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Celtic Myth in the Twentieth Century

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Celtic Myth in the Twentieth Century

Abstract
Discusses Celtic myth and “the comments made on it and its influence by the Celtic-born authors who can be said to influenced [her] own work.”

Additional Keywords
Celtic mythology—Influence on literature; Valerie Protopapas
people became poets long before they learned how to read or write, and if Yeats ignored their grossness, there'll always be some who dance on the hills or in the depths of the forest. Whenever I read a modern, non-fantasy novel based on an ancient myth—generally on Greek or Norse material: I don't think the Celts have as much appeal for the realists—I am always shocked at how much more the world, to which the modern reconstructions seem than Homer or the sagas ever did. But then our realists, who to me seems primarily the Beowulf scholar. He uses a few names with Welsh formations, such as Arwen, but a whole chapter is given to "The Dark Night of the Soul," pp. 300-412; other parallels than these which were alluded to in the above essay appear, of course. I understand that some critics consider other works on mysticism to be better than Underhill's, but since Williams was influenced by her work, it is important in the study of the Inklings.

WALDOFF, Leon. "Wordsworth's Healing Power: Basic Trust in 'Tintern Abbey.'" Hartford Studies in Literature, IV:2 (1972): 147-166. [An interesting comparison to Wilcox's theory (below); Waldoff, arguing from psychoanalytic theory and Romantic history, finds Wordsworth's return to the Wye Valley a regression to the oral stage, in which the capitalization of Nature of the last verse paragraph of 'Tintern Abbey' is definitely Mother Nature. Waldoff sees four main defenses in Wordsworth to "gratify the longings for union and omnipotence as well as against feelings of loss, diminution of self, and depression" (p.163): "regression, the fantasