul is also on a journey of birth, death, and rebirth. As Damh points out, there is no necessary contradiction here as a person could simultaneously exist in different ways both in the world of the living and beyond the Veil. The idea that we encountered in the previous chapter is also repeated here, that the living literally embody the Ancestors, as their fire, water, air and earth are physically within us, giving us form and substance.

Samhain at Avebury

In an article on the importance of ritual in coming to terms with grief and loss, Anastasia Scrutton describes a Druid ritual that takes place in Avebury at Samhain. In this ritual, the community gathers at the Red Lion pub, within the stone circle, on the Eve of Samhain and together walk along the avenue of

stones linking the circle to the Sanctuary. At the Sanctuary, the quarters are called, and it is explained that Samhain is the time when those who have died during the previous year are most easily able to pass to the Summerlands. Everyone present takes an apple[111] from a bucket and dedicates it to someone who has died. This may be someone who has died recently, or someone who is commemorated every year. The apples are then taken back to the Keeper's house in the village where a vigil is held over them. The following morning the apples are taken to the Swallowhead Spring, source of the River Kennet, where they are released into the water as a symbol of life 'renewed and recycled' (Scrutton 2018).

The Keeper that Scrutton referred to was the late Terry Dobney, Archdruid of Avebury, who was present at the dedication of the modern Barrow at All Cannings.[112] During an interview, I discussed this ceremony at some length with Terry's widow, Susan, who told me that it is referred to within their community as 'The Walk of the Dead'.

> So, at sunset we light the candles, and we would light the candle in the window and opposite - literally opposite us - across the road is the palisade. And we know that they would eat pork there around about that time of the year. First of all, what we'd do is we go and give an offering there, the palisade, and then we will go up to what we call the mounds. People say they're burial chambers, but they're actually not. There's no burials inside, they're just mounds...So, at sunset, after we've taken the offering, Terry and myself or Terry and another Druid before I came here, and then it was myself and somebody else when Terry no longer could do it because it's too far to walk - we will go to the mounds to see if there's anybody who, any spirits that want to be hosted and passed over, then walk all the way up to the long Barrow and do the same in the long barrow; open the quarters if anybody wants to be passed over. So, the long barrow was important for that, and then we would walk all the way back into Avebury, go to the southern entrance where it could be anything up to 120 people sometimes, processing all the way back through the avenue of stones, the processional way that you would go. And at one point the processional way we know went through a garden and they would actually allow us to go through that garden as well and go up the processional way to the sanctuary where everybody would go with an apple, or we'd have spare apples, and we'd go shoulder to shoulder in the sanctuary. And Terry said it is communal grieving. He called it communal grieving, so others know that other people are grieving and it's alright to cry, and it's alright to grieve. And then we, you know they would have the apple and they would go in and they would talk about that person, whoever it is, who they're passing over. They

[111] Apples are often associated in Paganism with the Otherworld, and so, by association, with the dead. 'Avalon', the mystical Island to which Arthur was taken in a death like sleep, and which is believed by many Druids to have been in the Otherworld, means 'The Vale of Apples'. Many believe this to have been located at Glastonbury. Apples are often used in divination at Samhain and are a common offering to the Ancestors.

[112] See Chapter 10

> would talk about that person and that would be put into a container. And at the end of that we have an all-night wake here. So, everybody will come back, and we'd feed them and give them drinks all night and music, and, because I did counselling as well, so anybody who wanted it, I would do counselling as well. And then sunrise the next morning those who wanted to or who stayed all night, the apples are then taken to the Swallowhead Spring, and they are put in the water there. Small ceremony there. Apples placed in the water so that it is like the spirits floating upstream to be reborn. (Interview with Susan Dobney 02.02.2023)

An interesting feature of this ritual is that it involves a significant amount of walking and is actually mapped on to an ancient landscape that is directly associated with the Ancestors, meaning that it is embodied and experienced in a way that many Samhain ceremonies are not. It is also interesting in that on this occasion the emphasis is on the living helping the dead to pass safely into the Otherworld, rather than with the living turning to the Ancestors for help or wisdom. The relationship is seen as truly reciprocal with the dead receiving help and support from the living as well as giving it to them. The spirits that were helped to pass into the Summerlands might be those of the recently dead, or of the Ancestors who inhabited and built the ancient landscape. Susan was very clear that one of the most important aspects of the ritual was to allow people to express grief, and to do so as part of a community that allowed them to feel supported.

The Anglesey Druid Order

In 2022, I was privileged to attend the Calan Gaeaf ceremony of the Anglesey Druid Order. This is held in a community hall and is attended by around 100 people. Some of these are members of the order, others are those who attended a workshop on the Ancestors earlier in the day, for which they had bought tickets, and who opted to stay for the evening rituals; having first been warned that the ADO was an order that was Pagan and polytheistic and that the events of the evening would reflect that.

The evening event began at around 6:30 in the evening, when it was fully dark, and the hall was lit mostly by candles. The first ceremony was to wake Mari Mon, the ADO's Mari Lwyd from her summer sleep. Once this was done, she became an honoured guest, presiding over the Calan Gaeaf ceremony

itself.[113] The primary aim of the ceremony is to honour the dead, particularly those who have died during the previous year, and to remind those present that there is no real separation between the living and the dead. An altar is set up at the stage end of the room with the circle forming around it so as to incorporate it. The altar very much looks the part for Hallowe'en, with pumpkins, lanterns, and gothic candle holders. It also holds photographs of the recently dead, and orders of service for funerals of order members that have taken place during the previous year. Each person standing in the circle is given a tealight candle prior to the start of the ceremony. Starting with the person standing to the left of the altar and proceeding clockwise (deosil) around the circle, each participant is invited to approach the altar, light their candle from one of the altar candles, and name one or more persons that they wish to remember, and, if they wish, to say something about them. Animals as well as humans were often mentioned, and some talked about quite a number of people, from distant Ancestors to family members and pets that had died recently. Once each person finished speaking, they placed their candle onto a brass tray placed onto the altar for the purpose. At this point everyone present responded, 'May they be remembered!' And the next person approached the altar. With around a hundred people present, this took well over an hour and not surprisingly there were quite a few tears. When the last person had spoken there were three trays on the altar all full of burning tealights. There followed a few moments of silent contemplation before the ceremony continued with the words, 'Behold your dead!' This was a very powerful moment. The altar was full of the burning tealights, mirroring the number of living people in the room; and many of the candles represented more than one person. The emotional impact of that one phrase was considerable and, once again, there were some tears. My own personal response was also strong, and I was struck that not a single person in the room, not even an eleven-year-old boy, had been unable to name someone they had loved and lost. It was a reminder of the ubiquity of death and bereavement. There was also a strong sense of community, even though many of those present had

[113] See p182-186 for a full account of the waking of Mari Mon.

not met before; these were not just any dead, they were ‘our dead’ our community, and we stood together in honouring them and in supporting each other in our grief. In the talk that followed, we were reminded that the dead are not separate from the living and that we are all part of a single community. The ceremony ended with the words, ‘What is remembered, lives.’ This phrase is frequently used in Druidry, and within Paganism more widely. It serves to remind Pagans that the dead live, if nowhere else, then in our memories and in our very bodies, as we breathe the same air and the atoms that made our Ancestors are recycled in us. When a Druid dies, it is very common for Druids (and other Pagans) to acknowledge this, in person, and often as a comment on social media, ‘Hail the Traveler. What is remembered, lives.’ The candles were then extinguished, and the formal part of the evening came to an end. Throughout all of this, Mari Mon acted as a silent witness to the lives that were honoured, and to the grief of the ones who spoke about them, accepting the dead who were presented to her into her care.

In 2017 I attended a similar ceremony at Druid Camp[114] in Gloucestershire. While this was held at Lughnasadh (early August) rather than at Samhain, the decision was taken to hold a ceremony to commemorate the dead in the marquee following the main ceremony of the day. On this occasion a candle was lit and placed in the centre of the circle. This was to represent the life of those present, who were currently in the land of the living. The point was made that human life is very short, and that we must make the most of our brief sojourn in the living world. A horn containing mead was passed around the circle in a deosil direction and each person was invited to name a person or pet they had lost and to speak about them if they wished. They would then either drink from the horn in honour of the person or pour some mead onto the earth as a libation to the Ancestors. As with the ADO ceremony, everyone responded with, ‘May they be remembered!’ At the end of the ceremony, there was a short speech honouring those who had died and encouraging us to live

[114] An annual event open to all Druids and others with a respectful interest.

in such a way as to bring honour to them, and as the final action, the candle at the centre was blown out, reminding us of our own mortality.

Another ceremony that Druids often take part in at Samhain is the ‘Dumb Supper’ or ‘Silent Supper’. I have included it in the section on the Anglesey Druid order as it is something that Kristoffer Hughes includes in his book about death, dying and funerals from a Druidic perspective, The Journey into Spirit (2014). Unlike the other ceremonies mentioned here, this is not something that is carried out by a grove or a large group, but more usually by an individual or a family, as a way of honouring their family dead and acknowledging the continuing family bonds.

According to Hughes, this ceremony is inspired by a Welsh custom called *hel bwyd cennad y meirw* or ‘gathering food for the Assembly of the Dead’ which was practised in North Wales as late as 1900. In the modern Druidic version, a table is set for a meal. In the middle is a large pillar candle representing the dead. A candle is also places on the windowsill of a north facing window, or if this is not possible, against the northern wall of the house. All other lights in the room are extinguished. Pictures of the family’s dead are placed around the candle. Cakes or biscuits are distributed to each guest, and one placed on a plate at a place setting that has been left empty for the Ancestors. The dead are invited to be present. At some point a bell is rung three times to announce the beginning of the meal, and from this point onwards, a meal is consumed in silence, with a portion of each course being served to the empty place setting. In some traditions, the meal is served in reverse order, with the dessert arriving first. At the end of the meal, the cakes placed on the plates at the beginning of the ceremony are eaten, the central candle is extinguished, and the dead are thanked with appropriate words, for example:

> Spirits and shades of the dead, know that you will not be forgotten.
> Blessed are the dead.

After this the silence may be broken and those present may wish to discuss their experiences of the Dumb Supper, or share stories about their dead (Hughes 2014, 272).

The point of the Dumb Supper for Druids is to emphasise that familial ties are not broken by death and that the dead remain a welcome and important part of the family. At this time a meal is shared with them, and they are welcomed into the home for the duration of the 'time of no time' that is Samhain, when the veil separating the living from the dead is temporarily lifted.

The Mari Lwyd

Meeting the Mari

There are many gods and goddesses associated with death and the world of the Ancestors by Druids[115] and most perform a role as psychopomps. Most common are Gwyn ap Nudd, The Morrigan, The Cailleach and Brigid.[116] However, none of these appear so frequently in the rituals surrounding death as the Mari Lwyd, who is emerging in some Druid groups, especially in Wales and the Welsh borders, as an important goddess of death, winter, and connection with the Ancestors.

The origins of the 'Mari Lwyd', or Grey Mare are shrouded in mystery. Most probably she is connected to the 'Obby 'Oss and other 'beasts' (wooden animals or animal skulls mounted on sticks that join in processions and snap at passers-by) that proliferate in the local folk customs and traditions of many British towns, often around May Day or Beltane. These, for the most part are

[115] Although, as we have seen, by no means all Druids acknowledge or work with deities at all.

[116] While there are many others, these are the most common. The Cailleach is an important figure in the OBOD ritual for Samhain. Gwyn ap Nudd is mentioned in Welsh stories as a king of Annwn and sometimes as the leader of the Wild Hunt. He also appears in Medieval legend as the king of the fairies who live beneath Glastonbury Tor. The Morrigan is an Irish goddess frequently associated with war and death. Brigid is primarily Irish and is a figure who unites Pagans and Christians as both goddess and saint. In one of her many functions, she is associated with keening, death and comforting the bereaved.

post-Medieval and do not, as has sometimes been suggested, provide an unbroken link back to a Pre-Christian past, although they have become an important part of the Pagan scene in the modern world.

The Mari has a particularly frightening appearance as a horse's skull draped in a white, shroud-like cloth, decorated, and carried from door to door and from inn to inn in the dark part of the year. The Mari custom is indigenous to Wales, particularly South Wales,[117] and was originally a Christmas or New Year custom. The Mari is accompanied by a rowdy group of companions, one of whom is the 'Ostler', who handles and speaks for her. When they come to a house, or an inn, they knock and are traditionally refused entry. There follows a battle of poetic wits, called a *pwnco*. If the inhabitants of the house win, then the revellers move on. If not, the door is opened and the Mari enters, causing havoc, snapping at the people within, galloping around and generally making a nuisance of herself. Offerings of beer, food or money are made to the Mari party, and they move on to the next establishment. There is a general belief that their visit will bring blessing and good luck to the house for the new year (Morus-Baird 2020).

The history of the Mari cannot be traced back beyond 1800 or thereabouts, and while a horse skull on a stick certainly seems to have a very Pagan 'feel' to it, there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that her origins are pre-Christian. However, as with other elements of folkloric tradition such as Morris Dancing, Jack in the Green and the Green Man, the fact that its history is not Pagan, does not preclude its being adopted as a legitimate part of Pagan culture and meaning making in the modern world. The idea that such things are a distorted memory of pre-Christian practices was fashionable at the end of the 19th Century and into the mid 20th Century. While this has been largely discredited, all of these things are attractive and useful to modern Pagans and have been absorbed into modern Pagan worldviews (Letcher 2013).

[117] The Mari tradition is strongest in Glamorgan, which, coincidentally, was an important place for the formation of Druidry in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

The Mari is no exception, certainly, she looks the part, and for many Druids, as well as other Pagans, she has been adopted as a psychopomp and even as a deity in her own right. Not surprisingly, perhaps, she has been associated with the Uffington Horse,[118] which is, itself, linked by many Pagans to the Romano-Gaulish horse goddess Epona, and with Rigantona, the 'Great Queen', and so with the sovereignty of the land. In her dark aspect as the Mari, she rules over winter and death. In one song, popular in some Pagan groups, she is equated with a Pagan sovereignty goddess ousted from her stable while pregnant in order to make space for the Virgin Mary, thereby suggesting that she represents the 'Old Religion' being unceremoniously supplanted by Christianity. Since then, she wanders through the night at mid-winter knocking on doors in search of welcome and acceptance.[119] It is important to stress that there is not a scrap of evidence for this story in any source, Pagan or Christian, and Pagans do not believe it to be genuinely ancient. Nonetheless, it is a powerful story, and one that fits well into the way that many Pagans view the world; and so, like many myths, both ancient and modern, it can convey meaning and a set of values even if it is not itself true. Thus, for some, the Mari has become a symbol of the old indigenous religion, with its intimate and animistic connection to the land, which has been displaced by Christianity which, in this particular instance, represents a patriarchal, hierarchical, disenchanted and disconnected religion imposed from outside.

This is not, of course, true for all Pagans, or even for all Druids.[120] The Mari is still best known in Wales and the Welsh borders. However, her influence is growing and in two areas in particular, she is gaining influence and becoming

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[118] The Uffington Horse is the giant figure of a horse carved onto a chalk hillside in Oxfordshire. It is believed to date from the late Bronze Age.
[119] *Mari Lwyd*. Sung by Chris Wood, words by Hugh Lupton. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vc_OXXt9PeE

[120] While the relationship between Druidry and Christianity is complicated, it is not universally a negative one and there are some very interesting areas of mutual discussion, respect and collaboration. (Cush 2015)

significant in the ways that Druids engage with death and the Ancestors. These are discussed below.

The Dark Gathering

The Dark Gathering, held on the last Saturday before Hallowe'en each year, is a major event for many Pagans. It feels like an archaic folkloric festival, but in fact it only began in 2014 (Latham Jones 2014). Its origins lie with a group of friends who met at the Chepstow Wassail[121], where a Cornish 'Oss, 'Penkevyll' had travelled to meet the Maris. The owners of the Mari decided to holiday in Cornwall the following year and asked if Penkevyll would like to meet up with them and their Mari and the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in Boscastle was suggested as a suitable location. Musicians were invited to join the festivities welcoming a Mari into Cornwall and a suitable welcoming *pwnco* was devised, with alternating verses in Welsh and Cornish. This was the beginning of the Dark Gathering, which has been held in Boscastle every year since, except during the years of Covid, and which has gradually grown into a large and popular festival, drawing Maris from around Britain and visitors from around the world. For the first time in 2023, the Dark Gathering will be moving to the nearby town of Tintagel as the huge numbers of Morris Dancers, musicians and Maris have outgrown the village of Boscastle. The festival is primarily seasonal, the meeting of the Maris with the 'Oss, which is generally active at Beltane, celebrating the transition from summer to winter. However, the significance of the festival has evolved beyond the seasonal into a chaotic and wild celebration of the connection with the Ancestors.

The day begins when dozens of Maris from around the country process over the bridge and into Boscastle, assembling outside the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. While the event itself is not explicitly Pagan, the choice of site alone means that it attracts many Pagan Morris Sides, musicians, and

[121] The Chepstow Wassail is held every year on Twelfth Night. Traditionally the Maris from the Welsh and English sides of the border meet and confront each other halfway across the bridge that separates England from Wales. Eventually 'peace breaks out' and the evening is spent with the Maris causing mischief in local hostelries.

visitors. The day is spent in celebration but towards the evening as the light fails, the emphasis shifts slightly towards a sense of mystery and ecstatic connection with the Ancestors. There are fireworks, and dancing late into the night; and a chant is set up around the crowd: *'Ancestors, dance with us, Ancestors, sing with us. We hear your voice; we hear your voice.'* For many, this is a time to remember and seek connection with those who have died, particularly during the previous year. Thus, The Dark Gathering has become a festival in which the Maris facilitate a connection between the living and the dead, both recent and ancient; dissolving, for a while the boundary between the worlds and allowing a reciprocal relationship of respect and friendship to continue. For many, the Ancestors truly are present, singing and dancing among the living and the Maris.

Mari Mon and the Anglesey Druid Order- The Birth of a Goddess

It is with the Anglesey Druid order that the most explicit claim for the Mari as a deity of death is made. As a Welsh order, the ADO already has a connection to the Welsh language of the *pwnco* and the tradition of the Mari. However, for them, she has become much more. Mari Mon, the Mari Lwyd of the ADO, is seen as an aspect of Rhiannon, a character in the Mabinogi, who is sometimes linked to the Romano-British deities of Epona and Rigantona,[122] and so with the idea of sovereignty. To the ADO, the Mari represents the dark, winter aspect of Rhiannon. In this form she rules over the winter and acts as a psychopomp, conducting the souls of any who have died during the year to the world of the Ancestors. She also presides at many of the ADO rituals and ceremonies between Calan Gaeaf (Samhain) and the Old New Year which falls on the 16th of January. The Mari, whilst greeted as an old friend when she rises from her coffin at Calan Gaeaf, is also presented as fearsome and demanding of respect. She represents death and the inevitable mortality that everyone must come to terms with. While death is not seen as an enemy to

[122] Although this is widely debated and is rejected by many scholars

be overcome, neither is it safe or comfortable and the Mari is a stark reminder of this.

Mari Mon spends the light half of the year in a small coffin, from which she is ritually awakened in a ceremony held at Calan Gaeaf. The ritual takes place in a candle lit hall with the coffin placed on a table in the middle of the circle of celebrants. The ritual is led by Kristoffer Hughes, the head of the ADO, and consists of the reading of *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* by Vernon Watkins. Verses are read in both English and Welsh by volunteers, and punctuated by the repetition of 4 lines of the poem at regular intervals:

> Mari Lwyd, Lwyd Mari,
> A sacred thing through the night we carry,
> Betrayed are the living, betrayed are the dead;
> All are confused by a horse's head. (Watkins 1941 Lines 397-400)

At each refrain, Barry, the Druid who carries the Mari while she is in the land of the living, bangs on her coffin with a short but sturdy stick wrapped with bells. This is a shockingly loud noise in the quiet hall. A few verses into the poem, he begins to undo the fastenings to the coffin with each knock until the ceremony reaches a climax when the lid of the coffin is knocked off and flies across the room landing with a loud bang. From this point, the Mari begins slowly to emerge from her coffin by degrees, until she stands facing the circle and a switch is turned on causing her eyes to light up. In 2022 I was lucky enough to attend this ceremony in person, and the emotional impact when Mari Mon 'sees' you for the first time is difficult to overstate. The impression of being in the presence of a newly awakened deity is quite overwhelming.

> So, at Calan Gaeaf…within the Druidic tradition or the Anglesey Order, we wake her up. So, we acknowledge that Rhiannon herself is moving from the guise of fertility; of sexual independence and that strength that she portrays and the humility within Rhiannon and she moves to the dead times… So, we wake her up and it's an elaborate ceremony. And I know we did a little bit of it online but in person it happens in a huge hall – well we have to cap it at a hundred people but there's always a hundred people there - and everyone is singing the *pwnco* in Welsh and in English and slowly but surely, she takes form. And, as she takes form over the course of forty five minutes we, as a community, remove the form of summer and autumn and prepare ourselves for winter so she not only helps us prepare for the seasonal change but also helps us to move towards the mentality of what It means to be dead; what it means to occupy the dead time of the year you know: the magic of decay; the profundity of decomposition because none of us would be here without decomposition. So, within that ritual, those are the messages that are being

> conveyed. The profundity of the horse Bone Queen as a symbol that encapsulates those mysteries that are seasonal and also internal. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

Immediately after her awakening, once she has been carried around the circle and greeted as an old friend, she witnesses and presides over the ADO's ritual for Calan Gaeaf at which the dead of the community, particularly those who died in the previous year, are remembered, honoured, and greeted as Ancestors. Her presence at this ceremony is as a presiding deity who is loved and honoured, but also feared and respected as an embodiment of death and mortality.

Figure 2- Mari Mon emerging from her coffin.

Mari Mon appears at several events following this, being a welcome guest in local houses and pubs, as well as the Order's Calan Gaeaf and Mid-winter rituals at the Neolithic burial chamber at Bryn Celli Ddu. She is also a regular attender at events much further afield such as the Chepstow Wassail and the Dark Gathering. At the Old New Year (*Hen Galan* in Welsh) on the 16th of January, the Mari returns to her coffin for the year, sung to sleep by the children of the ADO, there to rest until she returns the following year.

> So, then, by the time we get to *Hen Galan*: 16th January, it's time to acknowledge that winter has served us the worst it can, and the promise of spring happens, and in order for that to happen the Mari must return to her coffin. And then there's another elaborate ritual which puts her to sleep and that's done by the children of the Order … So, the role of the children is to say, "Thank you Mari, for everything you've taught us." And she has her own coffin; beautiful, beautiful coffin that one of our Druids has created. And then, our Mari lives with Barry and Crystal and their two boys. Gethin is 13 now - he's just turned 13 - and Gwydion is 11. Mari's always been a part of their lives, you know, always. And, even as a 13-year-old teenager, he's still a child of the Mari. He put aside his teenage humdrums and sang the lullabies because that's what they do. So, it's amazing how it's become a part of the community but also such a gorgeous aspect of a familial ritual as well, you know. There's something so profoundly communal about it and also deeply personal. So, that particular ritual at the very end, I don't take part in it. Nobody in the order takes part in that. It's just a family unit that loves her and washes her shrouds and irons her shrouds and puts her into her coffin. It becomes this beautiful process of acknowledging that she has now died herself, you know? So, at every stage there is death then there is the promise of life, and it just becomes this beautiful circle; this cycle of life, death and rebirth, you know? Encapsulated in this horse's skull. And she has this essence it is bizarre, and it never ceases to amaze me how people respond to the Mari. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

The ADO does not claim that there is any ancient association between the Mari, and the figure of Rhiannon in the *Mabinogi*, although they are open to the possibility. In a very real way, though, that is unimportant, it is the modern connection between the two and the current understanding within the Order of Mari Mon as an embodiment of the goddess of sovereignty in her winter aspect as a psychopomp and Lady of Death that is important.

> So, she always snaps at the genitals and there's this thing as if she is attacking the very font of fertility itself because she is so deathly and she is referred to as *Brenhines y Gaeaf*, *Brenhines yr Esgyrn* so she's constantly referred to in Welsh poetry as The Bone Queen; The Death Queen; and sometimes The Deathless one … She's simultaneously dead and not dead; almost like a vampire… But she is this thing that exists in that period where the year itself is dead…So, we took all these elements, but also this element of... she certainly has this psychopompic element to her. She not only attacks the source of life, she's somehow an affirmer to life at the same time…paradoxically, she expresses a life force. And this kind of, the quiddity of death itself, and she has shrouds. All the words…that are used in the Welsh language in association with the Mari are all words that are associated with death and with winter and coldness and the grave and all of those mysteries…So we do have a psychopompic goddess within the modern Druid tradition and that's Rhiannon. Her birds can bring the dead back to life…so as modern Druids we superimposed the Mari on Rhiannon…The Mari is referred to as a Queen and the Great Mother, so it lent itself perfectly. Of course, people make the mistake that we might be implying that she's always been Rhiannon and that's not true at all. We caused her to fit that mould 'cos she seems to fit so perfectly. That's not to say that's what she was to our Ancestors…the Mari tradition has constantly evolved…which is why it's still around now and having this huge revival. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

In Mari Mon we see an example of something that was not seen as a deity, but which now very much is, and which is connecting certain Druids to an awareness of, and reverence for death and mortality. This may raise the question of whether a goddess who has been self-consciously created can be a 'real' deity. This highlights the way in which Druidry, along with other forms of Paganism has a ludic quality to ritual and belief, playing with ideas in order to create realities that 'work' on an emotional, ritual, and religious level to establish the connection with the Ancestors that is central to the Druidic self-understanding. Certainly, there is no doubt that the Mari is a very real presence to the ADO, as well as to many others.

> She is alive. There's this animism to her that is bizarre. There's this dead horse's skull that's suddenly animated and it's incredibly profound and powerful to witness. And I never - and although we know Barry is underneath it – Barry the Mari as we call him, you know, but he isn't. And then his accounts of what happens to him underneath those shrouds where time ceases to exist, and he always feels like something else is there with him; something other. And all of the people, you know, John Exton, [123]they'll say exactly the same and all the people who have written about her within the Welsh language and in English have all remarked about this thing. Something happens; something of the other arrives and something of you takes a back seat while she runs amok. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

Conclusion

The key themes that emerge from an examination of the rituals surrounding Samhain are community, relationality, and reciprocity. The dead are not thought of as separate and irrevocably removed from the living, but are separated by a 'veil', which, at certain times, becomes thin and permeable, allowing the living to interact with the dead. This has clear associations with the idea of Continuing Bonds (Klass 1996), which I will examine in more detail in chapter 11.

The use of ritual is vital in establishing and maintaining these bonds. Scrutton (2018) argues that ritual creates a type of knowing that is qualitatively different to the type of knowledge that arises from the acceptance of a propositional

[123] John Exton and his wife, Sue, own a number of Maris, including Mari Sol, Mari Seren and Mari Celeste which they regularly take to events such as the Dark Gathering and the Chepstow Wassail.

belief or adherence to a religious doctrine. This is a type of knowledge that can only be gained through experience. The experience of ritual is, she argues, deeply sensual, somatic, emotional, and narrative. Rather than accepting the proposition that 'the Veil is thin' Druids experiencing the rituals described in this chapter 'know' this to be true for them through 'experiential knowledge'. Harvey suggests that rituals, certainly in a Pagan context, are 'enactments of inter-personal, and often inter-species, relationality.' Finding their meaning in 'the communication (to performers as well as to recipients) of respect and reciprocity.' (2020a, 37) Thus in the context of Samhain, ritual serves to enact and reify the connection of the community of living persons with the community of 'other than living persons' in a single continuum. Furthermore, because Samhain is an annual occurrence, it allows the bonds between the living and the dead to be maintained, curated, and reinforced over time. The grief of bereavement is not, as is often assumed, something that people 'get over' once a funeral is done, rather it changes those left behind fundamentally. There is a diachronic quality to Samhain rituals which allows the gradual renegotiation of the relationship with the person who has died from a living person who has been lost into an Ancestor. The relationship continues, but also fundamentally changes.

> ...Pagan rituals make space for a much longer period of bereavement than has often been regarded as healthy within western psychological and psychiatric literature, and for joyful as well as sorrowful experiences within it...rituals, as narratival, are diachronic: rather than being instantaneous, they take place over a period of time. Time matters, because it gives us the possibility of having a richer kind of experience of something, and this contributes significantly and infungibly to our understanding of it...That rituals take place over time, as well as being narratival in the sense of telling a story, furthers our ability to see how rituals contribute to experiential knowledge and understanding. (Scrutton 2018, 220)

Many of the ceremonies we have examined include a space for participants to speak at length about a person who has died. This not only allows them to recreate for themselves a strong impression of the presence of the individual (Valentine 2008), but also, crucially, allows others in the room to have a sense of the person who has died, even if they never met. This allows for the possibility of a shared or communal grieving, or at least for mutual support of the person who is grieving, not only at the single, chronologically bounded

event of a funeral, but over an extended, perhaps indefinite period of time. While this is not unique to Druidry, it is quite uncommon in a western context, where little consideration may be given to grief experienced by the bereaved once a funeral has taken place. Scrutton suggests that this shared or communal ritualisation of grief can be a valuable tool. The sharing of memories, the use of sensory stimulation, which might include poetry, music, candles or incense during rituals, particularly in close knit communities, such as might be found in a Druid grove, can alter the experience of grief by allowing the 'off-loading' of emotion so that it is shared by the community (2018, 223–24). In this way, the rituals of Samhain form a powerful tool for the strengthening of relationships within communities of the living, allowing them to share the burden of grief, as well as allowing them to maintain an ongoing relationship with their dead, relocated as Ancestors.

From the rituals of Samhain, including those that include the Mari Lwyd, we can also learn about Druidic attitudes towards death itself. There are no 'Words against Death' here (Davies 2017, 4). Death is not perceived as a threat or a challenge that must be overcome and there is no sense that the material world must be 'transcended' in order to conquer death. Rather, Druidic ritual comprises a 'conversation with death'. Death is envisaged as an old friend who has been encountered many times before and will be encountered many times again; a familiar and inextricable part of life itself. Rather than being seen as something that is inherently 'wrong', to be overcome by recourse to the sacred, death is a part of the natural order, and as such is sacred in its own right. This is not to say that death is not fearful- the Mari represents a stark reminder of the physicality and disturbing nature of death- but this is a fear that is a natural reaction to the Great Mystery of death, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1925), rather than a horrified revulsion and denial. Death, whether represented by the Mari or the Cailleach, is a fearful thing, bringing decay and dissolution, but without those things there would be no life on the earth. Death and life are irrevocably intertwined in a never-ending cycle, and both are honoured and celebrated at the appropriate times of year in Druidic ritual.

This concern with the physicality of life and death, and the Druidic understanding of the human body both living and dead, as a manifestation of nature, and so as inherently divine, is reflected in Druidic ritual. This is in sharp contrast to the contention of Philippe Ariès (1982) that death is to be understood as the triumph of nature over human culture, and that death rituals are an attempt to mitigate this unsavoury fact. In Druidry, death, nature and humanity are inseparably bound into an everlasting circle which is intrinsically sacred in its entirety.

Chapter 9: The Emerging Funerary Tradition in Modern Druidry

'Deep into the Earth I go; Deep into the Earth I know.' [124]

Introduction

The last decade or so has seen the beginnings of a distinctive funerary tradition within modern Druidry. There are several probable reasons for this, including the aging demographic within Druidry; the more general changes in British society about the expectations of funerals, meaning that people feel less constrained by tradition; and the rapid increase in the number of independent funeral celebrants (Davies 2017, 15). Druidry, as a distinctive Pagan religious identity, has only really existed in Britain since around 1990, and so is only now reaching maturity. Many of those who were involved in its inception as it exists today have died or are reaching an age where they are considering their mortality. Spiritual or Religious Druidry itself has expanded in numbers greatly since its inception. According to the 2021 census, 2,490 people in Britain identify as Druids, and this is likely be far less than the actual number, as some will have identified as 'animists', 'Pagans' or similar, or simply left the question blank. Consequently, there is an increasing feeling within Druidry that there is a need for a 'death-style' (Davies 2015) that expresses the beliefs, traditions, and worldview of Druids in a way that is recognisable and authentic.

It should be acknowledged that the perception of such a need is by no means universal. As we have seen, many Druids do not consider Druidry as religion, and many do not see a need for distinctively 'Druidic' funerals. It is not uncommon for Druids to have a 'traditional' funeral, that will not confuse or unsettle non-Druid friends and family. Nevertheless, there is an increase in the number of Druid funeral celebrants, and certain distinctive characteristics of a 'Druid funeral' are beginning to emerge. This chapter will examine these

[124] From a chant commonly used in Druid Ritual, composed by Tarisha Seligman. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_WHOU6XXUVI

trends and attempt to draw some tentative preliminary conclusions about the emergence of a distinctive funerary tradition within Druidry.

The Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust

While the increasing number of Pagan and Druid celebrants undoubtedly reflects an increasing feeling that there is a need for funerals that are specifically ‘Druid’ in character, the feeling that Pagans needed to take responsibility for themselves and their emerging culture with regard to death, dying and funerals is not entirely new.

From the late 1980s, there existed in Wales an organisation known as the Pagan Funeral Trust. Its aim was to assist Pagans in obtaining funerals that accurately reflected their Pagan identity. The late 80s and 90s were a very important time in British Paganism, characterised by an atmosphere of protest around the Newbury Bypass (1995-6) and access to Stonehenge, which led to a strongly emergent Pagan ‘culture’ that had not previously existed (see, for example, Letcher 2001). It was, in part, this new-found sense of identity and ‘tribalism’ that led to the feeling that there was a need for a specifically Pagan ‘way of death’.

> There was an upsurge then at that time of things like natural burials and there was a real sense of people thinking about the land, not as pagans, actually, but the whole road building thing had brought the idea of our relationship with the land to people's awareness in general. And then there were things like various books coming out about death and dying that were not maudlin, nor were they melodramatic. They were, ‘now, look, you can do this and that. And here's your advance directives.’ The Natural Death Handbook came out around that time and they were very, very helpful. They gave me I don't know how many copies to sell to raise money. (Interview with Clare Slaney 10/07/2020)

By 1991, the people who had been responsible for the trust were at the end of what they felt they could achieve, and the trust was taken over by nurse Clare Prout (later Clare Slaney). The following year, the Trust changed its name to become the Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust in recognition of the fact that many Pagans who were elderly or terminally ill needed support and advice. The Trust offered advice not only to Pagans, but also to funeral directors, hospices, hospitals and the families of Pagans. One of its main aims,

however, was to educate and empower Pagans to take control of the care of their own dead.

> One of the things that I routinely did when I did workshops was show people how to wrap up a dead body, how to perform last rites, how to manoeuvre a corpse. And people liked that, people like the hands-on doing something and people liked to volunteer to be a corpse. And I started off using a sheet. I mean, you know, you need a big sheet to do it properly. And I ended up using beautiful sari material, stuff like that. And it became quite ritualised. And I did some work with OBOD. Where they invited me to one of their camps and we made a big event of it, of Samhain, and continued every year to make a big event of Samhain. Real journeys where people were walking around in the dark having psycho dramas, really, quite structured, large rituals. And that was very good, very good. There was lots of life and death and, you know, the ritual cutting of people's throats and the embodiment of various archetypes. And that was, that was good. (Interview with Clare Slaney 10/07/2020)

In 1995, The PHFT applied for charity status with the Charity Commission under the category of 'relief of sickness and suffering'. This was originally granted, making the PHFT the third Pagan body in Britain to hold charitable status. However, in 1996 the Pagan Federation applied for charitable status under the 'education' category. This was rejected on the grounds that 'Pagan' was a term that could not clearly be defined, since in normal parlance it could simply mean 'not Christian'. Furthermore, Paganism did not fulfil the CC's criteria for the definition of a religion and so to promote it could not be seen as educational. Shortly thereafter, the PHFT was informed that its own charitable status was to be revoked. The Trust had been looking to purchase a piece of land in Wales as a Pagan burial site close to ley lines and standing stones. The CC's position was that to purchase a burial site could only be seen as a charitable action if it was for the use of the whole community and not just Pagans, since Paganism was not a religion (York 1997). I have already discussed at length the issues surrounding the Charity Commission and religion, and I will not rehearse these again here, except to say that this was a major factor in the eventual demise of the PHFT.

Another reason, according to Clare Slaney, is that while Pagans were good at dealing with death in the absence of the dead themselves, for example at Samhain, they were much less good at actually engaging with the dead on a

visceral or practical level, for example will writing, engaging with those who were dying or keeping vigil with the recently dead.

> I think one of the things that I wanted to do back in the 90s, because pagans were poor back then, you know, I mean, they're not much richer now, from what I can see. But it wasn't a fashionable thing to do. It was left field, and we were really poor. And so you don't have to spend a thousand pounds. You can do it yourself because you're Pagan and you will feel comfortable around dead people won't you? Yes, you will, because you're Pagan and ...You know. I remember, we really wanted to set up, a vigiling service, and there was one death that we attended that went on for a long time, more than a week. And we all burned out, really, and we tried to get somebody there for all the daylight hours, and it wasn't winter, and we just couldn't manage doing it through the night. There weren't enough of us, and that went nowhere. Nobody wanted to sit with the dying, let alone the dead, which is something that I found, I still do, I think it's just the way I am. I found that just bizarre. You know, if we're calling in these forces ...woooo.... Come here spirit of the Blahblah. We must be able to sit with somebody who's dying. They are just dying. No. But that never happened. It was not possible. And I'm sorry that that's just not possible. It really bothered me that Jewish and Hindu and Islamic people are able to do this. It bothers me that we're not. It really bothers me. (Interview with Clare Slaney 10/07/2020)

Apart from the fact that many Pagans were uncomfortable around death, another issue is that unlike other minority religions in Britain such as Hindus and Jews, Pagan communities tend to be geographically spread very thinly, often a Druid might be the only one in a particular town, and this obviously makes it difficult to gather a community to care for a dead body or organise a funeral. Many of these problems still exist today, however, the rise of the internet has created virtual communities who can at least offer advice and support even if they cannot physically be there. Furthermore, as TDN's successful application to the Charity Commission shows, public attitudes around Paganism and Druidry are beginning to change, meaning that a 'Druid funeral' is not as odd as it might once have seemed. These changes are reflected in the fact that there are a growing number of trained funeral celebrants who specialise in serving Pagan and Druid communities.

Funeral Celebrancy in Druidry

There has been a recent explosion in the number of independent civil celebrants conducting funerals in Britain. Gone are the days where the only options available were a religious minister or a Humanist celebrant. There are no legal requirements or qualifications required to conduct a funeral, or to

offer this service for a price. However, there are now many different bodies offering training in becoming a funeral celebrant, and many associations that a celebrant can join. This has led to something of a flooding of the market, and unprecedented choice for those who need to arrange a funeral. It has also led to a change in expectations, with many people now demanding a funeral that is a celebration of the life of the person who has died, reflecting an individual and unique life, rather than following a rigid liturgical framework. For Druids, this has led to an expectation that a funeral should include an acknowledgement of their religious and spiritual identity, and that, as such, it should be conducted by someone who has an understanding of this. According to my survey, 97% of respondents believed that it is important to have trained Pagan or Druid celebrants available to conduct funerals.

> There is a need, and it brings one's life full circle. When you have lived a pagan/druid life you want to be understood and cared for accordingly in death as well. 303113-303105-26092173

> Paganism is becoming more acceptable, and we need representatives that respect and understand our wishes when we can no longer speak. 303113-303105-32334886

> Just as other religions have their own ministers/priests then those of the Pagan pathways should also have them. I'm sure a Christian wouldn't want a Pagan to oversee their funeral and I don't particularly want a Christian overseeing mine. 303113-303105-26182795

The need for celebrants who are trained in the practicalities of arranging a funeral service, and working with statutory bodies as well as the bereaved has led to OBOD beginning to offer training in funeral celebrancy. The key ideas that separate this training from the many civil celebrant accreditation courses are apparent in its title, 'Serving the Living and the Dead'.[125] The course is split into six sections. The foundation and final sessions deal with the motivations of the person taking the course, and practical considerations, including how to build a business as a celebrant. The remaining four sessions follow the pattern of the traditional Druidic ritual circle, being titled, 'North/Earth'; 'East/Air'; 'South/Fire' and 'West/Water'. The concerns of each

[125] Available here: https://schoolofcelebrancy.org/training-courses/serving-the-living-and-the-dead/

of the sessions broadly match with the traditional symbolic associations with each of the directions and elements.
North/Earth is concerned with practicalities such as the nature of the funeral business and how to deal with statutory bodies. It is distinctively Druidic in its concern with the realm of the Ancestors as a source of wisdom and tradition. The session finishes with a guided meditation designed to help draw inspiration from the Ancestors.

East/Air deals with the skills of communication, which are often associated with the air. Learners deal with listening, writing, and speaking skills and on how to begin to craft a service.

South/Fire is about service to the living. This includes making sure that the family and community of the person who has died are involved in the service, rather than the funeral becoming something that 'happens to them'. As we shall see in the next section, where the funeral is for a Druid, the bereaved are often far more involved in the ritual of the funeral than is usual in western culture. This may be through music, telling stories about the deceased, or taking an active part in the ritual, for example, by calling the quarters.

West/Water is concerned with 'honouring the great mystery of death'. West, as we have seen, is often associated with death and the realm of the Ancestors in Druidry, and water is frequently associated with emotion and spirituality. Thus, in this section, there is an emphasis on dealing skillfully with the emotions that surround death; both one's own and those of the bereaved. The session concludes with a guided journey to receive inspiration, guidance, and support from the natural world.

What makes this course distinctive compared to others of its kind, apart from its framing in terms of a ritual circle, is its emphasis on celebrancy as service, which is one of the corner stones of Druidic identity and self-understanding. Furthermore, this service is not to the bereaved only but also, and quite explicitly to the dead. As Kristoffer Hughes explains it, 'I live my life through

my service to the dead.'[126] In the introductory video, the course leader, River Jones, states that a good funeral constitutes the final and most profound act of service to someone who has died. The extent to which the dead are understood as being actually present at the funeral and helped by it varies; but even if they are thought to have 'moved on' before the funeral then the honouring of their life is seen to be an act of service to them. In the survey I conducted, 61% believed that a funeral was for the benefit of both the bereaved and the dead, while only 31% believed that it was for those left behind only.

Finally, the OBOD course is distinctive in that it does not only teach practical skills, but also seeks to engage prospective celebrants spiritually in the process, through guided meditation and journeying and through a final 'Ceremony of Completion' at the end of the course. The course is open to anyone, not only members of OBOD, but the distinctively spiritual nature of the course, and the fact that it is run through OBOD make it a good choice for those seeking to serve the Druid community. Likewise, there is no expectation that OBOD trained celebrants will conduct services only for Druids and Pagans, but the hope is that their ritual and spiritual awareness will make them appropriate for a wide variety of people from any religious tradition and none.

> if people come to me who are atheist, as in most humanists with capital H wouldn't come to me, but I get atheist friends who don't realise my spirituality or haven't seen my website or on my Facebook pages, that kind of thing. And they're quite shocked that I believe in something, I don't always say I'm a Druid. I don't necessarily have to go the whole hog there. (Interview with Gabriella Aluna 26/11/20)

Having completed the course, graduates who are also members of OBOD will be added to a list of celebrants listed by region maintained in the OBOD website to aid people looking for a Druid celebrant. Other websites designed to help Druids and other Pagans to locate celebrants and resources for carrying out a funeral are also starting to appear. Life Rites is one such

[126] Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021

resource.[127] While it is not explicitly Pagan, it does emphasise the importance of ritual and spirituality in all rites of passage, including some less traditional ones such as eldership and coming of age ceremonies. Another popular website is Pagan Transitions,[128] which hosts a number of resources including a list of celebrants; a 'Pagan Pledge' card that can be signed by friends or relatives, undertaking to organise a Pagan funeral; templates for ceremonies and repositories of appropriate songs and poems. It would appear that these sites are fulfilling their aim of raising awareness of the resources available as 92% of survey respondents said that that they would know where to look to find a Druid celebrant, and 90% said that they would know how to find out more about a Druid funeral.

While not all funerals of Druids are carried out by a Pagan or Druid celebrant, the majority of those who took the survey (67%) said that they would prefer their funeral to be conducted not just by a Pagan, but by one that was known to them personally. This might be a Grove member, a suitable family member, or just a friend. Quite a few respondents mentioned that members of their groves were currently going through the OBOD celebrant training with the view to being able to perform this function within the grove. Three respondents specified that they did not want a single celebrant, but rather for the ceremony to be led communally by grove members, as their most immediate religious community. The fact that so many presumed that they would know someone personally who would be willing and able to carry out their funeral strongly suggests that the number of Druids, whether formally trained or not, who are taking on the role of funeral celebrant for their own religious community or more widely, is considerable, and growing.

[127] https://www.liferites.org.uk
[128] https://www.pagan-transitions.org.uk

Druids and Funerals

In many ways, the funerals of Druids may not be significantly different from those of anyone else. Many choose to use their local crematorium, often because it is most convenient. 22% of survey respondents said that they intended to use this option. However, only 5% said that they intended to use a Humanist or professional civil celebrant who was not a Druid, suggesting that even in a relatively straightforward crematorium service it was important that there were at least some features that were distinctively Druidic. In this section I will take a closer look at Druidic funeral ceremony, including the role played by the dead themselves, whether in spirit or in body. I will look at how Druid core values, such as a reciprocal and relational approach to nature and ecology, a reverence for Ancestors, and the typical ceremonial aspects of calling the directions and the elements are reflected in funerary practices. Firstly, however, I will turn to a question that is of fundamental importance, although it is often overlooked in contemporary discussions of funerals: what is a funeral for?

The Purpose of a Funeral

On face value, this may seem like a very straight-forward question, and in fact different funerals can serve very different purposes. In most non-religious funerals, and even in most church funerals, the assumption is that the primary purpose is to offer comfort and closure to the bereaved in some form. Whilst the person who has passed away is remembered and honoured, there is generally no sense that what is said or done at the funeral is of direct benefit to them. Most Druids would agree that the most important purpose of a funeral is to honour, remember or celebrate the life that has ended, (53% of survey respondents). 30% said that a funeral is to say goodbye to the person who has died and 21% believed that it was to allow family and friends a space in which to express grief. Where Druids differed significantly from the wider population was in their suggestion that what is said and done at a funeral can be of direct assistance to the dead in passing to wherever they needed to go

to. 61% believed that a funeral was for the benefit of both the living and the dead, while 31% believed that it was for those left behind only, and 16% specifically stated that one of the main purposes of a funeral was to help the dead to move on. There was also a concern with the importance of ritual as something that brought closure to the bereaved, ritually separated the living from the dead, and allowed a space for the deceased to be honoured and thanked for their life.

> To honour the dead and help move the spirit/soul onwards. And to provide a ritual in which the bereaved can journey into a greater acceptance of the death of the one they've lost. 303113-303105-26087707

> Mostly for the folks left behind. But some young spirits can have problems with getting themselves properly passed-over. One of my jobs is as psychopomp so I get to herd souls and get 'em across to where they should be. Death rituals - not always funerals - can be useful as part of this 303113-303105-26109215.

> There are two main purposes of a funeral. One is to console the living, to provide a ritual of closure with the physical remains and ritually say good-bye. The other is to provide a ritual of transition for the deceased, to acknowledge for them that the end of a particular manifestation has ended. 303113-303105-26151813

> The funeral is to help that person to move on to wherever they believe they're going to. So, in some ways you could say it is to help them through a gateway or, you know, it depends. I mean, if they believe that they're going maybe to another realm, or if they're just going back into the earth or they're going to be coming back as... I mean, from a Druid perspective, I would say it's a ceremony to help somebody move in the spirit and to move from this reality into the into the world of spirit. And then when we celebrate Samhain, when you know, that is the place where we think of our ancestors and people who have passed, that's like a place where we think of them. (Interview with Paddy Mooney 24/11/2020)

> My core thoughts on it at the moment is there is potentially when the physical body dies, the part that can't be found, if you like, most people call it spirit or soul. It kind of, it starts to make a transition. And perhaps there is an initial element of surprise that at the time in the physical body, the attachment, if you like, the material attachment to a body and being, you know, on the earth as we see it has passed and therefore a ceremony, a ritual where assisting a living will also assist that part of that person to understand that separation and to move comfortably on. So, yes, a comfort, I suppose, for whatever it is that is left when the physical body is no longer needed. (Interview with Richard D 03/06/17)

Making Ancestors

We have already seen the extent to which the Ancestors as a concept are central both to Druid ceremony and to the way in which Druids orientate themselves towards the world. We have also seen that even where Druids

believe in re-incarnation there is also, very often, a sense in which someone who has died remains, in part, in the realm of the Ancestors. In some religious traditions, there is a specific ceremony that takes place a year after death, and which relocates the person who has died into a new category. This can be seen as a secondary stage in bereavement which is less immediate and raw. In Druidry this purpose is served by annual Samhain rituals in which those who have died in the previous year are particularly honoured and remembered. In indigenous traditions, these ceremonies often serve to relocate the dead into the realm of the Ancestors. This is one of the functions that may be served by a Druid funeral, although this is rarely explicitly stated.

> I also think funerals should be about acknowledging ancestors in a bigger sense, and that the newly dead go to join them, although I have not yet been to a funeral that recognised that last part. 303113-303105-26139905

Often, ties to the person who has died are symbolically cut in some way so as to relocate the person from being 'here, but dead' to being 'there'. There, as we have seen, is often understood as the Summerlands, the Otherworld or the Realm of the Ancestors, which exists beyond a veil; separated from this world but accessible to it. There are various ways in which this may be done, including through the envisaging of a door or veil through which the person must pass, or through the cutting of ties between the person and their body, or the person and the living. In one case, at the funeral of a man who had died before he was able to marry his partner, a handfasting ceremony was held between the woman and her partner's cremated remains, with the woman symbolically cutting the handfasting cord at the end of the ceremony (Interview with Gabriella Aluna 26/11/20). According to Kristoffer Hughes, significant ritual power and force is required to sever these bonds and separate someone from the living in order to reincorporate them into a new status as an Ancestor.

> And, of course, the point of that crematorium curtain, whatever method they use, is the crescendo of emotion and it's that point of they have now gone and it's replacing that lowering into a hole, you know. And that image is so psychologically powerful and necessary for us to acknowledge they have now moved from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. I still punctuate it with what I consider to be important aspects of the funeral ritual, you know. So, acknowledgment, honouring

> and veneration; separation, the power of loss; the profundity of mystery; the spiritual element and then, finally, the vanishing...the cone of power in a funeral is the rising of that emotional energy to a crescendo that, in my mind, punches the ancestors straight through the veil and the ancestors need that as well. They need us to walk them to the edge of forever and not just say 'Go mildly'. Punch the fuckers out, you know? Go [makes punching sound] 'there you go' you know; ram them into eternity so that they've been firmly ensconced there, you know. So, that to me is the cone of power within a funeral ritual is that bubbling; that distillation of energy from laughter and memory and tears and sadness and loss and nostalgia that rises to this peak and then that peak is the punch, you know, that acknowledges you are now ancestor and I acknowledge you as such. So, that's how I ritualise it; by keeping all of that in mind of this importance of not just going meekly and mildly into the ranks of the ancestors but going with power and intent and feeling; punching them through you know? And, in my experience, those funerals have been the ones that have created the platform for emotional relocation much easier and much quieter, if you like, without huge inappropriate coping mechanisms coming into play. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/5/21)

The process of cremation itself may be important for the transformation of the recently dead into Ancestors. Robert Hertz suggested that funerary rituals often have two phases. The first involves the 'wet' remains, in other words, the dead body that is subject to decay and dissolution. This is treated in such a way as to render it 'dry'. This may be by temporary burial or by cremation, which he asserts, 'far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering into new life'. (Hertz 1960, 43 First published 1905). Thus, the process of cremation turns the temporary and corruptible body into something stable and permanent; capable of being regarded as an Ancestor. What Druids subsequently choose to do with cremated remains might relate to the secondary phase of funeral ritual suggested by Hertz and may be significant in the relocation of the person who has died as an Ancestor. There are many ways in which this might be done. Some Druids may keep some or all of the cremated remains on an altar dedicated to the Ancestors, incorporate them into a ritual tool, or scatter them in a significant place such as an existing ancient site associated with the Ancestors. They may also choose to place them into one of the 'new barrows'; an idea to which I shall return in Chapter 10.

The Significance of the Dead Body

As 11 respondents pointed out, an important purpose of a funeral is for the safe, hygienic and emotionally fulfilling disposal of a dead body. In wider society, physical remains are increasingly removed from the experience of the bereaved. While some do choose to visit their dead in the Chapel of Rest at the funeral home, many do not; and the increasing trend for direct cremation[129] means that many have no physical interaction with their dead from seeing them in hospital to receiving cremated remains back. Indeed, an increasing number do not even wish to receive these, preferring instead to allow the crematorium to scatter them with no witnesses present. Funerals are concerned with the memory of the deceased person, and while most people spend some time at a funeral service in the physical presence of the coffin, it is quite usual for them to have no experience of their friend or family member as a corpse. While this remains true for some Druids, there is a greater tendency than in the wider population to engage directly with the body[130]. This tends to be done either at the place of death, where this is practicable, or in the funeral home. Very often the emphasis is on honouring the physical body and thanking it for the role that it has played in their lives. One way in which this can be done is by the placing of objects into the coffin that serve to establish an ongoing bond between the person who has died and those left behind[131]. One example of this occurred when Terry Dobney, who had been the Archdruid of Avebury passed away.

> When Terry's body came home, and we had him home the night before with an open coffin. We had candles lit all the way down the path at the back. And two really big 48-hour candles burning in the house. So, he was brought in - he was wheeled in and

[129] This is where the body is taken directly to the crematorium and cremated with no service and no family present.

[130] It should, of course, be remembered that there are several religious traditions living in Britain who routinely engage with the body of someone who has died in ways that are both practical and ritual. My intention here is to place Druidry within this tradition as opposed to the common practice in British secular society.

[131] It should be pointed out that this practice is by no means exclusive to Druids or Pagans.

> placed there and then the vicar[132] and everybody else was here as well. And we brought the mead out and we toasted Terry, and the vicar brought some frankincense. So, he had given her a large, solid piece of frankincense, and this was the tiny bit that was left. So, she was here and some Druids, and some of the Wiccans again. So, we did a bit of a ceremony again. We put, let me see, rosemary went into the coffin. We put the *Awen* in. a penny for the ferryman, of course, but it's no longer the penny it was it was £5 worth of penny. All my hair was cut, symbolically. All my hair. My hair was long. It all got cut. That went in. Oh, right motorbikes. Terry was very big on Indian motorbikes. He was very well known in the motorbike world, and I had actually bought him, the Yule before, a wooden, an oak Indian motorbike with all movable parts and everything. So, that symbolically went in with him as well. We put the harvest biscuit in as well. Every Lughnasadh or Lammas, whichever one you call it, we make specific biscuits from the grain round the area with the honey and everything that's local and we keep one for the next year. So, the one that had been left actually went in with him as well. I think that's what went in with him, yeah. And then, all that day, people were coming as well, around. And they were putting one or two things in as well that they wanted to put in. (Interview with Susan Dobney 2/2/23)

It is common for Druids to use the language of the four elements to represent the Cosmos, the human psyche, and indeed, the human body. A well-known chant used in Pagan and Druid ceremony includes the line, 'Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath and fire my spirit.'[133] Thus, the human body is seen both as a microcosm of the universe and as an embodiment of the Goddess who is herself, the manifestation of nature. This is no less true of the dead body, which may be represented as returning to the elements from which it came. Because of this, the elements in the form of candles, incense, water, which may be scented with essential oils, and crystals are often used to wash or honour the body. In one case, the actions of the Druid couple who acted as celebrants at the funeral, and who also conducted a blessing for the body at the hospice, encouraged the nurses to join in with a spontaneous ritual with the body.

> So, we held a ceremony in the hospice, you know, just using the bedside table. I brought in a pretty fringed cloth and something representing Earth, Air, Fire, water in physical form. Obviously, because of fire regulations we never would light candles. We have a very beautiful LED candle that's all carved and it's pretty and even down to ashes from holy fires of hundreds and hundreds of holy fires from Seneca Nation. If people wish we can bring all these things together, preferably it's their own things, but. You know, on death that could be difficult. If it's white sage, they want or mugwort or whatever it is. So then for Paddy and I, we literally call in the directions

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[132] This took place in Avebury where the vicar of the local church is very familiar with and sympathetic to Paganism, and often forms a bridge between the Pagan and Christian communities. Terry had given her a large piece of frankincense incense as a gift when she first came to Avebury.

[133] Author unknown. Available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qkr4AreWMQI

> and call in the spirit beings. Asking that the transition and the path is clear for them, So the nurses too came to us and said very, very we didn't know what to do. We didn't know what to do, hope it's OK. And I said, What do you mean? And this nurse, I just burst into tears afterwards because I just felt so touching. She said, well, we took her felted hare and we laid it on her heart. Facing her? And then we have crystals and we laid them in an arch around her head and we took her aromatherapy spray, we sprayed. I'm emotional now. And I said, that's fantastic. That's perfect. 'Well, we didn't know what to do.' I said, 'you just did it. You took what you saw and created a beautiful ritual.' And that's what it's about. So I've been trying to link to hospices, I've been into a few now. Some are linking with us and with hospital visitors in our local hospital. Just trying to be there in case somebody needs us at the end of life. (Interview with Gabriella Aluna 26/11/20)

In his book, *Journey into Spirit*, (2014)[134] Kristoffer Hughes, head of the Anglesey Druid Order, describes a ritual that can be used to honour the body of a person who has recently died and prepare them to be placed into their coffin. The ceremony ideally takes place in the home of the person who has died, and Hughes, who has also worked as a mortuary technician, gives advice on how best to take care of a body in the home. However, it could also take place in a hospice, or in the premises of a sympathetic funeral director. This is, he suggests, the last act of kindness and service that can be offered to a member of one's spiritual community that has died. The body is laid out on a suitable table with cloth placed underneath that will later be used to wrap it. Incense is prepared to a recipe including frankincense, myrrh, pine needles or resin, wormwood, vervain and patchouli, all plants that have an association with death and the Ancestors. A mixture of tea tree and lavender oil is also blessed, and this is used to anoint the body. The dead person is addressed, and assured that they are loved and will be remembered. Any gods or goddesses to whom they were especially attached are invited to be present. The person is thanked and encouraged to move into the place of spirits.
The main part of the ceremony is the anointing of the body, with the purpose both of honouring it and thanking it for all that it has done and been in the world of the living. As the body is anointed, beginning with the head and moving down to the feet, the following is recited:

> We honour your head, the place that gave rise to your thoughts.
> We honour your eyes that bore witness to this world.

[134] Republished in 2020 as *As the Last Leaf Falls*

> We honour your ears that heard the wonders of this world.
> We honour your nose that brought breath to your lungs.
> We honour your lips that expressed your uniqueness.
> We honour your shoulders that carried your burdens and those of others.
> We honour your arms that reached to embrace this world.
> We honour your hands and the magic of touch.
> We honour your heart, your seat of feeling and compassion,
> We honour your centre that held you to this place.
> We honour your belly button that anchored you to blood and heritage.
> We honour your belly, the centre of passion
> We honour your genitals, the portals of pleasure.
> We honour your knees that bent in service to others.
> We honour your legs, strong and stable.
> We honour your feet that trod the face of this earth.
> *We honour your body, the vessel of living.* (Hughes 2014, 250)

Following this, a small stone local to the area, a few grains of sea salt and a feather are placed on the belly of the deceased in order to symbolise their connection with earth, sea and sky. These are accompanied by the words:

> May the powers of this land return your body to the mysteries of earth.
> May the powers of air and sky hold the memory of your life.
> *May the powers of our sacred seas call your spirit home to itself*.(Hughes 2014, 251)

The body is then dressed and wrapped and placed into the coffin. The emphasis is on honouring and thanking the physical form, but also on encouraging the spirit of the deceased to move on from it. It also gives those taking part in the ritual a way to say goodbye and to acknowledge that the body is now a corpse, so providing some closure.

Cremation Funerals

As we have seen, a local crematorium serves as the venue for many Druidic funerals with 22% of survey respondents saying that this is what they would choose. One reason for this is undoubtedly that it is the most straight-forward option, and one that might be most acceptable to non-Druid family and friends. However, there are reasons why cremation might be a deliberate and positive choice for Druids.

The legalisation of cremation in Britain in 1884, and subsequent Cremation Act of 1902, came about in part due to the result of a court case involving the Druid, Dr William Price. Price was a medical doctor, surgeon, eccentric,

activist and Welsh Nationalist. He was a prominent member of the Pontypridd Druids discussed in Chapter 3 (Hutton 2011, 253). On 10th January 1884, Price attempted to cremate his five-month-old son, Iesu Grist, on a pyre at the top of Caerlan hill in Glamorgan. Local people saw this and reported it to the police who stopped the ceremony and removed the partially burned body from the flames. He was arrested and initially charged with murder, although when a post-mortem revealed that the child had died from natural causes this was changed to a charge of carrying out a cremation, which the police believed to be illegal. At his trial, he argued that while the law did not explicitly state that cremation was legal, neither did it say that it was not. Justice Stephen agreed with him, and he was acquitted, with the cremation finally going ahead on 14th March. When Price himself died in January 1893, his body was cremated on the same site on a pyre made of wood and coal (Hutton 2011, 283–85). Following Price's trial, which established that cremation was not illegal under British law, crematoria began to spring up around the country and in 1902 the Cremation Act set out the legal parameters for crematoria and cremations. Thus, Britain could be said to have Druidry to thank, at least in part, for the establishment of cremation.

Price's motivation for wishing to cremate his son, and to be cremated himself, stemmed in part from his belief that this was the normative funerary practice in the Iron Age culture whose religion he believed himself to be reviving. This affective connection to ancient practices is, as we have seen, very much evident in Druidry today, in multiple ways, including 'death-styles'. 20 respondents to my survey, an impressive 14% stated that they would prefer cremation on an open-air pyre.[135] Open-air cremation is not currently a viable option in the UK. As the current situation stands, it is technically legal but the restrictions that have been put on the circumstances in which it can be carried out make it functionally illegal (Inman-Cook n.d.). Nevertheless, it is an idea that holds a powerful romantic fascination for many Druids and other Pagans

[135] This was one of several options stated on the survey itself, and it is possible that some of those 20 would not have thought about putting it as a choice if this were not the case, however, this still represents a significant trend.

as well as other religious and cultural groups in the UK. The amount of wood required means that it is not a viable option on a large scale, and to facilitate and witness such a cremation could be a very disturbing experience for residents of the UK who are not used to such sights (and, indeed, smells!) However, as well as providing a very clear link to the practices of the past, it is also perceived as being very different to the clinical and detached process of mechanical cremation at a crematorium. The process takes several hours, allowing the potential for a long and drawn-out ritual period during which engagement with the dead body could hardly be more intense and immediate. It also requires a very large fire, which is always going to be a popular ritual feature for Druids! The cremated remains, which would need to be collected from the pyre once it had cooled down sufficiently, would be instantly recognisable as human remains rather than the rather clinical white powder that British people are used to receiving back from the crematorium[136], which would render many things that people are wont to do with cremated remains impractical, but which would open up other magical and ritual possibilities. For some, there are reasons connected to specific beliefs that make open-air cremation attractive. In Vedic India it was believed that cremation was necessary to release the atman from the body, and that the atman would then ascend to the heavens on the smoke of the cremation pyre (Uzzell 2010, 13). Some survey respondents expressed a similar belief, including one who was commenting on the new barrows.[137]

> I am strongly in favour of them as they are a means of returning the physical remains to the earth, but still the act of cremation to sever ties to the body. 303113-303105-26092756

In this case, cremation, whether on an open-air pyre, or in a cremation, is a necessary part of the funeral ritual if the person who has died is to benefit from it.

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[136] Cremated remains from a crematorium have been passed through a cremulator, a grinding machine that reduces them to a powder of uniform consistency in which no body parts are discernable.

[137] See Chapter 10

Another advantage to conventional cremation is that it produces an inert substance in cremated remains that can be deposited in various locations or used in ways that are ritually significant. Many of the survey respondents saw this as a clear advantage to cremation. Cremated remains could be scattered in a significant place, often an archaeological site connected with ideas about the Ancestors; or returned to the earth in order to feed nutrients back it. Several people expressed a wish that their cremated remains be used as fertiliser for a tree. This also seems to have been the wish of William Price himself who wished that his ashes be, ‘Spread all over the earth to help the grass and flowers to grow.’ (Hutton 2011, 285). The appeal of this to Druids is easy to see; as with natural burial, it is perceived as a way of giving oneself back to the earth from which one came and becoming an active part of the ecosystem. Unfortunately, this appealing idea has no basis in fact as human cremated remains are actively harmful to plant life.

As well as its link to Iron Age funerary practices, another reason that Price is likely to have favoured cremation has to do not so much with his religious beliefs as with his agenda as a political and social activist. The Cremation Society of Great Britain had been advocating for cremation for some time in 1884 on the grounds that church yards and cemeteries were becoming dangerously overcrowded and represented a significant risk to public health. Price shared this concern and along with the Cremation Society viewed cremation as a safe and hygienic method for the disposal of a body.

As always, ideas change over time, and modern Druids are likely to object to cremation on environmental grounds, due to its consumption of fossil fuels and production of dangerous chemicals such as mercury. A possible solution to these concerns comes with the introduction of resomation, sometimes known as water cremation, in which the body is dissolved in a strong alkali solution, and the skeletal remains put through a cremulator to produce a result almost identical to conventional cremated remains. While the ‘cremated remains’ are as dangerous to plant life as their more conventional counterparts, the process does produce a liquid, rich in nutrients, which could

be used as fertiliser. The process itself uses far less energy than cremation and does not release chemicals into the atmosphere[138]. This process is very much in its infancy in the UK, and it remains to see what impact, if any it will have on Druid practice. Only one of my survey respondents was aware of its existence as a more environmentally friendly alternative to cremation.

There are logistic problems with using a conventional crematorium for a Druid ceremony. Most crematoria are set up on the model of a church or chapel with the coffin at the front, or even to one side, and the 'congregation' facing the celebrant at the front. Druid ceremony, on the other hand, is almost always held in a circle, and the ideal would be to do this in a crematorium with the coffin at the centre. It would also be common to use incense and candles in a Druid ceremony, and as we have seen, these are often used to bless a body or a coffin. However, in many crematoria there are fixed pews that cannot be arranged in a circle and fire regulations prohibit the use of lit candles and incense. Since ritual and ceremony rather than words alone are fundamental to what takes place at a Druid funeral, celebrants often need to show a degree of initiative in overcoming these issues.

> Outside the crematorium there would be a blessing of fire and water, and I would be talking to the congregation outside, explain what's about to happen and singing a blessing chant, a very simple one. I'm going around the coffin and inviting in what that person believed in. To be blessed and cleansed before going through. The family would normally follow behind the coffin and myself, Paddy, leading up aisle and singing that chant acoustically and carrying that through until everyone was sat down, the person went not on the catafalque but on some trestles because she wanted people to be able to touch the coffin or place rosemary on the coffin afterwards. In that particular funeral there were four OBOD members, Druids representing the four elements. I gave a welcome and introduction, giving people the landscape of what's about to happen because it is unusual and I actually talk to most of the close family members and congregation together in the waiting room, just explained everything was an invitation, not an obligation to join in... , instead of opening the four directions, as you might do, we would stand in a line looking at congregation. And we requested that the other ladies wear white, if they could or one lady that wasn't passed in Druidry, so she wore colours representing the element that she was standing for. And Paddy takes absolute spiritual leadership on the wording regarding a Druid ceremony, because he's Druid grade and I look to him for that advice. And so we honoured the four directions rather than open things and close things in front of people. (Interview with Gabriella Aluna 26/11/20)

[138] https://resomation.com

> The lady who had passed, she definitely wanted a circle. So we went up to the crem for a visit a couple of weeks before, we said, ‘So is there any way that we can get the chairs into a circle?’ And so they said, ‘Well, if you can do it, if you can put them in a circle, then put them all back in the allotted time, then that's fine.’ So we had to sort of have a little crew, so to speak, to come in. And that was like a military operation. And we always say to people to book a double slot, even if we don't use the time for the actual ceremony, it'll be setting up and setting down time. We had to plan it down to the minute, really, because the funeral director, which is one of the old guards from the time they were really like, you know, we've got to be out of here to let the next people in. Yeah. And they were more concerned about that. But we did it. We put the chairs in a circle. Obviously, we weren't allowed candles, so we had those little electric tea lights. We weren't allowed incense to burn, but we had incense in a bowl, and we used it like it was lit. And we had a centrepiece, we put we put an altar down. We had the coffin as part of the circle. And it was beautiful. And everybody was like, wow, you know? But I mean, there was a lot of work and] it took a lot of visits and phone calls and reassuring people that it was going to be OK. (Interview with Paddy Mooney 24/11/2020)

When these logistic difficulties can be overcome, however, Druidic funeral held in a crematorium can be a very rich experience for all concerned, whether or not they are Druids. The funeral of Terry Dobney, Archdruid of Avebury, was a significant event that required a lot of co-ordination by all involved. Whilst the service itself was held in the crematorium, the funeral was larger than the crematorium service and incorporated the sacred landscape of Avebury itself.

> And then, when it came the next day, obviously they came with the motorbike hearse. And it was brilliant because we went down the avenue of stones into Avebury and as we got into the circle, there was a group of bards playing music. They were playing drums. The lady that played the mandolin: she was there. They were all playing music as we were going past for him. The whole of Avebury stopped, and they all came out. We had to have police helicopters above us, as well. Checking everything. Just before we arrived at the actual crematorium itself, the hearse stopped, and all the motorbikes went ahead of us. And they lined the path - the road in the car park - and were revving up as a sign of respect for him - revving up all the engines. And one did a doughnut. And then Terry came in. Then all the Druids or anybody who had a staff like Pagans, Druids, whatever and the vicar, with their staffs they made an archway as we walked in. I placed an apple before everything started. I placed an apple on the coffin. The quarters were opened. We had somebody who speaks Celtic do a call to the ancestors in Celtic. We had Druid's prayer which Terry had adapted. So, it's not Druid’s prayer that everybody knows, because there's no gods or goddesses or anything in that at all, all that is we say, ‘Earth, give us thy strength, and in that strength knowledge, and in that knowledge, understanding and with that knowledge and understanding the knowledge and understanding of justice and with knowledge and understanding of justice, the love of life itself. So mote it be.’ So, there was a eulogy there. One of the bards had written a poem about Terry, so he got to say that. There was a song written about Terry, but there wasn't enough time to sing that. And then, let me see, what did Henk do there? Oh yeah, Henk symbolically cut the cord with Terry's gold sickle. (Interview with Susan Dobney 02/02/2023)

Natural Burial

Natural burial sites are a comparatively recent phenomenon, with the first being opened by Ken West MBE as a designated part of a conventional cemetery in Carlisle in 1994. By 2014 there were a similar number of natural or woodland burial sites as there were crematoria. Like the growth in cremation, the demand for natural burial has been driven largely by the Middle Classes. Sites may be run by individuals, private companies, local authorities or large funeral companies such as the Co-op (Davies 2015, 347). What is distinctive about natural burial sites in comparison to conventional Church or council-run cemeteries, is the lack of gravestones or permanent memorials[139]. Burials, or sometimes interment or scattering of cremated remains, are effectively invisible. The landscape, usually meadow or woodland, is managed with ecology, biodiversity, and wildlife as the top priority, rather than the memorialisation of the dead. Small markers flush to the ground are allowed at some sites, and some others allow the family to adopt a tree close to the grave and place a wooden dedication plaque on it. Funeral services take place either at the graveside or sometimes in a small wooden lodge on the site. There is one natural burial ground, Sun Rising,[140] in Oxfordshire, that is owned and managed by Emma Restall-Orr, formerly co-leader of the BDO, and founder of TDN. Emma is also the founder of HAD (Honouring the Ancient Dead) which campaigns for the respectful treatment and, where possible, reburial of pre-Christian human remains held in museums.
Among the Druids who responded to my survey, by far the most popular option (67%) was for a funeral at a natural burial ground. One of the reasons for this was the lack of the constraints in time and use of space that are common in a crematorium service. Furthermore, services at natural burial sites are often held outside, as are the majority of Druid rituals. This freedom allows for a high degree of creativity and innovation in the use of ritual. As in funerals that take place in a crematorium, common elements are the calling of

[139] The position of graves is carefully mapped using GPS and other techniques, so that there is always a reliable record of where particular graves are located.

[140] https://sunrising.co.uk

the directions in order to create a scared space, and the use of the four elements to bless the body.

> We managed to find a woodland burial in Scotland for William. And it was a very large funeral by English standards 125 people at it...And we created a circle. And then people were allowed to speak, and they put things on the coffin. And then he went in. And his friends had dug the grave. So, it was a very earthy; engaged and people – one or two Irish people, that was all - and my kids, myself and two Irish friends who held the ceremony for us and the rest were English and the older English not the pagan crusty types. Eco warriors, there was lots of those, you know...we kept it as raw as possible, therefore, it was real...Someone left a knife, some potato cakes, spoon, a little whisky flask, somebody left one of her dreads and I think there's a tradition of, if a dreadlock falls out you give it to somebody, bury it or something. So, we allowed it for people...So, it allowed that space to talk or people to do about memory and then we told stories as part of it. His two brothers were there. And as I was doing the eulogy then they would come in a little bit and there was a lot of laughter and chanting...Because it was a wicker coffin, we had to put straw on first. So, there was bags of straw. So, we offered everybody to take some straw and then they put it in and then we chanted 'Deep Into the earth I go'. And so, everybody chanted and held hands all around the grave. That's it off the top of my head. So, it was I suppose, readings, eulogy and for me elemental blessings are really important in any ritual for me. Oh, so was there anything else? No, I think the readings might have been old funeral, ancient Irish blessings type thing as well. (Interview with Eimear Burke 22/11/21)

For some Druids, the value of natural burial lies in its ability to create coherence or assonance between the lifestyle and death-style of a person. In other words, it allows a person to die as they have lived, expressing the core values in which they have found meaning and framed their identity, thus, 'Giving an individual a greater sense of integrity of identity than would be afforded in a form of funeral that compromised a person's lifestyle.' (Davies and Rumble 2012, 14). This coherence between the way that someone lives and dies has always been important to Druids, even though the ways in which this manifests change over time. William Price rejected burial because, 'It is not right that a carcass should be allowed to rot and decompose in this way. It results in a wastage of good land, pollution of the earth, water and air, and is a constant danger to all living creatures.' (Powell 2007, 23). Cremation seemed to him to be the better option as it was sanitary and in the interests of public health. However, in the years since Price, concerns over pollution and fossil fuel consumption have risen over cremation so that, 'Dissonance replaces assonance over cremation' (D. J. Davies and Rumble 2012, 14) for many Druids, and the pendulum is swinging back in favour of burial, albeit framed in a new way.

We have already established that one of the core values of Druidry is a reverence for ‘Nature’ however that word is understood. It should come as no surprise, then, that natural burial is attractive to so many Druids. Davies (2017, 6) proposes that an idea, such as ‘Nature’ can become a value when it is invested with emotion. When this ‘value’ is significant to a person’s sense of identity it becomes a ‘belief’ and when a belief such as this is significant to a person’s sense of destiny, it becomes a religious belief. While I would argue that the idea of ‘destiny’ is somewhat problematic within the context of Druidry, it seems clear that the idea of ‘Nature’ fulfils Davies’ criteria of a religious belief admirably, and indeed, Davies himself considers ‘Nature’ as such a religious belief in the context of natural burial (2015, 249–50). He suggests that in Britain, part of this reverence for nature arises from the cultural popularity of parks, gardens and gardening. Many British people have, or would like to have, gardens or allotments, and such places are associated with positive feelings of peace, fecundity and vitality. The association of ‘the sacred’ with ‘that which confers identity’ (Mol 1976) leads to the idea of natural burial grounds as ‘sacred space’ and if this is true of British culture in general, as Davies suggests, then it is doubly so for Druids who self-consciously use the language of sacralisation to describe nature. In terms of Davies’ theory of ‘destiny’ as being central to religion; while Druidry lacks a sense of ultimate soteriological destiny, a Druid might see their ‘destiny’ at least in part, as becoming a part of a vital and animate ecology through natural burial.

> Here, in pragmatic fashion, we can see something of the very dynamics of ‘the sacred’ at work, as people’s sense of their relation to their grave ‘in nature’ engenders an identity aligned with vitality. Their destiny is to be integrated with the ongoing nature of ‘nature’ (Davies 2015, 350).

Thus, for Druids in particular, natural burial offers an opportunity to become integrated with nature, and thus represents a form of apotheosis, literally to become a part of the divine. As we saw in chapter 7, there is a strong affinity in Druidry with the idea of ‘cosmic recycling’ where both the physical and energetic components of a human being are re-used in an ongoing cycle of life and death. The person continues to ‘live’ as part of the vital landscape around them, even where there is no sense of continued personal

consciousness. This idea can be seen in the lyrics to a song sometimes used at Druid funerals and at Samhain, written by Damh the Bard, a popular Druid songwriter and musician.

> I am the rising sun,
> I am the birdsong when the day is done,
> I am the tear in your eye,
> But I am alive.
> I am the buzzard on the wing,
> I am the snowdrop of the Spring,
> Wipe the tears from your eyes, I am alive! [141]

Eimear Burke, Chosen Chief of OBOD, expressed a similar belief when talking about her late husband, who is actually buried in a church cemetery next door to their house, which used to be the rectory, but whose presence she feels much more strongly in the garden.

> I mean Howard has spoken to me. He came to me. You know, when he was dying, my sister's a good Catholic and she used to say, 'now, Howard, when you're going to God...' That's our euphemism for when somebody has died. We all knew Howard was dying so it was discussed, there was no, kind of, need to beat around the bush. And I remember saying to him, 'Are you going to God?' And he goes, 'No, course I'm not.' And he said, 'My spirit will be with the birds, the trees, the mountains and the islands.' And three weeks after he died, I was just out; I'm upstairs now but outside my garden room door there's a lean-to. This Sparrow Hawk came right beside me. I mean, we're talking about next to the house right in and then moved by me. Sparrowhawks don't do that; they're in the garden. And I knew that was Howard. And then I had a dream another time about a bird coming into me hugging me and in the dream, I knew it was Howard. (Interview with Eimear Burke 22/11/2021)

It was common for Druids who wished for a natural burial to speak in terms of 'giving something back' to the earth or 'returning to the earth. This is very much in keeping with the findings of Davies and Rumble (2012) in their investigation of a Barton Glebe Natural Burial Ground in Cambridgeshire, which is the only such site to be consecrated by the Church of England. It is interesting that Christians and Druids use very much the same language in terms of natural burial. As Davies and Rumble point out, this language of the giving or gifting of the dead body can be understood in terms of Marcel Mauss' theory of gift giving as a means of maintaining a relational network

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[141] *Down in the Garden* Words and music by Damh the Bard, available at https://www.paganmusic.co.uk/new-lyric-down-in-the-garden/ Used with permission.

that is the cornerstone of society (Mauss and Evans-Pritchard 2011). Mauss identified three ‘obligations’ that operate within normative society; the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate. Beyond this, though, he also mentions a fourth and qualitatively different obligation, the obligation to give to the gods. This is not limited to ‘gods’ in the conventional sense of the word, but can be interpreted as

> ...any ultimate agent, cause, or cluster of prime social values, upon which humans acknowledge dependence, and in relation to which they understand their origins, whether as divine being, nature, the environment, or humanity at large. (D. J. Davies and Rumble 2012, 101)

To this idea of a fourth obligation, Godelier (1999) added the idea of a gift that is ‘inalienable’ in that it retains something of the identity of the giver and is ultimately inseparable from them and so cannot be used in ordinary commerce. It is hard to imagine something that fits these criteria better than the human corpse, especially when used in the context of someone who has chosen to have a natural burial. The gift, however, consists not simply of the corpse itself, but of its decomposition, unsullied by the chemicals of embalming, or by synthetic coffins. The gift is in the nutrient and lifegiving potential that the body holds in its decomposition[142] (D. J. Davies and Rumble (2012, 107). The gift can be understood as being given, according to Davies and Rumble, to the wellbeing of future generations who will benefit from the life that will grow from the dead body, to the surviving family, who will enjoy visiting a beautiful and peaceful site, or to the earth itself, or, in a Christian context, to the God who created the earth, ‘given in acknowledgement of the resources consumed by the formerly living person.’ (2012, 101). All of this is equally true of Druids, but there is an extra dimension here in that the Earth, as a manifestation of Nature is often understood to be divine, a Goddess (sometimes The Goddess) in her own right. Thus, a natural burial fulfils Mauss’ fourth obligation in a very simple and straightforward way. Many Druids would say that they come from the earth and are utterly dependent

[142] Unfortunately, most natural burial sites use graves that are too deep for the bodies to act as fertiliser or food to plant or animal life. Below four feet there is little to no insect life and decomposition is anaerobic. As with the use of cremated remains as fertiliser this is a myth that is remarkably persistent but has little basis in fact.

upon her for the elements out of which their body is constituted, as well as for their food. At death they return to the earth from whom they came, thus completing the cycle of life and death.

I have no problem being buried as my offering to Mother Earth or cremated into a compost for a tree to be planted on me or around an existing tree with my family or friends. 303113-303105-26537897

Conclusion

As we have seen, then, the idea that there is a need for a 'culture of death and dying' that is specific to Druidic ideas of identity and meaning making is one that has ebbed and flowed since the emergence of a distinct Spiritual Druid identity. In the late 80s and early 90s the spirit of collective identity fostered by ecological protest, as well as the rise of the natural burial movement led to a sense that action was needed. Now again, in the second decade of the 21st Century, concerns over climate change have produced a climate of activism and protest centred around a need to protect the earth. Whilst organisations such as Extinction Rebellion are non-religious, they nevertheless attract many Druids, and it is not uncommon to see Druid ritual incorporated into their events. At the same time there has been an unprecedented rise in the number of 'life-centred' celebrant led funerals that move away from traditional structures. Associations such as the Natural Death Centre, the Association of Green Funeral Directors, and the Good Funeral Guide advocate for a more ecological, ethical and person-centred approach to the funeral service. All of these factors mean that once again, the time is ripe for the emergence of a distinct and recognisable Druidic funeral tradition. Only time will tell if this does, indeed, prove to be the case.

While there is, as I have demonstrated, wide variety in the style of funerals chosen by Druids, the core values that Druids see as being central to their sense of identity identified in Section A, continue to be evident in death-styles. Davies, (2017), has theorised that funerals are best understood as 'words

against death'. While I accept this as a general principle,[143] Druid funerals are characterised by a concentration on ritual action as opposed to words only, which is uncommon in British Christian and secular funerals. The people present are likely to be active, rather than being 'spoken to' by a celebrant standing at the front. Most Druid funerals take place in a circle, and many of the people present take an active part, whether calling the quarters, blessing the circle with the elements, or reciting prayers. The Druidic concern with the *Awen* and with creativity is reflected in the fact that funerals frequently contain live music as well as songs and stories written and performed by those present.

The typical Druidic reverence for nature is reflected in the popularity of natural burial and in the wish for cremated remains to be used to nourish the earth. While technically inaccurate, this continues to be a very powerful idea. Finally, belief that the dead are, in some form or another, both present and accessible as Ancestors is powerfully reflected in Druid ritual. One of the ways that this has been expressed in recent years is through the deposition of cremated remains, either at sites of archaeological significance or in new barrows built in the style of ancient tombs. It is to this newly emerging practice that I will turn for the final chapter.

[143] Druidry is less concerned, at least in theory, with the denial and conquest of death than the soteriological religions.

Chapter 10: Barrows Ancient and Modern

'Raise me up a Golden Barrow'[144]

Introduction

The stories we tell ourselves and about ourselves are a vital part of our identity and belonging. For Druids living in the UK, as we have seen, those stories tend to be deeply rooted in a sense of connectedness with the landscape and with the 'Ancestors', often situated in an imagined and idealised pre-Christian past. Since the time of William Stukeley, the Druids have been associated in the popular romantic imagination with the ancient burial mounds that proliferate in the landscape. The fact that this association is not historically correct has done little to weaken its power.

This chapter will focus on the construction, in recent years, of a number of 'new' barrows, mimicking the Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, and designed to take human cremated remains in niches built into the construction. The fact that this initiative has proved popular with Druids, but also with many others, testifies to the power that the barrows hold over the imagination. Why is this? What stories are being told about the barrows, and what do those stories have to say about connections to 'deep time', to the land, to each other, to community and to the future.

Why 'Barrows'?

Many terms have been used to describe the features discussed in this chapter. Archaeologists have often used the term 'chambered tombs' as many of the features, including the modern ones modelled on them that are described in this chapter, have multiple chambers. The most obvious problem

[144] From *Barrow Song*. Words and music by Andy Letcher, from the album *Untie the Wind* by Telling the Bees. 2008 Used with permission. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD1UZ-yzhVo (Accessed 23/06/2023)

with this is that while the majority of these monuments contain human remains, some do not, and none contain enough to have been the primary means of the deposition of the dead for the local community (Hutton 2013, 40–41). Furthermore, experiments conducted on the effects of sound on human consciousness in West Kennet long barrow (Marshall 2016) raise the possibility that the monuments may have been used for ritual purposes apart from the deposition of the dead. What these were, and the extent to which they were concerned with either the dead or Ancestor veneration is not, now, something that may be known. The analogy to churches is a helpful one here, an archaeologist excavating a church many centuries from now when the context of Christianity has been lost, might conclude that the primary purpose of such buildings was the deposition of the dead since large numbers of human remains are found there. However, it is obvious to us, equipped with a knowledge of both the theology and the history of Christianity that the burial of the dead is incidental to the purpose of the church. The dead wish to be buried in and around a church because the place is seen to be intrinsically sacred; it is not the presence of the dead that makes it so. In the absence of evidence, we cannot know whether it was the interment of the dead in the barrows that was their primary purpose or whether the dead are interred there because of their inherently sacred nature. The more colloquially used term ‘burial mounds’ has the same issues. Hutton suggests the use of ‘tomb-shrines’ as a way of avoiding this issue (2013, 40). I have chosen to use the term ‘barrow’ here for two main reasons. Firstly, it is a well-known and familiar term to most people; indeed, this is the term that the builders of the new barrows themselves use. Secondly, it is a neutral term, making no specific claim about the original use of the monuments. The word barrow comes from the Old English *beorg*, meaning a hill (Hutton 2013, 44), and is most commonly used to describe the type of tomb-shrine that is characterised by a mound of earth. Since this is the type of monument on which the ‘new barrows’ are modelled, it seems the most appropriate term to use here.

Barrows in the Ancient Past

Barrows first began to appear in Britain during the first half of the fourth millennium BCE and represent the first monumental stone constructions in Britain (Hutton 2013, 41). They take a variety of different forms and shapes and the majority contain human remains. These are rarely articulated individuals, rather there are jumbles of bones, or sometimes the bones may be organised into different types, with femurs being stored together in one place and skulls elsewhere, or with males and females in different chambers. This suggests that the bones were curated and possibly taken in and out of the barrow over time, possibly indicating some sort of ritual interaction with the Ancestors (Smith and Brickley 2009). The earth mounds that covered the burial chambers also often contained assemblages of materials such as pottery and animal and human bone, suggesting a deliberate assemblage of things that were important to the identity and memory of the community, possibly deposited by different groups during construction as a way of expressing collective memory and identity (Hutton 2013, 45).

Figure 3- West Kennet Long Barrow

We know surprisingly little about the cultures that produced the earliest barrows or the rituals that took place within and around them (Smith and Brickley 2009). We do, however, know that they have had an impression on

the religious, spiritual, and political life of those who lived near to them from earliest times. Neolithic stone circles and barrows have been re-used and re-interpreted by people of the Bronze and the Roman Iron Age (Bradley 2017) and the Anglo Saxon period (Semple 2013). In fact, Bradley has demonstrated that some Scottish sites previously thought to be Neolithic are in fact much later, belonging to the Middle Bronze Age, and are self-conscious reconstructions of forms and alignments that have their origins in what was, even then, the ancient past. There is no direct line of continuity of use from the Neolithic monuments to their re-purposing, re-use or reconstruction in the Bronze Age and therefore, as Bradley points out, the Bronze Age monuments are not based on memory, in the sense of an accurate account of past events, rather their histories have become fluid; imbued with successive layers of association, memory, myth and meaning. Rather than such reconstructed barrows being based on memory, he suggests, 'A more appropriate term is commemoration, which can be characterised as human activity undertaken in response to a past' (Bradley 2017, 5). This may be for political reasons, where incoming people sought to assert their right to an area of land by burying their elite dead in places of ancient and 'ancestral' importance, although there may be other explanations. Bradley suggests that the local Iron Age elite, who were in receipt of luxury goods from the Romans and lived in Roman style residences, nonetheless sought to re-assert their 'native' identity through burial in places associated with their ancestral past.

After the incursion of the Anglo Saxons from the late 5th Century onwards, many Neolithic sites were renamed to honour Germanic deities. Examples include Thundersbarrow Hill in Sussex and Adams' Grave, previously Woden's Beorg in Wiltshire. It is possible that these sites were associated with the mythology or worship of those deities, indicating a further re-imagining or re-interpretation of ancient sites in antiquity.

> There was this other brief; very brief; all too brief flourishing of Paganism with the Anglo Saxons who did have this deep connection with our land because they were incomers, and they were discovering it afresh. So, naming the long barrow Wayland's Smithy or another long barrow Adam's grave/Odin's grave or whatever it was, it was almost like they were discovering the land afresh. (Interview with Andy Letcher 31-08-2017)

During the later Saxon period, burial mounds were perceived as frightening liminal places associated with ghosts and the dangerous dead. They were used by the Saxons as places of execution and for burial of the 'outcast dead' (Smith and Brickley 2009). Possibly, although this can never be certain, they were associated in the Saxon mind with the Paganism and the underworld. During the conversion period, the association with the underworld became an association with hell, and the barrows were increasingly shunned as being evil and dangerous places, (Semple 2013, 205–7). They retained, however, a powerful presence in the popular imagination.

Barrows in Deep Time

By the time that they first became objects of interest for the antiquarians of the 17-19th Centuries, the barrows were already clothed with many layers of myth and story, having been imagined and reimagined by countless generations. As Bradley says, 'If the histories of such places were represented as memories, that was sometimes a fabrication or an illusion. When people looked back across an enormous expanse of time it is likely that they were remembering things that had never happened' (2017, 10). The barrows, in other words, were inhabiting a sort of mythological time, or 'deep time'.

'Deep time' is a concept that was developed by Scottish geologist James Hutton in 1788 to describe the timescales in which geological processes of earth-shaping take place. The phrase itself was first used by American author John McPhee nearly two centuries later. McPhee draws a comparison between the almost unimaginable timescales in which mountains and rivers are formed and landscapes shaped, and the brief, almost un-noticeable flicker of each human life against this backdrop (1982). Human beings, viewed at this scale, appear as almost insignificant; and yet they are not. Building upon McPhee's concept, David Farrier writing in an article for *The Atlantic* in 2016 comments that human activity, certainly over that last 10,000 years, has been intimately involved in this process of landscape formation. Human presence is increasingly visible written onto the landscape and will, increasingly, in the

Anthropocene, be writ large over the ‘deep future’. ‘Deep time is not an abstract, distant process, but a spectral presence in the everyday. We also, in the everyday, increasingly see our human role in shaping deep time’ (Aeon 2016).

When we look at the barrows, we see the role of geological timescales in shaping the landscapes that gave rise to them and in which they are deliberately and purposefully placed. We see the processes that have created the different rocks and stones used for their building in different locations, and in the formation of the valleys and hills that are incorporated as part of the ‘sacred landscape’. We also see the role of our distant ancestors as co-creators of the landscape that we have inherited. It is exactly at the period where the barrows begin to be constructed that human agency appears in Britain for the first time in terms of landscape formation. Hutton (2013, 37) suggests that it may have been the act of deforestation as farming began to be practised that led to the exposure of the landscape in a new way that produced a fundamental change in attitudes towards and relationships with the land. Viewed from the perspective of deep time, a human life span may seem insignificant, no more than a mayfly, and yet at the same time it is possible to see it as a part of something unimaginably larger than itself, a vital part of the coalescence of processes and intentions that have created the landscape and will continue to shape it into the deep future. The deep time of the barrow formation exists beyond history or memory. We may find glimpses of the barrow builders through archaeological investigation, but we can know almost nothing of their intentions or hopes, and because of this, the barrows are freed from their place in the ‘mundane time’ of day to day living in which the past and the future are easily discernible and easily separated. Any interpretation of them that fulfils the evidence available at a given time, be that the Bronze Age, the Eighteenth Century or the present day is as valid as any other and so meaning can be ‘read into’ them and the people of each time and age are as instrumental in their creation as the men and woman who first created them as part as a relational and reactive world made up of living beings, animals, Ancestors, gods and primal forces.

Barrows as Symbols

The French anthropologist, Pierre Nora, has written about *Les Lieux de Mémoire* or 'Sites of Memory' (1989). These are not necessarily physical structures, since they can refer to historical archives or to events in history that have taken on cultural significance.

> *Lieux de mémoire* are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most absurd elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word- material, symbolic and functional...(they) are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the *lieux de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialise the immaterial...it is also clear that *lieux de mémoire* only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, and endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications (Nora 1989, 18–19).

I would argue that this description matches the barrows very well, and that they should therefore be regarded as 'sites of memory', or, as Szpocinski suggests (2016, 246), 'sites of remembering'. They exist not just as archaeological relics from which we can learn about the past, but also as repositories of meaning, with layers of cultural value that change over time and from person to person. In the 19th and early 20th centuries they were frequently associated with ghosts and the uncanny, places of danger and brooding threat. In the modern world, they can express ideas about heritage and 'Britishness'. To many Druids, they represent ideas about an ancient past where community and harmony with nature were key values, 'remembering' a past that never was (Bradley 2017, 10). Thus the barrows have become more than monuments, they have become symbols, embodying ideas, values and beliefs (Davies 2017).

In literary studies, 'reception theory' is used to unpack the idea that each person who comes to a text brings with them their own past, knowledge, emotions, associations and ideas and that these are at least as important as the intentions of the author in establishing the 'true' meaning of the work (Goldstein 2001). There can therefore never be a single, fixed, bounded and unchanging way to understand a text. It may be used in new political, religious

or cultural contexts in ways that would have been totally alien to its creator. It has been suggested (Hunt 2004) that a similar methodology can be applied to gardens as deliberately shaped landscapes with meanings that can be both intended and 'read' by visitors. It is clear to me that such an approach can, and indeed should be taken to the sacred and ritual landscapes of the deep past, overlaid with countless layers of 'commemoration' (Bradley 2017, 5), re-telling, identity making and mythologising. Much can be learnt about the power and importance of such landscapes, both in the past and in the present day, by paying attention to the various ways in which they have been read and interpreted by successive generations. The original intentions of the barrow builders lie hidden in the deep past, and yet such sites remain full of meaning, embodying the reimagining of national, religious, cultural, and local identity.

Having examined the ways in which ancient barrows in Britain function as symbols endowed with multiple and interlocking layers of memory and meaning, I will turn now to the construction of 'new barrows' in Britain from 2014 onwards. It should now be obvious why the idea of a barrow is endowed with such powerful emotions to many people in Britain, and therefore why the new barrows, which are already culturally layered and storied by their association with ancient barrows, and with the modern dead, should be beginning to operate as 'sites of memory' or 'sites of remembering' and accumulating their own unique layers of meaning, story and mythology, such as with the butterflies at All Cannings.[145]

New Barrows

In 2014 Tim Daw, a farmer and former steward at Stonehenge, opened All Cannings[146], a Neolithic-style barrow modelled on the chambered tombs and designed to receive cremated remains caskets in niches in the walls that would then be sealed. It is aligned with the Mid-Winter sunrise and there are open days on the solstices and equinoxes where families of those whose remains are interred in the barrow, those who have niches reserved and

[145] See p.247
[146] https://www.thelongbarrow.com

members of the local community meet to socialise and to mark the occasion. All Cannings is closely modelled on the West Kennet long barrow, which is very close by. In fact, it could be argued that All Cannings is the latest addition to the ancient sacred landscape in which West Kennet is situated, which also includes the stone circle at Avebury, Silbury Hill, and the Avenue, a processional line of stones that links the Avebury circle to the Sanctuary. The site is clearly designed to engender feelings of connectedness and continuity with an ancient past. It is of particular interest that while the barrow has only a 5% occupancy rate, all of the niches have been reserved.

Figure 4- The main passage of All Cannings Long Barrow illuminated by the Mid-Winter sun rise

So popular was the project, in fact, that the team responsible for its construction later set up a company (Sacred Stones Ltd.[147]) in order to construct similar barrows at other places in the country, where possible, in keeping with the archaeology local to that area. The second barrow, at Willow Row near St Neots in Cambridgeshire, was completed in summer 2016. This is a round barrow[148], rather than a long barrow, as at All Cannings, and it does not have any astrological alignments. It is, however, nestled in a wooded

[147] https://www.sacredstones.co.uk

[148] In archaeological terms, round barrows are common in the Bronze Age and tend to contain one or two high status burials rather than the communal burials typical of Neolithic long barrows.

clearing and approached by a pedestrian gravel path approximately half a mile long, which conceals the barrow from view until you round the final corner and come face to face with the heel stone. Toby Angel, a director of Sacred Stones Ltd, feels that having a round barrow makes the space feel more welcoming and encourages people to stay longer, engaging with the communities of the dead within the barrow. There is a circular bench at the centre of the barrow where people can sit. For him, this makes it easier to engage with the space than in the long barrow at All Cannings. The whole experience of the barrow engages the senses, through music, candles, touching the stone and so on. It is, he believes, very much a 'living' space.[149] When I arranged to interview Toby for the first time, I felt it was important to do so inside the barrow itself. The experience of being inside the chamber, with its peculiar acoustics, the light filtering from the outside and from candles, and Toby's dog running inside and outside gave the interview a quality it would not otherwise have had so that it felt as if the barrow itself was participating in the interview.

Figure 5- The interior of Willow Row Barrow with the niches for cremated remains illuminated by candles. Copyright Sacred Stones Ltd.

[149] Interview with Toby Angel 16/3/2017

A third barrow in Soulton Manor in Shropshire was completed in the summer of 2018. The Soulton barrow includes a short processional way of standing sarsen stones, marking an even closer connection to the Neolithic past.[150] Tim Ashton, the owner of the land on which Soulton is built is a farmer, but also a physicist, and a newly constructed stone circle close to the barrow contains a holed stone aligned with the black hole at the centre of the galaxy. In Tim's view, this is a modern take on the ancient idea of using monuments to express knowledge of the heavens, so although it is a very modern notion, it also links back to the intentions of the Ancestors, creating a link with them.[151] Various innovative rituals are also beginning to emerge, linking the communities and landscapes of the different barrows. A stone from All Cannings was brought by Tim Daw to the Soulton site and is built into the foundation of the wall alongside stones from the farm at Soulton Manor. An oak tree from Soulton has been planted at All Cannings in an act of reciprocity. Also, the principal stone, forming the central point of the barrow, was laid by the family of the first person whose remains are to be interred there, with coins placed beneath. As building on the site continued, a number of families intending to use the barrow have participated in the building of their own niches. For Toby Angel, one of the directors of Sacred Stones Ltd, the central idea of the barrows is of a community hub where layers of meaning are added over time; a place where ritual, whether consciously religious or not, can be conducted in an unhurried manner by family members. The barrows are placed in natural settings surrounded by wildlife and far from the urban noise and pollution that often surrounds civic cemeteries and crematoria. He sees this, to some degree, as an antidote to the modern 'conveyer belt' of commoditised and impersonal cremation ritual. He describes the site as 'non-denominational, but full of faith' (Angel 2016).

> So maybe when you look back in time, maybe that's what it was. There was some form of community focus, at them barrows. Maybe it wasn't just for burying people. Maybe there was a gathering place there. But that seems to be what's happening now. There is a definite gathering space where people are, I dunno, they're all

[150] A number of ancient sites, such as Stonehenge and the Avebury stone circle are approached by a processional way which was presumably used for ceremonial purposes.

[151] Interview with Tim Ashton 11/01/2018

> different with different religions there's different everything, but they all seem to come together. There is none of that about it. There's no ... And I think that's the beauty of it. Well, that's how I feel anyway. It's the community that it does make. I think it does create like a community, maybe not a local community, but they have a kind of a kindred spirit between the people that are, you know, and I feel that kind of thread of a community running through all the barrows. Right. Well, that's what I hope is going to be anyway that as it goes on, you know, like we were saying, we should have a noticeboard at the top there with all the information on it. Yeah. You know, like a community noticeboard. (Interview with Geraint Davies 14/02/2017)

It is clear, therefore, that the idea at the heart of the barrow is one of community. The barrows function as the hubs of networks of living people; both from the local communities, where they become the centre of social and cultural activity, and also between the different 'barrow communities.' They also become hubs for building and sustaining relationships, perhaps, ultimately, across generations, between communities of the living and communities of the dead in a way that is, perhaps, unique in modern Britain. Finally, they are designed to fit harmoniously into the wider than human ecology that already exists in the location chosen. The Soulton site boasts a healthy population of barn owls which have become almost totemic to the barrow, with the owl imagery being repeated in various ways throughout the construction, including in stained glass panels to seal the niches. Toby Angel speaks of the owners of Soulton Manor and of the barn owls equally as 'guardians' of the site.[152]

The barrows are used as places of community gathering and ritual. At both Willow Row and Soulton there are outside areas close to the barrow that are used for musical and theatrical performance. The barrows are almost unique in the United Kingdom in their attempt to establish a place where communities of the living, across generations, can gather, socialise, enjoy music, theatre and food, and interact with a community of 'other than living persons'. In using this term, I am suggesting that the people whose remains are interred at the barrows operate within a reciprocal and relational world as 'persons' with agency to affect the wider world around them. Clearly, they are not 'living' in a biological sense, however they are continuing to interact with and influence those that are. They form a part of the larger than human world envisaged by

[152] Interview with Toby Angel 11/01/2018

Abram (1997) and Harvey (2020a) and yet they are clearly not ‘other than human’, since human is precisely what they are. They are more than a homogenised concept of ancestral dead, as many of them continue to be acknowledged in kinship relationships and activities and so they operate as ‘persons’ with agency to affect the living. I therefore suggest that the ‘more than human’ ecology of relationships be expanded to include those who continue to be a part of the day to day lives, activities and affairs of their kinship and wider relational groups and yet who are not themselves alive in a biological sense. This is not to comment on the question of life after death, or on the beliefs concerning the afterlife of those who use the barrows or of their families. Rather I am suggesting that the dead remain, as present and visible in the community in a way that allows the relationships that the living have with them to be renegotiated in a dynamic and relational way that perhaps goes beyond the ‘continuing bonds’ that have been theorised in bereavement studies (Klass 1996). The dead remain as important members of their families, with regular interaction. Many of the niches can be opened so that artefacts can be placed within them or taken out, and candles can be burnt within them. This active way of relating to the dead allows each generation to continue to be present as an ‘ancestral’ dynamic which, while radically different to the ways in which the Neolithic barrow builders interacted with their Ancestors, is, non-the-less a part of the same continuum. In this way, the new barrows are, in Bradley’s terms, ‘commemorating’ their ancient counterparts (2017, 5). While their usage is undoubtedly very different, they are an attempt to look backwards towards a time when the demarcation between the living and the dead was more porous and fluid, and both were seen as active participants in a community. In this way, the purpose of both the ancient and modern barrows can be seen as analogous. The new barrows offer the potential for the use of space and sensual experience in funerals that is highly performative and interactive in a way that that can be very meaningful to the families that use them. As Druid and storyteller Cliff Eastabrook points out, the original barrows were almost certainly used in a similar way.

> Yeah, so performance spaces at burial mounds, stuff like Maeshowe having the tunnels, and the alignment with the midwinter sunset and suddenly the chamber gets lit up at that point. The thought that that isn't at the centre of a performance is insane. Of course, there's a performance going on and it happens there. All the stuff that's been done with resonance that they have: All ancient monuments have resonances and if you play the right drum; hit the right thing in it; sing the right note: there it is! How would that not be part of performance of some sort? And going right back to the very first part of this conversation: narrative: story is going to be part of these performances because that's who we are. We are, essentially, the stories that we tell. And yeah, let's do it. Let's do those things. Because, at the moment, the story we tell about the dead is, 'Get 'em in the ground as fast as you can and talk about God a lot'. My Grandfather's funeral really, kind of, hit me: We went to this chapel that I'd never been to in my life, and a bloke, who didn't actually know my grandfather personally, cracked on about God a lot. My father cried. The coffin went away. It was like, that was so impersonal and so final and so irrelevant to the man. Yeah, I kind, of, went: 'Yeah... that's... I... Don't do that!' (Interview with Cliff Eastabrook 24/11/2020)

This sense of freedom to experiment and innovate with funeral ritual combined with a sense of congruence with the ancient past is a combination that is proving to be very powerful.

Barrows and Druids

The tendency of Druids to 'remember' a past that never was (Bradley 2017, 10), in the historical sense, was manifested publicly when the prominent archaeologist Stuart Piggott took exception to the claims of various groups of people calling themselves Druids to be the natural inheritors not only of the Neolithic mounds, but also of monuments such as Stonehenge (Piggott 1985). As we have seen, the association between the Neolithic monumental landscape and the Druids was first made by the antiquarian, William Stukeley in the 18th Century, and this association has continued with surprising tenacity to the present day. Archaeologists such as Piggott in the mid 20th century criticized Stukeley for attributing the building of the monuments and barrows to the Druids when in fact they were much earlier. While this is true, and the barrows predate the earliest accounts mentioning Druids by around three thousand years, it must be remembered that Stukeley lived in an age when the creation of the earth in six days approximately six thousand years ago was widely accepted by the scientific community. Stukeley correctly identified the mounds as pre-Roman, showing considerable insight. According to his worldview, if they were pre-Roman then the only possibility was to ascribe them to the Druidic period. In any case, the association between the

barrows, the stone circles and the Druids stuck, and it is an association that many still hold today, as is testified to by the number of cartoons and memes that appear on social media clearly showing ancient Druids building or otherwise associated with Stonehenge. In the Fifteenth Mount Haemus lecture, Julia Farley observes:

> By Piggott's time, the association between the Iron Age Druids and the monument at Stonehenge had been thoroughly unravelled in academic circles, but it was still popular with the general public (and it remains to this day). (Farley 2014).

Furthermore, it is an association that remains strong with modern Druids themselves. Whilst most Druids would acknowledge that neither the barrows nor the stone circles were built by Druids, and there is no evidence to suggest that they were ever used as sacred sites by Druids, yet they are by far the most visible and accessible link to the Ancestors in the landscape, even if those Ancestors pre-date the Iron Age Druids by millennia.

The Deposition of Cremated Remains at Sacred Sites

Due to the sense of connection that they may feel in places where the ancient Ancestors are interred, there is a tendency among some Druids to 'join the Ancestors' in a very physical way by having their cremated remains scattered in or around an ancient sacred site, such as a barrow. 8% of survey respondents had either done this for someone or were intending to do it themselves. 65% were either moderately or strongly in favour of this practice, with a further 19% non-committal and only 8% strongly opposed.

> It is up to them. If they have a connection there. I disagree with the view that once an archaeologist gets there it is a closed, sealed dead site to be preserved as a snapshot of itself as a time and date set by a human individual. Obviously, these places are still part of our current world. 303113-303105-32287493

19% specified that this was acceptable only if no damage was done to the site, and for most this meant that cremated remains should be scattered over a wide area, and not interred in a container.

> If it is done respectfully and is what the person wanted, I have no problem with this. I would not want anyone to place an urn or long lasting anything there, but ashes can be returned to the earth or on the wind. 303113-303105-26087609

> So long as there is no adverse environmental impact, I see no problem with it. In the case of burial mounds, it is better for ashes to be scattered outside than stored within a mound - the original creators of the mound might object to strangers being stored within. 303113-303105-26090250

Where disquiet was expressed, it was often on the grounds that we do not know what these sites were originally used for and so using them for our own purposes is presumptive and disrespectful to the Ancestors.

> I am against it on general terms. We have no idea what stone circles were for, and ancient burial grounds were not built for us. It is presumptuous to assume we can use such sites as we wish. 303113-303105-26165893

> I don't have a problem with the placing of remains in the vicinity of circles, provided it is done with respect to the site and those that visit it. With ancient burial mounds I am less sure, as these were specifically the burial sites of others, unknown to us and of a tradition lost to us across time. 303113-303105-26136104

Several respondents who expressed disquiet suggested that a good alternative to the use of ancient sites was that modern Druids should create new sacred spaces for the deposition of cremated remains that would, in time, become ancestral sites in their own right.

> I think it is more respectful to find those who have gone their own space rather than leave them at others' burial mounds. 303113-303105-26092173

> I believe the ancient sites should be for the ancient dead / ancestors - and we should make new sites for the more recent deceased. 303113-303105-26092828

Druids and the New Barrows

55% of respondents were already aware of the new barrows before taking the survey, and to some they represented a possible solution to the issue of finding new sacred ancestral sites.

> Not too happy about this, modern bodies are full of toxins and contaminants. I totally understand the wishes of some but think they should create their own sacred site. I have studied archaeology and I think it is important that some sites are kept intact. This is why I think the new burial mounds are such a good idea. 303113-303105-26090227

Reactions to the idea of the new barrows among survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive, with 74% being moderately or strongly in favour of them. Interview and survey data suggests that these barrows are linked in the minds of Druids with a sense of continuity with an ancient and pre-Christian past. The barrows provide the opportunity to become in effect 'tomorrow's Ancestors', continuing to be present and to be a part of the human and more than human community, as well as of the landscape itself, into the deep future.

> Wonderful idea! Lovely to become an ancestor with many others. 303113-303105-26113021

> I think it's beautiful. Feels more sacred than a coffin in the ground. You are surrounded by souls, not walking past them. 303113-303105-26126134

> I think they're a good idea. The one I know is All Cannings, because it's near where I live. It isn't built in the same style as earlier chambered tomb-shrines nor for exactly the same purpose, but it's a good modern innovation and a fine building in its own right. 303113-303105-34648558

> Joy! It gives a very pagan alternative based on community and not a single lonely grave. 303113-303105-34650846

> I like the idea (of my limited knowledge of the concept. Which may not be the reality). I like the idea of a house of the dead where the living can still visit and pay respects. 303113-303105-32287493

The emergent ideas, then, are of community, and of a specifically 'Pagan' place where Ancestors can be visited and honoured. Also important is the location of the barrows in rural areas associated with nature and beauty. For some, there is also the idea being in a part of the country to which there is an ancestral connection.

> Things started to Fall into place. One was perhaps thinking about that ancestral connection to that piece of landscape, And I found a great book about Druidry, it was one of those wonderful sort of early 19th century books by learned vicars who have been, you know, who love their landscape and want to taste something different and slightly eccentric about it. And he had a wonderful theory about the ancient monuments in the Wiltshire landscape relating to the temples of the planets. It's a nice fold-out. it was someone who'd clearly read Stukeley and it was a little bit later. And, you know, but he clearly worked out where the centre point was. And all these temples (are related to) different planets. And it covered that part of the landscape. You know, All Cannings was even on the map. When I went down and visited the site when it was being built in 2014. I bumped into Tim quite by accident. But we were chatting and obviously and he was pointing out the orientation in the landscape because there are... two Neolithic long barrows near the site. One of those is currently called Adam's Grave, but earlier it was Woden's Beorg. So in Heathen studies it's assumed to have been some sort of cult site for Woden, but obviously we don't know much. So it mostly fitted in the landscape with the heathen layer. So It kind of clicked into place mostly In my head. I decided to invest in a handy niche which is planned for the whole family really. (Interview with JG 14/08/2018)[153]

Another thing that makes the barrows attractive to some modern Druids is their long tradition of counter cultural ecological and social activism. Barrows may be understood not only as a direct link to distant ancestors but also as a community enterprise that circumnavigates the institution of modern funerals and the impersonal feel of the modern crematorium. There is time and space to conduct a ritual fitting to each person when the cremated remains are deposited in the niche without the need to conform to convention. For this reason, for some, it is the deposition in the barrow that has real ritual meaning and not any cremation service that might precede it. The barrows also provide a suitable setting that allows the dead to retain their ‘personhood’ beyond the moment of death, and to continue to act as part of a reciprocal and relational community based on ideas of kinship and ancestry that is entirely in sympathy with Druidic ideas about death and dying.

Another way in which the use of the new barrows by Druids can be understood is as an indigenising behaviour. By consciously mimicking the ways in which the ancient Ancestors conducted funerary ritual, albeit in a way that is more in keeping with the modern world, it could be argued that they are linking themselves to those people as progenitors of tribe and culture and so claiming to be inheriting and continuing an indigenous practice.

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[153] JG is a Heathen, but well acquainted with and sympathetic towards Druidry. There are family connections with the Wiltshire area.

> it just seemed to be a way of your remains being treated as similar as its possible to what your ancestors...I know in modern times it would be impossible to, you know, dump a load of bodies in a long barrow, like they did before, I can't see health and safety being particularly keen on that! So this is the closest you can have in our kind of, bureaucratic society. You know, my own preference would be for…I'd be quite happy to be, you know, laid out on a platform and give the crows a meal and then just, you know, dump me…dump me in a long barrow, or my bones and stuff, or a funeral pyre, I quite fancy the idea of that, but that's not legal in this country I don't think either... And it's an authentic proper long barrow; I mean it's aligned to the midwinter sunrise. (Interview with L P 23/12/2016)

The intriguing idea was also mentioned during this interview that given the belief in re-incarnation, there is the possibility that the bones of a previous incarnation of a person whose cremated remains are in a new barrow may already be interred in one of the ancient barrows, making the potential link between the two even stronger. It is possible that the ancient barrows functioned on one level as a place where the living and the dead could come together. We have seen how the new barrows are becoming, at least in a symbolic sense, a place for communities of the living to interact with communities of the dead, however, for some Druids and other Pagans this possibility of barrows as a point of interaction between the living and the dead is a much more dynamic and concrete possibility.

> I'm quite wedded to the idea that the barrow or indeed the grave site, you know, is some sort of contact point, interface point. Between the living and the dead, although that's probably more important to the living. I like the idea that there's some sort of contact, back and forth and active contact, I feel there is, but maybe only for so long. Quite a few friends think that as long as a certain amount of remains survive, that for a certain amount of time there's quite an active connection, but then after a while, the dead pass on to wherever they might pass on to. I guess that ties in slightly with common ideas that people are remembered as long as there are living people around who remember them. I like the idea that the Barrow is planned to be around for quite some time, so it's there as a concept. Less bothered about longer term history that slips out of distance into the far future. Probably more emotional narrative than the theological. (Interview with JG 14/08/2018)

Druidry at All Cannings

There is a clear connection between All Cannings in particular and modern Druids. it was dedicated at its opening by Terry Dobney, Archdruid of Avebury, and he and his Druid grove continued to conduct ritual there, particularly at

the Equinoxes,[154] and he, himself secured a niche in the barrow, where his cremated remains are now interred[155].

> Terry already knew Tim... they would talk about Stonehenge and Avebury and all these sort of things together. And then Tim came up with the idea of the long barrow. Terry would see him now and again and they would discuss it. Terry thought it was absolutely brilliant idea and I think they discussed alignments and different things together. I know Tim went up to West Kennet Long Barrow, which is more or less opposite where we live and had a look there and decided he was going to have his long Barrow on the lines of the West Kennet Long Barrow. And Terry said to him, when it was finished, if he wanted, that he would come and bless the Barrow. And that's what happened on the open day. Terry took an apple. Terry always had an apple as a symbolic- the spirit going into the apple. And then, obviously, the apple of life itself. (He) did a blessing and then left the apple inside the long barrow. And then Tim asked if we could go at sunrises at the equinoxes and call the sun up with the *Awen*. We said yes. Tim told Terry that if he wanted, he could have a niche actually in the passageway...Terry was very much into sunrises...So, therefore, the equinox sunrise would be going down the passage where he was...So, when the long barrow was built, Terry was absolutely over the moon about it because, for him, it's bringing back the barrow so it's bringing back – he was very much into the ancestors. Very much into the ancestors. So, for him, bringing back the long barrow and then into a modern-day type of long barrow, if you like. (Interview with Susan Dobney 02/02/2023)

[154] Interview with Susan Dobney 02/02/2023

[155] See p244 for an account of the interment of Terry Dobney's remains in All Cannings.

Figure 6-Terry Dobney, Archdruid of Avebury with Tim Daw at the opening ceremony for All Cannings Long Barrow

The connection of All Cannings to modern Druidry goes deeper than this, however. Druid groups continue to meet and conduct rituals outside the barrow to mark the Wheel of the Year.

> And it was solstice Tim messaged me and said, you know, ‘Sue, are you doing anything?’ I said ‘Well, really we're actually calling up the sun in Avebury on that day but, if you want to, Henk will do Avebury and I'll come and do some ceremony for you at the long Barrow.’ And when I turned up there was about 40 people there. Which I hadn't expected because the time before that there was only about 10. Things have gone bigger and bigger, and we did the ceremony we called up the Awen. We talked about solstice itself and we talked about the Ancients and our loved ones, and then I took a Bard with me, who did a couple of poems. And we did Druids Prayer; we took mead and I always make a mead cake as well. So, it's like a rich fruit cake with all this mead inside it as well. So that went round as well, but it was interesting asking

> the people how many people there actually had loved ones in the barrow. Only two of the people put hands up. (Interview with Susan Dobney 02/02/2023)

Furthermore, in 2014, shortly after its completion, Philip Carr-Gomm, then Chosen Chief of OBOD spoke of the barrow in glowing terms on his blog:

> It is moving to think that for the first time in five millennia, the dead will be laid to rest in a barrow of this kind in a landscape that still speaks so strongly to us of our ancestors.[156]

In 2018, following an assessment from the Valuation Office Agency, Tim Daw received a ratable value of £9,000 for the barrow, which had been classed as commercial storage. This caused him significant concern, as the barrow was administered by a CIC and was strictly non-profit. The only income came from the sale of niches, which at that point were all sold.[157] His response was to register the barrow as an official 'Druid place of worship'[158], only the second such in the country,[159] as such the barrow could be classed as a religious burial site and thus exempt from tax. While the site is officially classed as Druidic, it remains open to people of all faiths and none, as Tim commented, 'It's not like a parish church. There is a congregation in an elusive sense, but it's a bit more of a virtual community.'[160] Unfortunately, the barrows at Willow Row and Soulton Manor, which do not have an official religious nature, and which are run as for-profit businesses, were assessed for ratable value before All Cannings, thus setting a precedent for the type of structure. While the tax bill was amended in 2019 to include small business relief, so that no money is payable, Tim is appealing the decision on grounds of principle and at the time of writing the dispute is ongoing.[161] In keeping with its official status as a

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[156] https://philipcarr-gomm.com/long-barrow-cannings/

[157] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-wiltshire-48613688?fbclid=IwAR08pawHkrit2MZGC61v4Cm7stDVSZd82cKWdLThS9hokjNoq-eKKmXRhn4 (Accessed 25/6/23)

[158] Registration number 84705.

[159] The other site is on the ground floor of a terraced house in Lancaster.

[160] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-wiltshire-46222146 (Accessed 25/6/23)

[161] Personal communication 23/06/2023

religious site, the Long Barrow at All Cannings Group on Face Book posted an invitation to worship on the Summer Solstice 2023, including a prayer to be used in the ritual. While there was no mention that the worship was to be specifically Druidic, it was held on a day of great significance to modern Druids and the prayer is certainly in keeping with Druid beliefs and values:

> As the sun sets on the longest day, we gather to remember our departed loved ones. We give thanks for the blessings in our lives, and we hold our hopes for the future close to our hearts.
> We honour the ancestors who have gone before us, and we pray that they guide us on our journey. We ask for their strength and wisdom as we face the challenges ahead.
> We give thanks for the warmth of the sun, And the light that it brings into our lives. We pray that it will continue to shine on us, and on all of creation.
> We are grateful for the beauty of the world around us and we pledge to protect it for future generations. We pray that we will live in harmony with nature, and that we will always remember our place in the web of life.
> We are lucky to be alive, and we are grateful for every day. We pray that we will continue to live in peace, and that we will always find joy in the simple things.[162]

In this sense, then, All Cannings retains the functionality of the original barrows in that for some individuals at least it serves as both an active place of ritual and worship and a place for the interment of the dead.

New Barrows as Ancestral Sites

As I have demonstrated, for Druids in particular, but for others as well, the new barrows afford an opportunity to become a part of an ancestral landscape, as well as allowing people to continue to interact in a dynamic way with their dead kin. We saw in chapter 7 that Druids understand ancestry in terms of Ancestors of blood, place, and tradition. These categories can be clearly identified in the ways in which Druids relate to the people whose remains are deposited in the barrows, and the ‘deep time’ landscapes in which the barrows exist.

For Ancestors of blood there is a clear connection where the family and, ultimately, the descendants of those whose remains are deposited in the barrows will have a focus for the veneration of their blood Ancestors. Over time, these Ancestors will become an inherent part of the landscape, in which

[162] https://www.facebook.com/groups/thelongbarrow/

they will become embodied. Each barrow has a number of family niches designed to take up to six urns of cremated remains. At Willow Row, the intention is that as the niche becomes full the oldest residents are scattered over and around the barrow, continuing to be a part of the landscape, while new are interred. The possibility remains that for some at least they could fulfil the role of a family or ancestral shrine, as is the case for at least one Hong Kong Buddhist family.[163]

Ancestors of place are those, human and other than human, who have inhabited the same locality across time and even deep time. Since the barrows are built in the same way as their ancient forebears, there is no reason why they could not, given favourable conditions, last as long and so become landmarks as well as reminders of the ancient inhabitants of their localities. Interestingly, Tim Daw has a slightly different vision for All Cannings to the one that Toby Angel has for Willow Row.[164] All the niches at All Cannings are now reserved and the intention, at some point in the future when all of the interments have taken place is to permanently seal the barrow, as many of the Neolithic barrows were sealed in antiquity. All Cannings, like its ancient predecessors will, for a generation or two, operate as a place where the living can encounter and interact with the dead, but it will, in the fullness of time, become a place of the ancestral dead who will slowly pass from living memory. Placed, as it is, within the ancient sacred landscape of the Avebury area, it will eventually settle into that landscape as natural part of it. In this way, its inhabitants will become ‘ancestors of place’ no less truly than those in the ancient barrows just out of view from it.

Perhaps ‘Ancestors of tradition’ is the most nebulous concept, referring to those people who are instrumental to an individual in making them what they are. In the case of modern Druids, these may include, but are by no means limited to, the Druids of the Iron Age, or seminal figures in the rise of modern

[163] Interview with Toby Angel 16/08/2017

[164] Interview with Tim Daw 07/05/2018

Druidry such as Iolo Morganwg or Ross Nichols. Clearly, also, the builders of the original barrows can be regarded as Ancestors of tradition, tribe, or culture for those whose remains are interred in one of the new barrows. One cannot help but wonder if future generations might look at the barrows that are springing up today and wonder about the 'ancient' barrow builders and the role that their vision had in shaping future communities. Since many Druids also believe in reincarnation, there is also the intriguing idea that they are to some extent their own ancestors, the barrows may therefore represent an opportunity to mimic the way in which that individual may, in a previous life, have been laid to rest, providing some degree of continuity from life to life.

For the people responsible for the physical construction of the barrows there was a very strong and immediate sense of connection to the Ancestors, in that they were doing the same things in a similar way and would have encountered similar problems. This was felt very strongly by Martin Fildes who oversaw the construction of the barrows. For him, the differences in beliefs and world view were less important than the connection generated through the process of building.

> It is probably the closest you can ever get to seeing or feeing how our ancestors would have felt because the conversations we have at the end of the day, I guarantee you they are exactly the same they would have been having five thousand years ago. They would have all been standing round and saying, 'Oh, shall we do this?' or, 'I like that bit' or, 'It looks really good from here – look at it from here'. They would have been doing exactly the same. Same conversations, I think that's quite an amazing thing. Because there are very few things we do now that you have a direct link into the emotion that they would have felt five thousand years ago... I'm amazed more archaeologists don't actually pick up on that point because there's very few things we can do now that can have a direct correlation to an emotion our ancestors would have had five thousand years ago and that's one of the few things I can think of that have happened that we can get a true understanding of how they would have felt. (Interview with Martin Fildes 04/06/2021)

As we have seen, in his study of funeral rituals in Indonesia (1960), Robert Hertz suggested that funerals generally consist of two parts. The first, dealing with the 'wet' body, removes the dead person from the world of the living and renders it 'stable'. This may be through either temporary burial, excarnation, or cremation, accompanied by the relevant rituals. In the second phase, the

‘dry’ remains are treated in a ritual way that remove them from the world of the living and reincorporate them as Ancestors.

> Hertz stressed the shift of status of the deceased from the realm of living people to that of the ancestors. The dead person first entered into a period that seemed to be not quite that of the living and not quite that of the dead...Only after the period of decay did it go to join in the life of the ancestors, placed in a special cave or building alongside the remains of other dead kinsfolk (Davies 2017, 32).

This model fits well with the way in which some of the ancient barrows seem to have been used. The bodies were subject to excarnation, either in the main chamber of the barrow, or elsewhere, and the ‘dry’ and permanently stable bones were placed inside the chambers, possibly as part of an Ancestral assemblage.

Davies theorises that a similar idea can usefully be applied to the treatment of cremated remains in modern Britain, particularly since the rapid expansion since the 1980s of personal and individual rituals involving cremated remains (2017, 35–40). As we have seen, Druids routinely engage creatively and ritually with the concept of Ancestors and if Hertz’ theory could be fruitfully applied to any group within modern British culture, it is surely Druids. Thus, the process of cremation, for some Druids, becomes a means of converting a dead body into a stable and permanent medium that can easily be transported and ritually manipulated. As we have seen, one way in which these cremated remains can then be incorporated into the world of the Ancestors is by depositing them at ancient sites. Another, and, for many Druids, more attractive possibility, is by placing them into a modern barrow that replicates the ‘double funeral’ usage of ancient barrows with their associated layers of meaning and cultural symbolism. It is common to have a funeral service at the crematorium, followed by a second ritual event when the cremated remains are installed in the barrow. Thus, the new barrows potentially become Ancestral sites for future generations.

Druid Funerals and Barrows

While there are a number of Druids who have purchased niches in the new barrows, particularly in All Cannings, the fact that it has only been operational since 2014 means that not many funeral ceremonies have taken place there as yet. One that has, however, is significant in that it was that of Terry Dobney, Archdruid of Avebury, and so of the area, and the sacred landscape within which All Cannings is built. As we have seen, Terry was present and conducted a ceremony at the opening ceremony for All Cannings. The fact that the first Druid funeral conducted at All Cannings was for such a prominent and well-known Druid means that what happened on that occasion might well set a precedent for Druidic barrow funerals in the future and so create the foundations for a new funeral tradition with Druidry.

Terry's funeral followed Hertz' pattern of double funerary ritual very well (1960). There was a funeral service at the local crematorium, attended by hundreds, and open to anyone. This was followed, a few days later, by a much smaller ritual in the barrow, conducted by his Henk Vis, whom Terry had trained, and who replaced him as Archdruid. Henk Had also conducted the funeral at the crematorium. On both occasions, though, multiple people took an active role. Terry's cremated remains were placed into their niche in the barrow in order to join the Ancestors.

> And then when it came to the internment, it was a day when it had been raining out, it was raining. There was twenty of us and, unfortunately, it was too many of us inside. Well, it was twenty of us, so we managed to get the bard in the centre. And then we were all round the outside of him and, obviously again, it was we called quarters, called the ancients again. We talked about Terry. The song for Terry was performed. And then the mead and the cake. And, basically, it was just like a normal ceremony if you like, but inside. And it was mainly - for the crematorium, because Terry was (I don't know if you know how well-known Terry was, but he was known all over the world), so the crematorium was like for everybody, if you like. The internment was a personal one. And I think everybody said that Terry would have would have liked it. He would have loved his cremation and that he would have loved the Internment as well. (Interview with Susan Dobney 02/02/2023)

It remains to see how Druid funerals at barrows will develop over time, but the calling of the quarters and the blessing with the elements are likely to be important as they are in most Druid ceremonies. It is also probable,

particularly at barrows with their ancestral associations, that calling to the Ancestors will form a significant element of the ceremony. Like natural burial sites, the barrows remove the constraints of time and the organisation of space that can be problematic for Druids at a crematorium, allowing for an organic development of rituals. One feature of the barrows that is almost unique in Britain is their permeability, the effective removal of a hard barrier between the living and the dead. This was important to Martin Fildes who was responsible for the idea that it should be possible for those who wanted to, to be able to open a door the niche and access the cremated remains.

> At Tim Daw's, you probably realise, there wasn't a need to have any covers on the front of the urn – the niches and I said to this woman, 'Aren't you worried that someone could…' - her son was in there – and I said, 'Aren't you worried that someone could knock him over or walk out with him? Don't you want a cover on it? and she said, 'No', she said, 'I've lost my son once, he died of a motorbike accident and I don't want to lose him again, I want to be able to pick him up and hold him.' And, you know, that just really cut me to the quick, you know, and that's where we thought well, if we put covers on it, we've got to make them that people can open them and hold the urn, you know, because it's a really important thing. We all know, it's ashes. We all know it's nothing, it's just a piece of dirt but there is something very special about being able to hold someone who you love close to you, isn't there? So, that kind of changed the design of the barrows. Originally, we made it so you – at Willow Row, I don't know if you've been there, you might notice there was originally, it started off that there was like an open, an aperture that people could reach through and touch. Then we thought, 'God, wouldn't it be great if we could have a door?' And then we come up with the idea of the door and the glass. And I'm so glad we did because, you know, certain people, the niches now, instead of being a niche just for a depository of ashes, they've become a time capsule. You know. (Interview with Martin Fildes 04/06/2021)

The barrier between the living and the dead is not fixed, in fact it can, quite literally, be opened, a feature that it likely to lead to ritual innovation in its own right. The cremated remains can be accessed, and objects taken out and put in.

> OK. This might be strange to you. OK, I've just I've just thought I haven't told you this. So, Terry's urn. Terry was into motorbikes. So, one of the things that motorbikes is the older ones they like patina. So, his urn is called Patina. But every time I go to visit Terry, I bring him outside. I get the urn and I bring it outside and we do the ceremony with him outside. And on the last sunrise…Yeah, I got hold of him and I brought him out and he was there with me, and we did the sunrise. Yeah, now the other people that were there, sort of, looked at me and I said 'Well, Terry liked the sunrise, so I brought him out, you know sunrise, sunrise.' So, they sort of looked at me a bit, you know? And as long as I can get there and do that, I shall do that. Yeah, and on one of the equinoxes, when you come out of the long barrow there, there is a flat stone and we use it like an altar. So, we put Terry on it, and we put the mead cake on; we put the mead on and one or two other things as well and we did a ceremony around it. And we put Terry back. And at Yule, I took mistletoe and I put mistletoe in with Terry.

> He loved sunrise, you know? Somebody once said to him, ‘Terry, what do you believe?’ and he flippantly said, ‘Well, if the sun doesn't come up, it's all over.’

Figure 7- Terry Dobney's cremated remains in their urn 'Patina' outside All Cannings Long Barrow for a ritual at sunrise.

This manipulation of the cremated remains, sometimes for ritual purposes, is reminiscent of the ways in which the human remains in the original barrows appear to have been treated over time (Smith and Brickley 2009). It represents a sense that the dead do not ‘go away’ and become inaccessible but rather remain an ongoing presence in family life.

> One of the things that we have problems with, in our society, is the unfinishedness of death. The fear of death has been raised to such a level that we’re encouraged to throw people in a box, nail them in as fast as you can; get them in the earth, done.

> And then don't talk about death anymore and they're gone. Whereas older times had a longer process around it, you know, you maintained that dialogue with the person, or the body of the person, for a lot longer. Neolithic burial, as far as we understand it, was that you excarnated on a causewayed enclosure and the bones rolled down into the ditch and then you take the bones, that are all clean, and truck them across a valley and up the next hill where you've got your long barrow. And then you put them in the long barrow and then, every year, at certain dates, you get them out again and have a chat. (Interview with Cliff Eastabrook 24/11/2020)

It is also interesting that already the barrows are starting to gather their own stories and mythology around them. One story, in particular, I heard from no fewer than five different people while I was carrying out my interviews. It concerned a gentleman who had come to the barrow to choose a niche for his wife who had died and been cremated about two years previously. His daughter came with him to help choose the niche.

> And I remember him and his daughter, his daughter, was about 15 or so, I should imagine, and it was fairly soon after we started, we kind of finished the 2 first chambers as you walk through the main entrance and as we were building it. It was very strange, actually, because the right-hand chamber, as you walked in, we had about 200 butterflies that kind of actually roosted in the roof of it. It was quite hot. I don't know whether they would come in because it was so hot, but they were just like bats almost. But, you know, they were in the dark place. Anyway, this one day he come there with his daughter and they were going to select a niche to put (his wife) in and this butterfly come from that one chamber and flew into the other chamber and into a niche, that's the niche that they chose because of that, they felt as if it meant to be, you know, this one from all the hundreds of butterflies just flew from one chamber across the passageway in front of them to this one niche. (Interview with Geraint Davies 14/02/2017)

> And later that day the customer turned up and he was a man, similar age to me, came with his teenage – no, young daughter must have been 10 or 11 whose mother (the wife) had just died of cancer. He came with his daughter and as he walked into the niche, or the chamber, you get a lot of butterflies in there and the butterfly flew down to the little girl and then flew into a niche and I remember hearing this and she said (and I could hear it) 'Daddy, daddy. That's the niche Mum wants.' And I just went, 'Oh,oh, there's something to this isn't there?' This is a bit more than just, you know, just a building. And that was, I would say it's one of the biggest, not a lightbulb moment but the biggest turning moment because I just thought, 'wow, this is some kind of connection here.' (Interview with Martin Fildes 04/06/2021)

The slight variations in the story are interesting as both of these accounts come from people who were actually present but remember the event slightly differently. I have also heard the story recounted by people who were not physically present. It would be very interesting to see if this story persists into the future, perhaps even beyond living memory, becoming a part of the layers of memory, and meaning with which the barrows may surround themselves.

Druids' Objections to the Barrows

It is important to point out that while the majority of the Druids that I spoke to were in favour of the new barrows and could see a useful place for them within Druid practice, this was not universally the case. Some were indifferent to the idea and did not really see the point of creating a new barrow. Since the purposes of the original barrows are not understood, some saw no point in trying to recreate them. For some, the fact that the cremated remains were treated as individuals, with their own niches and specific memorials in the form of the niche covers or objects placed inside the niche meant that they 'missed the point' of the original barrows.

> Fine, if that is what is wanted by the deceased, but the original long barrows were places where the excarnated bones of the loved ones were mixed together to represent the conjoining of the spirits to form a 'collective consciousness of the people' that could be consulted when the wisdom of those who lived before had been forgotten and was needed. Nowadays, we write things down that we do not want forgotten. 303113-303105-26090805

> They do not have the context of the historical equivalent. I assume that the ash / body parts are not scattered together or treated as a collective assemblage. 303113-303105-26091403

> Lukewarm. They aren't for me or mine. Fine if you like that sort of thing. I don't believe 'burial' mounds were originally for that purpose. But their true purpose will resurface. They are places of initiation. 303113-303105-26104439

For some respondents, the issue was specifically with cremation, to which they objected on ecological grounds. For others, they were uncomfortable with placing the cremated remains in a tomb that separated them from nature rather than using them to nurture and fertilise the earth. Interestingly, this is a widespread and invasive myth. In fact, human cremated remains, particularly in concentration, are actively damaging to plant life and the practice of scattering cremated remains is beginning to become a significant ecological problem.

> Don't like. Giving your burned ashes back to the land and allowing them to disperse easily so they can be used by other lifeforms is much better for the Earth and all her children. I hate 'boxes' and the thought of my bodily remains being put in one is

> disgusting. Go listen to one of our old shifter-songs, Crazy Man Michael, and see what happens to his lover and what he does in his turn. 303113-303105-26109215 I'm not keen on ashes being kept in jars. I think they should be returned to the earth so that it can be nourished. 303113-303105-26099597

A final reason given for rejection of the barrows was that they were commercial, and money orientated. This perhaps relates to what we have already observed of Druidry as being a counter-cultural and activist movement that self-consciously rejects the capitalistic mainstream of industrialised Western culture.[165]

> They are grossly overpriced and do not address the issue of industrial cremation. I have turned down paid work by the people who own them because I find them smarmy and capitalist. 303113-303105-34643268

Beyond Druidry

While the appeal of the barrows to modern Druids is perhaps not surprising, their popularity goes far beyond this. According to Ezzy (2014, 19), rituals are among the resources that enable a person to live a 'life with soul'; that is a life that is experienced as worthwhile and emotionally satisfying. Such a life is characterised by relationships; facilitated through ritual performance and draws on 'symbolic resources such as myths and shared cultural understandings.' The rituals that are evolving organically among and between the families choosing to use the new barrows seem to be engaging with just such a 'soulful' approach to death regardless of the religious beliefs, or lack thereof, of those involved. For society as a whole, as well as for Druids, the link to an imagined and idealised past is important. Howard Williams, in his work on the National Arboretum, notes that in memorial gardens there is '…a veritable scramble to harness antiquity' and makes the observation that '…ancient and historical material cultures are refashioned, replicated and re-used' on a regular basis (2014, 11). The imagined, idealised past has power for many in today's world (See, for example, Bauman 2017).
In an article for 'Once I'm Gone', Toby Angel writes:

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[165] It is worth noting that while Sacred Stones Ltd. Does operate on a commercial model, All Cannings continues to be a not for profit organisation.

> Now I have to admit I'm no expert on Neolithic burial mounds or culture, but I do feel somewhat empowered to communicate the modern-day barrow's impact has created a tangible sense of 'community'. I believe that the ancients were also celebrating community. I believe they were making a clear statement about who they were and where they belonged. That they were 'of' the locale and thus keen to remain part of the commune (Angel 2017).

Despite the non-denominational nature of the barrows, the owners are also involved in re-telling the past in order to re-shape the future, creating new possibilities and new ways of being in community for anyone and everyone to whom such an idea appeals.

The reasons given by the non-Druids that I interviewed for either having interred loved ones in the barrows or wanting their own remains to be placed there were varied. They included a connection to a local place, a love of nature and a desire to placed in it, or a love of history and archaeology and a deep interest in the original ancient barrows.

> For me, I'm not a traditionally religious person. I consider myself, I suppose, as an atheist more than anything else. And I didn't want, you know, and I just thought where would I like my remains to go? You know, and then this came up and I thought, Yeah, it's a brilliant idea. It's perfect, it's what we, you know, we're going back into the past, but we're not, you know, we're doing something that could have been done thousands of years ago rather than something traditional now. (Interview with Jennie Povey 04/06/2021)

> I think it's more a connection to the Neolithic. But as to spirituality, I mean my partner and I, there isn't a religious bone in our bodies. I would describe myself as completely atheist and I believe that, you know, once you're gone, you're gone and that's it. But, you know, there is something spiritual – something, you know, about the place that calls to us. I don't know whether you could describe that as a spiritual thought or not but yes, certainly there is something emotionally bound up with the place. (Interview with Jon Adkin 03/06/2021)

In one case there was a clear family connection to the barrow in that one of the builders was her son, and her mother's cremated remains had been placed in it.

> I just really liked the idea of having somewhere that Joby has been a part of building but also, it was a sense of community. We actually went to an open day when it very first had finished and meeting people that had bought niches and things like that was just really lovely... And, I mean, the nice thing was, we went to put my Mum's ashes there last year. She knew she was going there. She didn't know she was dying, but she knew she was going there. So, we put my Mum's ashes there last year and we took the whole family: all the great grandchildren, everything. And they were running

> around, and they loved it. It wasn't like, you know, going round a cemetery or a crematorium it was just really lovely. And they really enjoyed it, and I didn't feel I had to say "sshh be quiet", you know. It was just it had such a lovely atmosphere. (Interview with Gill Masters 15/08/2018)

Once again, an idea that emerges, perhaps more clearly than any other, is that of community. For some of those I spoke to the appeal was precisely in the non-religious nature of the place and the freedom that this gave to design an organic 'bottom up' approach to ritual that was not constrained by the limitations of a crematorium service.

> And the thing that I liked most about it - which might be a little bit contentious - it was non-religious because I am an atheist and that was really important to me. And I love that. I love that aspect of it so, you know, it didn't matter if you were religious or irreligious or whatever, you know, we could all be there together but, you know, it wasn't under one roof under the heading of a religious sect or whatever. So, I bought the niche. (Interview with G M 15/08/2018)

In fact, one of the great advantages of the barrows as secular ritual spaces is the absence of any constraints of time or the organisation of space. A family is completely free to use the barrow for the whole day for the interment of cremated remains if they so wish. The only constraints are that they do not climb on the barrow, they do not leave anything of material value inside the niche and that they take away anything that they bring into the space when they leave. The barrows do offer a completely innovative option. The coffin itself can be taken in procession to the barrow and placed outside it for a service, allowing the family and friends to gather around it with the coffin as the central point of focus. The coffin may then be removed for direct cremation and returned at a later date for a secondary ritual of deposition within the barrow. Both of these events can be arranged exactly as the family wishes and can take as long as necessary.[166]

[166] Interview with Toby Angel 11/01/2017

Figure 8- A fictional funeral outside Willow Row Barrow to show the potential for the site as a funeral venue as well as for the deposition of cremated remains. Copyright Sacred Stones Ltd.

One aspect that was both interesting and surprising was that in both Willow Row and All Cannings the local Anglican Church was engaging with the site in a positive and creative way. At All Cannings the vicar of the local church in Avebury took an active part in a Druid funeral that took place in the barrow. At Willow Row, the local church has expanded the route of its annual 'beating the bounds' walk around the boundaries of the parish to include the barrow as a vital part of the community, making full ritual use of the 'processional route'.[167] All those that come to the barrows bring with them their own unique personal history, pre-existing knowledge, spiritual or religious heritage (or lack of it) and interests. Thus, everyone will experience the barrows in a different way. What is becoming clear, not least due to the popularity of the barrows and the speed at which the niches are being purchased, is that they speak to a wide variety of people in ways that are reminiscent of the natural burial grounds we encountered in chapter 9. It is tempting to ask if we are witnessing the birth of a new funerary tradition that is analogous to, but very different from natural burial; speaking to deeply entrenched values in Davies' sense of an idea

[167] Interview with Toby Angel 11/01/2018

endowed with emotion (2017). It may be that given time the barrows may become as numerous as natural burial grounds.

Conclusion

Max Weber suggested that the modern capitalist world is 'disenchanted' as it is stripped of mystery and magic. (2013 Originally published 1904) When many Druids look at the barrows of the deep past, they imagine them situated in a society free of the angst, alienation and displacement that they perceive as endemic in our own, caused by this disenchantment. They imagine a society where everybody had a place and was valued and accepted. A society that was fundamentally living in harmony with a world populated with animals, Ancestors, and deities. It is interesting that both Rosher (2020) and Woolley (2017) understand Druidry, at least in part, as being fundamentally concerned with activism in the sense of a conscious rejection of systems, political and otherwise, that are seen as oppressive or unjust. Here, perhaps, we begin to engage with some of the stories that contemporary Druids are telling about the distant past and about the original barrow builders. Whether this story has any basis in historical fact is largely irrelevant, as is the question of any direct continuity between the Druids of the Iron-Age and those of today. 'Authenticity,' says Woolley:

> arises not from adherence to a series of ancient modes and forms set down by our ancestors, but from engagement with nature itself…– Indeed I would suggest that the reason why ancient monuments possess such a power is that they are preserved through, and integrated with the landscape upon which they are built' (Woolley 2017).

Thus, while the new barrows are not the same as the old, and are used in very different ways, they do represent for modern Druids a symbolic connection to the past that is entirely congruent with their own ideas, values and beliefs. The new barrows are of course, situated within their own landscapes, from which they are not separate, inhabited by a wide variety of birds and wildlife. As such, for many they offer an opportunity for Druids to express in death the values and identity that was important to them in life, and

to attain a congruence between lifestyle and death-style analogous to that offered by natural burial (Davies and Rumble 2012, 14).

The title of this chapter is taken from *Barrow Song*, written by Andy Letcher, a musician and academic who has written on Druidry and Bardism (2001). The song, which knowingly references death rituals from a variety of different time periods from the ancient past, romantically reimagines a death that is simple, authentic (in the sense that it addresses emotion and death in an honest and straightforward way that is meaningful to the bereaved) and 'natural': free from modern constraints of empty and outdated ritual and expense. It also refers, with a sense of nostalgia, to the ancient Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows.
The song entreats the listener:

> And raise me up a golden barrow,
> Lay me down 'neath sods of earth;
> And when the year is good and hallowed
> Let me hear your songs and mirth.

The dead person, then, is envisaged as a continuing participant in the community, hearing, and presumably taking pleasure in, the sounds of life continuing to unfold around him. This participation in community is ongoing through the generations. The song concludes:

> And down the ages, still some remember
> To sing the song and raise the glass.

The person has, in effect, become an Ancestor, beyond the realms of living memory, yet he continues to be engaged in the wider life of the community as well as becoming present in an embodied sense as a part of the landscape. Stories have power. A story about a past in which society was harmonious and just can become a story about a future society. Living in community is reciprocal, negotiated and relational, and often relies on an economy of obligation and gift-giving (Mauss 2011). In the larger than human world, it would be natural to expect this economy to operate between species and well as between humans. Humans might be expected to have obligations towards

not only the gods, but also to the Ancestors, the animal and plant ecology on which they depended, and to the land itself. It is possible to read the activism of which Woolley speaks in this context, as part of a reciprocal series of obligations in which Druids understand that they ‘owe it’ to the larger than human community to act as protector and guardian. It is also in this context of an ‘inalienable gift’ (Godelier 1999) that many Druids interpret the idea of returning their body to the earth when they die, whether through natural burial, or through interment of their cremated remains in a barrow, into the keeping of the land itself. This brings us back to the song with which we began. A song that imagined a more authentic way of dying in a re-imagined past. A way of dying that was in harmony with the earth and with the more than human community and in which the dead, in a very physical way, become one with the landscape, in fact become the landscape itself, the foundation upon which future generations are built.

One more thing remains to be said and that is that for many Druids the land is a living and sentient thing that forms a vital part of their network of relationships and obligations. Thus, the land remembers all the people who have come and gone upon it and is itself a part of the ‘larger than human’ world.

From this viewpoint, the land is a participant in its own evolution. The land is not only re-told, and re-read, it is a story is constantly telling and re-telling itself. It holds the Ancestors within itself, not only physically but also in the sense of incorporating within itself their stories and their memories, read and re-read in the landscape by countless generations. Seen from this perspective, the ‘new barrows’ are a continuation of the story of the land, and those whose ashes are laid to rest within them will themselves become a part of that story.

At the time of writing, there are plans for several new barrows to be constructed around the country, including, intriguingly, one owned and managed by a large and well-known independent funeral director. We cannot

know at this stage how widespread the barrows will become or whether they, like their predecessors, will become a familiar part of the landscape. Likewise, we cannot know how long they will last, or for how long they will be in active use. Perhaps our descendants will tell their own stories about them and about the Ancestors that lie within them and perhaps those stories will be about a better future.

To conclude, in *The Last Hero*, Terry Pratchett has one of his characters, Cohen the Barbarian, found by his friends sitting pensively on an ancient barrow. They ask him what he is doing, and he replies, ‘Someone’s got to remember the poor bugger!’ His friends are confused by this response since the person for whom the mound was built died many centuries ago, beyond the reach of historical time or living memory. ‘You don’t know anything about him!’ they protest. After thinking about this for a while, he replies, defiantly, ‘I can still REMEMBER him!’ (Pratchett 2001, 34–35). I suggest that the barrows are one among a number of resources employed in the modern world for attempting to ‘remember’ something that lies just out of reach.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Out of the Mist

It must be emphasised that this study is limited both in length and in the amount of time available for data collection. There is a wealth of information, not least from survey respondents and those who have been generous enough with their time to conduct interviews with me, that cannot be accommodated here; although I hope that it will be possible to do so in future projects. There is so much that remains to be said, and this is by no means the final word on any of the research questions addressed by this thesis. It is my sincere hope that I have been able to do enough to give at least an authentic flavour of British Druidry and its ritualisation of death in the early decades of the 21st Century; and that Druids will be able to recognise themselves and their concerns and values herein. What follows is a brief reprise of the research questions addressed in sections A and B of this thesis and an attempt to reach some conclusions; followed by suggestions for further research.

Section A What is modern Spiritual Druidry in Britain; how is it best understood and categorised?

As we have seen, this is a question that defies any easy or simple answer. Spiritual Druidry has been described as a religion, a spiritual practice or path, a magical path, a philosophy, and a way of life. For some, it is the native indigenous spirituality of Britain, or a new form of tribalism. All of these definitions have their strengths, but also significant weaknesses. Druids have many different beliefs and practices and understand their own Druidry in different ways. According to Philip Shallcrass, Chief of the BDO, the simple answer is that ‘Druidry is what Druids do.’ (Shallcrass 2023, 13) In other words, like ‘religion’, ‘Druid’ may be better understood as a verb; it is not a set of beliefs but a way of being and living in the world. This does, of course, as Shallcrass suggests, beg the question, ‘What is a Druid?’, or, to frame it in the terms of a verb, what exactly are Druids doing when they ‘Druid’?

One of the questions in my survey asked, ‘What makes someone a Druid?’ The responses are interesting in that they reveal a set of familial characteristics that perhaps serve to distinguish Druidry from other forms of Paganism; although it is important to note that these characteristics are also shared by Druids who do not see themselves as Pagan, perhaps seeing Buddhism or Christianity as their primary religious identity.

By far the most common point made (by 63% of respondents) is that Druidry is about a connection to or a reverence for Nature. This was sometimes explained as Divine, or in animistic terms, but always it was relational. Druids see themselves as in an active relationship with the natural world. 8 respondents made specific reference to the ‘land, sea and sky’ terminology which does form a direct link between modern Druidry and the Iron Age in which it finds its ultimate roots. Not unrelated to this is that a significant number (12%) claimed that Druidry was defined by some sort of relationship with ‘Celtic’ identity, through myth, particular deities, or culture. Again, this takes us back to the emotional connection with the idea of ‘Celticness’ described by Bowman (1995). 25% mentioned the connection with or veneration of Ancestors in some way or another. Another thing that seems to distinguish Druidry is a concern with creativity (5%), Bardic arts, including poetry, music, and storytelling (4%) and inspiration (4%). *Awen* was mentioned twice by name. The importance of connection (10%) and knowledge, wisdom and learning (11%) were also mentioned, and in this context, a concern with justice and ethics was mentioned by 10% of respondents. The veneration of gods (10%) and spirits (7%), and connection to an ‘Otherworld’ (7%) also confirm the move towards polytheism and animism (6%) discussed in chapter 5. Interestingly, in light of the discussion on religion, the word ‘belief/believe’ occurs only twice.

Taken together, then, we can see that Druids see themselves as people who are deeply connected to nature and the Ancestors, who may venerate gods or spirits and may believe in the Otherworld. They are concerned with creativity and the *Awen* through the Bardic arts, as well as with learning, wisdom and

scholarship, and the quest for social justice. Thus, we can see that while Druidry contains huge diversity, it does, nonetheless have enough distinguishing characteristics to make it a clearly recognisable movement of some kind. Thus, Harvey is able to say that there is 'sufficient coherence among the varied expressions and experiences labelled as "Druidry" to be certain that this is a religious movement (not merely a loose amalgam of individualist fantasies.)' (2009, 3) Druidry, then, clearly is 'something'- but what is it? Harvey goes on to describe Druidry as:

> A communal phenomena (sic) that brings together and moulds people with shared passions, interests, ideas and practices. It offers a complex range of ways of engaging with the world that shape possibly inchoate concerns into recognisable social/communal/corporate and embodied practices, movements and networks. (2009, 4)

A phenomenon, then, a movement, certainly, that has evolved over the last three centuries or so, but which has as one of its unifying features the inspiration of a particular idea of an Iron Age Celtic priesthood rooted in learning, wisdom, and the dissemination of justice. This 'imagined past' (Bradley 2017, 10) is one of the things that is distinctive about Druidry, and it is an idea to which I have returned repeatedly throughout this thesis.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions of modern Druidry comes from Hutton in a 2016 interview for Pagan Dawn Magazine (although it should be noted that he was speaking of Paganism in general rather than of Druidry in particular):

> … calling on ancient images and ideas, but addressing some of the greatest needs of modernity, and in doing so drawing on major streams of British culture going back over two hundred years and a continuous tradition of ceremonial magic[168] going back millennia (Large 2016).

[168] It is, perhaps, worth noting that while the idea of 'magic' understood as an attempt to bring about change in the material world through ritual practice or the will is by no means absent in Druidry (with 6% of respondents making reference to it as an essential aspect of Druidry); it is not as prevalent as in many other forms of Paganism. Druid ritual, as we have seen, tends to be more relational - working together with spiritual or natural forces to bring about results that benefit both.

Another, albeit related, approach to defining Druid identity can be found in the 18th Mount Haemus lecture:

> Druidry is a form of re-enchantment, an attempt to restore some of the magic and meaning stripped from the land through the alienating forces of capitalism and consumerism…the basic work of the Druid is to spin this process into reverse – to challenge the relentless commodification and alienation from our world. It does so through a very specific aesthetic – an aesthetic of enchantment. (Woolley 2017)

This language of re-enchantment is found frequently in Pagan literature and is directly related to the animistic world view that sees 'persons' in landscapes and eco-systems where the dominant Western model sees only 'things' and commodities. It is a way of endowing life with purpose and meaning (Ezzy 2014) and of living well. Harvey, in fact, describes re-enchantment as being as central to the Pagan message as salvation is to Christianity. (Harvey 2015), Druidry, then, is about re-enchantment and aesthetics, taking us back, once again, to the Bardic arts. However, to Woolley at least, Druidry is also fundamentally concerned with activism in the sense of a conscious rejection of systems, political and otherwise, that are seen as oppressive or unjust. One thing that Druids will agree about is that words matter; and, specifically, stories matter. The way in which we speak about the land or the past will fundamentally shape our understanding of it and our relationship with it. Druidry is as much a creative artistic response to the world as it is anything else. A Druid may well agree with the description of language from an indigenous (rather than a Cartesian Western perspective) as 'generative' (Morrison 2013, 49). Words do not merely describe a world that is fixed, other and 'out there', rather they actively engage in the act of creating the world. The stories that the Druids tell about themselves, about the land, their Ancestors and the monuments they left behind are not 'just' stories. They participate in the generation of the relational cosmos.

This being said, I will leave the final definition of Druidry to Mark Rosher, one of the Trustees of The Druid Network, who, to my mind, perfectly summarises the discussions of Section A in this way:

> The evolving traditions of Druidry, from ancient and largely unknowable practice through romantic reinvention have grown through peaceful protest and animist awareness to the partly religious, partly philosophical partly activist modern Druidry of today…we are the result of a thousand, thousand stories and here we are, now, being us (Rosher 2017).

In the final analysis, then, Druidry is a polythetic movement. It has many discernible 'parts' none of which is held by all Druids none of which is distinctive to Druidry, and none of which provide a full definition or explanation of it. Yet, taken together, these things provide a sufficient definition of modern Druidry at the current time: A religious, spiritual, activist, relational, creative, and sometimes indigenising way of living in the world that is supremely well suited to modernity and its concern for ecology.

> (Druidry) is not a relic from the past, but a timeless response to nature, to the landscape and the sacred sites, … capable of re-interpretation, re-imagination and re-creation without losing its spiritual essence (Farley 2014).

Section B i) What is Distinctive about Druidic Approaches to the Ritualisation of Death?

Druids in Britain, like everyone else, are subject to 'social force' (Davies 2015, 6). They are influenced not only by Druid beliefs about what does or does not happen after death, but also by family, tradition, cultural expectations, and trends.[169] A Druid may be isolated from other Druids other than those groups and communities that exist online, so that the primary concerns when organising a funeral may be the expectations of family and the non-Druid communities to which the person belonged. Many Druids do not think of Druidry as a religion and so see no need for a specifically 'Druid' funeral. Finally, financial considerations may limit the options that are available to an individual or to a family when organising a funeral. For all of these reasons, the majority of Druids may have funerals that are effectively indistinguishable from the civil celebrant led cremation funerals that are becoming the norm in modern Britain. By its nature, this thesis has only been able to capture the

[169] Such as the current fashion for direct cremation.

Druid funerals and rituals that are in some way distinctive, and these are by no means indicative of the situation in Druid communities taken as a whole. With these provisos clearly understood, however, there are certain elements of the Druid ritualisation of death that are distinctive and perhaps even indicative of an emerging coherent and cohesive approach.

There is a strong preference among Druids for natural burial. Natural burial is by no means exclusive to Druids; indeed, it is becoming increasingly popular among the wider population as concerns about climate change grow. It is not, therefore, a 'distinctive' feature of Druid funeral practice as such. It is, however, one that sits very well with the values of Druidry, and particular its reverence for nature as an expression of the divine. It allows Druids to return to nature from which they came, and which sustained them in life, and so to become a living and vital part of the landscape. Natural burial therefore represents an assonance between lifestyle and death-style for (Davies and Rumble 2012, 14). Natural burial grounds allow for a funeral service that is not constrained by the limits of a crematorium, and so can make optimum use of time and space, allowing, for example, for a circle to be cast, with the grave in the centre, thus delineating it as sacred space, in the centre of a symbolic cosmos created by the calling of the directions and blessing with the elements.

The engagement with Ancestors as a dynamic force with which the living can interact and from whom they can learn is very rare in mainstream Western culture, and so its predominance in Paganism, and particularly in Druidry is of particular interest. This thesis has examined a number of ways in which this connection is expressed and ritualised both at Samhain and during funerals. The emergence of the new barrows, however, is particularly interesting. The use of the new barrows is most certainly not restricted to Druids, and, indeed, one of the reasons for their popularity is that they are non-denominational spaces that are open to people of any religion or none. However, their advent into the funeral culture of Britain opens up new possibilities for Druids, particularly with regards to their interaction with Ancestors.

The new barrows are virtually unique in Britain in terms of their ability to create communities of the dead that are engaged in active relationship with communities of the living. In recent decades, the idea of 'continuing bonds' has become popular in the field of death and bereavement studies (Klass 1996). Simply put, this is the idea that when someone dies, while our relationship with them alters radically, it does not end. This is not to make any sort of truth claim about what happens to an individual after death, whether the person who has died continues to exist in a veridical sense is irrelevant, the fact is that the bereaved continue to have an active and dynamic relationship with them. When Valentine conducted interviews with bereaved people, she noticed that when they described the people they had lost it was almost as if they became present in the room, continuing to operate as 'persons' with agency in their relationships with the living. She therefore suggested that there is a need for 'a more flexible and nuanced understanding of personhood' (2008, 174). It is in this sense that I have spoken of those interred in the new barrows as 'other than living persons'.[170]

It is possible to understand continuing bonds theory as having an unusual and distinctive dimension for Druids in the sense of bonds continuing not only into the future with the people they have loved and lost, but also into the past, back to Ancestors who are beyond memory, with whom Druids may feel that they share bonds and continue to be in relationship. For this reason, the original barrows become the focus of ritual where the connections to ancient Ancestors can be explored and developed. With the passing of time the new barrows too may become ancestral sites where continuing bonds become networks of connection with tendrils reaching forward into the future and backwards into the past, dissolving, to some extent, the barrier between the living and the dead.

A distinctive idea within Druidry is that the Ancestors are present with the living not only in a vague spiritual or supernatural sense, but also in a very

[170] See p.229-30.

real and physical sense. Their water and air are present in us, as is their DNA, and the atoms of which they were made. Davies points out that particular mannerisms and ways of speaking 'live on' in the living, such as when someone acts or speaks in a way that is strongly reminiscent of a parent or grandparent (2017, 76–77). It is, of course, quite possible that these mannerisms, as well as physical resemblance pass down multiple generations, they merely become more difficult to see with the passing of time. Looked at in this way, a person is not just an individual, bounded within a particular body, but also a dividual, whose personhood is constructed through relationship and connection with the larger than human world, including the Ancestors. According to Harvey, a person is 'necessarily a dynamic interaction of many relations'(2020a, 35). For Druids, the new barrows open up new potential for the dividual interaction and identity construction with Ancestors. The ritual possibilities of crossing the 'veil' between the living and the dead through the opening of the niche doors or coverings are only now beginning to be explored.

While there are significant and obvious differences between natural burial and the interment of cremated remains in a new barrow, there are also some points of similarity, most obviously the natural and scenic setting. There is also, in both, the idea of the dead retaining a sense of vitality and ongoing participation in the life of the natural world. Community is also important in both:

> So, the woodland burials are indisputably; they're living; they're alive; they're a part of a living network and then the chambers and the cromlechs and the new chambers are still very much a part of our, not only our cultural landscape - because we all remember them somewhere on a profoundly deep, ancestral level - but they're also a part of the landscape itself. They seem to morph out of it organically. They're so different to cemeteries and also what I love is what goes back to what I was saying earlier on about the communality of the dead of the ancestors. In a cemetery it's prescriptive. It's so individualised. Every person has their spot. Go into a woodland burial ground that's not the case at all. It's the wood that you focus on. It's a community that is alive and when somebody is taken into one of these chambered cairns, it's a community. There's this loss of individuality and an acknowledgement of community and that the dead are a part of that living landscape whether it's a chamber or a burial ground. I think the psychological methodology is the same or the psychological response and you know articulation is the same. It's a part of the living landscape. It's this sense of the dead are a community, and they are not us in one way, but they are wholly us on another way. It's this beautiful paradox and, yeah, I

> love it. I get very excited about it all, really. (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021)

The values that we noted in Section as being in some way central to Druid meaning and identity construction continue to be important in death-styles. The love of and reverence for nature, and the understanding of people as essentially dividual, their personhood being shaped in relation to the wider than human world around them is expressed through natural burial and through the use of the new barrows, which may also be understood as a form of indigenising behaviour. The importance of telling stories and singing songs about the dead takes us back to the value of the bardic arts and the deliberate 'making' of Ancestors.

Section B ii) 'What are the Wider Implications of Druidic Approaches to the Ritualisation of Death to the Field of Death Studies and to the Bereaved?'

This is a more difficult question to answer, not least because any Druidic funeral tradition that may be emerging is very new, and because Druidry is not widely known about or understood in mainstream culture. As we saw in chapter 3 modern perceptions of Druids tend to be in stereotyped terms of bearded, white-robed old men doing strange and slightly worrying things at Stonehenge at the summer solstice. There is, then, no particular reason why Druid funeral rituals should be thought of as something that is potentially useful or applicable to the wider community. There are, however, some things that can usefully be said.

As can be seen from the previous section, there is much to be learnt from the application of ideas and theories from the wider field of death studies to the specific example of modern British Druidry. Davies has taken the innovative step of applying theories about dividuality to the study of death, grief, and bereavement (2020). There is much scope to look at this through the lens of Druidry, with its existing ideas about relationship with a wider than human world. Likewise, I have suggested in the previous section that there may be

value in considering continuing bonds in a new light through a study of Druidry; seeing bonds as extending not only into the future, but also into the Ancestral past. Hertz' arguments concerning double burial and the importance of incorporating the dead into a new status (1960) take on a significance with a study of Druidry and its foregrounding of Ancestors in a way that is quite distinctive in Western society. It is my sincere hope that this thesis will serve as a starting point to open up curiosity within the field of death studies about the ways in which Druidry and other Paganisms are imagining and ritualising death; and that this will lead to a rich vein of research.

Certainly, Druids possess a high level of ritual proficiency. Davies characterises funeral ritual as 'words against death' (2017, 4–5). I have suggested that Druid funerals do not seek to challenge or transcend death, and so can be understood more in terms of 'conversations with death,' however, there is a more important point to be made here. Funerals in Britain, as Davies observes, are comprised almost entirely of words. Scrutton (2018) has demonstrated that ritual action embodies a kind of knowledge that cannot be expressed in words. For this reason, I would argue that the use of performative ritual in funerals might bring a level of benefit and comfort to the bereaved that would not be possible through words alone. Certainly, it seems that when non-Druids have attended funerals led by Druid celebrants, they have found them extremely moving, and have often asked the Druid celebrant to conduct their own funeral or that of a loved one.

> So every time that we've done a ceremony for somebody, we get loads and loads of people that come up afterwards, oh, I want you to come and do my funeral and, you know, have you got a card? And so, I mean, you know, I think people just need a little bit of coaxing and encouraging and a little bit of signposting. We know where to find these things. (Paddy Mooney 28/11/2020)

> So, we find... and interestingly in the last year, during the pandemic, this need for ritual that people are unable to articulate because they're far too secular; they've got no faith. They still feel that they need some form of acknowledgement or some sort of ritual (Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/5/21)

The Druid funerals and rituals that appear in this study show a high degree of 'mortality salience'.[171] From the ritual anointing of the dead body, to the funeral itself, to the ceremonies that connect the living to the Ancestors at Samhain Druid funeral ceremony, where possible, takes the overall shape of Druid ceremony more generally. It is held in a circle where the four directions are called, and elemental blessings are carried out. Where possible, the coffin will be placed in the centre of the circle, making it quite literally the centre of attention in a way that is rarely the case in a more conventional funeral. This also shifts the format from a single person at the front of a hall speaking 'at' the congregation. Many of the people present at a Druid funeral will take an active role, whether this be speaking or singing, calling one of the quarters, or blessing the circle or the coffin with earth, air, fire or water. Thus, the funeral is, almost by its very nature, more of a community event. This is something that is rarely encountered in mainstream secular funerals in Britain, and which may well be beneficial.[172] As the current trend for direct cremation grows, people in Britain are increasingly detached from the dead body, even as a presence in a coffin at the funeral. It remains to be seen what the long-term psychological effects of this might be, but they certainly contribute to a sense of separation from the dead and possibly to difficulties processing the loss of a loved one. The Druidic engagement with the raw physicality of death, while it is something that many people shy away from, may prove to be something that can usefully be applied more widely.[173]

With direct cremation, there is no ritualisation at all for many people of the actual cremation. For some, this means that what happens to the cremated remains is the most important component of the ritualisation of death. There

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[171] This is a term that is used frequently by Kristoffer Hughes to describe the degree to which people are comfortable with the concept of death and can talk about it and engage with it intellectually and ritually. One of his overriding concerns in his work is to raise levels of mortality salience in any way that he can. Interview with Kristoffer Hughes 31/05/2021.

[172] Although for the many, mainly middle class people who are choosing natural burial, organic development of secular rituals is clearly underway.

[173] It should, of course, be noted that Druids are not the only group active in Britain at the moment who are encouraging this 'death positive' approach to funerals. See, for example, the Good Funeral Guide. https://www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk (Accessed 28/06/2023)

are a bewildering variety of options in Britain, including their use in jewelry, tattoo ink, or even fireworks. However, for most the remains are either interred in a family grave, scattered, or retained by the family in an urn. There is potential here too for ritual experts, including Druids, to help people to construct rituals designed around the final deposition or reception of cremated remains. Around the barrows in particular, it is an interesting idea that Druid ritualists might be available to help people of no religion to design ceremonies that are meaningful to them.

The issue with all of this, of course, is that the number of Druid or Pagan celebrants is still relatively low, and most people would not consider using a Druid celebrant for a secular funeral. As the numbers grow, however, and with more media attention on the possibilities for choice that exist around funerals, it is interesting to reflect on what the future could hold.

Suggestions for future research

There is much research that could fruitfully be done in the future on the areas with which this thesis has been concerned. In particular, research into the benefits of performative and interactive ritual at funerals, as opposed to a single speaker at the front of the crematorium. Anecdotally it would seem that taking an active part in the funeral would be beneficial and Scrutton's research into embodied ritual knowledge would seem to support this (2018). However more research is required to test this idea.

The new barrows are, at time of writing in 2023 very much in their infancy, with the oldest having been operational for just 9 years. There is great potential for ongoing research into the way that these come to be used, and by whom, as well as of the ways that people express both their individuality and their dividuality through the customisation of niche covers and the creation of new forms of funeral ritual. At both the barrows and in natural burial sites, freedom from the constrictions of services held in a crematorium or church are leading to the development of new rituals that do not have their

roots in traditional religious liturgy, and which are starting to experiment with ritual action as well as words. Time prevented me from conducting as many interviews with the barrow communities as I would have liked. They are welcoming and open people who are passionate about the barrows, eloquent and self-aware and very happy to share their insights. These growing and increasingly interrelated communities offer a rich resource to future generations of researchers.

Finally, and on a slightly different tangent, while this thesis did contain research into Druid beliefs about life after death and, in particular with the Ancestors; time did not permit for an analysis of individual experience of or encounters with the dead; for example, experienced as ghosts, ‘voices in the head’ or in dreams. This would make an interesting area for future research.

Appendix 1

Survey Questions

1 I have read the information provided on this page and I wish to take part in this survey. (Y/N)

2 Which Pagan tradition (if any) do you belong to?

Druid
Wicca
Heathen
Goddess Spirituality
Non-Wiccan Witchcraft
Pagan, no particular tradition
Solitary Practitioner
Other (2a-Please specify -Free text)

2b If you are a Druid, please say what you think makes somebody a Druid. (If you do not think of yourself as a Druid, please skip this question and the next one) (Free text)

3 If you are a Druid, please give any Druid Orders that you are a member of. (Select as many as apply) If you do not think of yourself as a Druid, please skip to the next question.

Order of Bards Ovates and Druids
British Druid Order
The Druid Network
Anglesey Druid Order
None
Other (3a-Please specify- Free text)

4 How do you define your gender (if you do)? (Free text)

5 What is your ethnic background? (Free text)

6 What is your sexual orientation? (Free text)

7 How would you describe your occupation? (Free text)

8 How old are you?

18-25
26-35
36-45

46-55
56-65
66-75+

9 Where do you live?

England
Scotland
Wales
Northern Ireland
Republic of Ireland
Other (9a- Please specify)

Beliefs about the Divine and Life after Death

10 What do you believe about the Divine? (Free text)

11 What do you believe happens to someone after they die? (Free text)

Attitudes to Ecology

12 How important to you are the following ecological/'green' issues?

12.1- Preserving Woodland
12.2- Preventing Air Pollution
12.3- Recycling
12.4- Using ‘green’ energy
12.5- Opposing ‘fracking’

13 Do 'green' or ecological issues form a part of your ritual, magical or religious practice? (Y/N) (13a-If you answered yes, please give more information here- Free text)

Beliefs About the Ancestors

14 What does the term 'Ancestors' mean to you? (Free text)

15 Does your ritual, magical or religious practice include the ancestors? (Y/N) (15a-If you answered yes, please give more information here- Free text)

16 Have you ever had an experience that you would describe as supernatural or mystical at an ancient site? (Y/N) (16a If you answered yes, please give more information here- Free text)

About Your Experience of Funerals

17 What do you think is the main purpose of a funeral? (Free text)

18 Who is a funeral for?

The person who has died
Family and Friends of the person who has died
Both of the Above
Not sure

19 Have you attended a traditional or church funeral in the last 5 years? (Y/N)

19a-If you answered yes, please give further information. What (if anything) worked well about the funeral and what (if anything) could have been better?

20 Have you attended a funeral that you would describe as 'Pagan' in the last 5 years?

20a-if you answered yes, please briefly describe the funeral you attended

20b-If you answered yes, what worked well, or not so well about this funeral? In particular, were there any ways in which it was more, or less effective than a 'traditional' funeral?

21 Are you aware that there are modern barrows inspired by ancient burial mounds and designed to hold cremated remains at All Cannings in Wiltshire and Willow Row in Cambridgeshire? (Y/N) (Links to websites provided).

21a-What are your feelings about barrows like this? (Free text)

Thinking About your own Funeral

22 Before completing this survey, had you spent any time thinking about your own funeral? (Y/N)

22a-Have you spoken to friends and family about your wishes? (Y/N)

22b-Have you given anybody written instructions about your wishes? (Y/N They are stored in my will)

23 Where would you like your body to be looked after before your funeral?

Funeral Home
At Home
It Doesn’t Matter
Other (23a-Please specify)

24 What would you like to happen to your body?

Burial at a local cemetery
Burial in a natural or woodland burial ground
Cremation at a local crematorium
Cremation on an open-air pyre

It doesn’t matter
Other (24a-Please Specify)

24a-If you intend to be cremated, what do you want to happen to your cremated remains? (Free text)

25 Who would you prefer to conduct your funeral service?

Pagan celebrant known to you
Pagan celebrant not known to you
Professional civil or Humanist celebrant
Family Member
I don’t want any funeral service
Other (25a-Please specify)

25b-Please add any additional information here

26 Do you think it is important that there are Pagan/Druid celebrants who can conduct funeral services? (Y/N)

26a-Why/Why not?

27 Would you know how to find a Pagan celebrant? (Y/N)

28 Would you know how to find information about Pagan or Druidic funerals? (Y/N)

29 Some Pagans have placed cremated remains of family or friends at ancient sites such as stone circles and ancient burial mounds. What is your opinion of this practice? (Free text)

30 Is there anything I have not asked in this questionnaire that you think is important? This might be to do with funerals, other ceremonies or rituals connected with death or the dead, the ways in which people who have died are remembered or commemorated, or anything else related to this topic. If so, please tell me about it here.

31 If you would be happy for me to contact you for further information about any of your answers, please give your name here.

31a-And your email address here

Appendix 2

Questions Used in Semi-Structured Interviews with Barrow Users and Completed by Barrow Users where an Interview was not Possible.

Q1	Which barrow is your connection with?
A1	
Q2	What is your connection to the barrow? For example, do you have a niche reserved, or a friend or family member interred in the barrow, or a different connection?
A2	
Q3	Could you describe how you first heard about the barrow?
A3	
Q4	When you first learnt about the barrow, how did you respond? What is it about the idea that appeals or speaks to you?
A4	
Q5	Do you think that you would feel the same if it was in a form other than an ancient barrow (for example a brick built, above ground columbarium in the countryside)?
A5	
Q6	Is the location of the barrow, or its wider landscape important to you? If so, can you explain how/why?
A6	

Q7	The barrows are not specifically religious spaces, but does the idea of the barrow speak particularly to any of your own religious or spiritual beliefs? If so, please could you explain more about this?
A7	
Q8	Ideally, what would you like to see happen to the barrow in the medium and long (perhaps very long) term?
A8	
Q9	Was there/will there be any particular words or actions when the cremated remains were/will be placed in their niche? Or are there any objects of significance paced with them?
A9	
Q10	Is there anything about the barrow that you are not quite comfortable with or you would like to change
A10	
Q11	Do you think that the barrows will become common around the country in the future?
A11	
Q12	If they were to become common, how would you feel about this.
A12	

If you have a friend or family member interred in the barrow:	
Q13	How does this make you feel?
A13	
Q14	Do you visit the barrow? If so, do you do anything in particular while you are there?

A14	

Appendix 3

Information about Interviewees

Druid Leaders and Academics

Eimear Burke is the Chosen Chief of OBOD. She is a psychotherapist who lives in the Republic of Ireland. Interview conducted 22/11/21.

Philip Shallcrass, also known as Greywolf is the founder and Chief Druid of the British Druid Order, and writer of its distance learning courses. He is an author and a shaman. Interview conducted 29/7/17.

Kristoffer Hughes is the founder and Archdruid of the Anglesey Druid Order. He is a mortuary technician and a professional entertainer/presenter as well as an author and funeral celebrant. Interview conducted 31/5/21.

Andy Letcher is a Druid and an academic who is currently the course director for the MA in Engaged Ecology at Schumacher College in Devon. He is a writer and a musician. His second PhD concerned the Bardic tradition in Druidry. Interview conducted 31/8/17.

Susan Dobney is a Druid resident in Avebury. She was the wife of the late Terry Dobney whose cremated remains are interred in the barrow at All Cannings. Interview conducted 2/2/23.

Cliff Eastabrook, also known as The Travelling Talesman, is a Druid and a professional storyteller. Interview conducted 24/11/20.

Druid Funeral Celebrants

Paddy Mooney and Gabriella Aluna are an OBOD Druid couple based in Sussex, who have conducted a number of Druid funeral ceremonies. Gabriella is a funeral arranger with a local funeral director. Interviews conducted 24/11/20 (Paddy) and 26/11/20 (Gabriella)

Richard D is a member of OBOD and a funeral celebrant who has trained with the OBOD celebrancy school. He is based in the south of England and conducts funerals for the wider community as well as for Druids. Interview conducted 3/6/17.

David Ledger is a funeral celebrant based in the south of England who works with a number of funeral directors and has a particular interest in council financed funerals. Interview conducted 28/7/17.

Clare Slaney is a funeral celebrant and retired nurse. She managed the Pagan Hospice and Funeral Trust during the 1990s. Interview conducted 7/10/20.

Barrow Owners and Builders

All Cannings

Tim Daw is the owner of All Cannings and had the initial idea for the barrows. He is a farmer in Wiltshire whose land falls within the existing sacred landscape of Avebury. Interview conducted 7/5/18.

Sacred Stones Ltd.

Toby Angel is a managing Director and Trustee of Sacred Stones Ltd. He lives in Cambridgeshire, close to the site of the Willow Row Barrow at St Neots. Interviews conducted 16/3/17 and 11/1/18.

Tim Ashton is the owner and manager of the Barrow at Soulton Manor in Shropshire, built by Sacred Stones Ltd. He is a farmer with a keen interest in physics. Interview conducted 11/1/18.

Geraint Davies is a stone mason who was involved in the building of All Cannings and has subsequently become a Director and Trustee of Sacred Stones Ltd. He has been involved with the building of the barrows at Willow Row and Soulton Manor. Interview conducted 14/2/17.

Martin Fildes is a stone mason who oversaw the construction of All Cannings and has subsequently become a Director and Trustee of Sacred Stones Ltd. He has been involved with the building of the barrows at Willow Row and Soulton Manor. Interview conducted 4/6/21.

Druid and Pagan Barrow Users

LP is a female Druid based in the Northeast of England. She owns a single niche at All Cannings and was one of the first to purchase one. Interview conducted 23/12/26.

JG is a male Heathen with an interest in Druidry. He lives in the Northwest of England but has family connections to Wiltshire where All Cannings is built. He owns a family Niche in All Cannings. 14/8/18.

GM is a female who is local to All Cannings and owns a family niche there. Her mother’s cremated remains are interred in the barrow. She is an atheist. Interview conducted 15/8/18.

JP is a female who has pre-purchased a family niche at All Cannings. She is non-religious but has a keen interest in Neolithic history. She is based in Shropshire. Interview conducted 4/6/21.

JA is the partner of JP. He is a male based in Shropshire with a keen interest in the ancient history and monument of Britain. He is an atheist. Interview conducted 3/6/21.

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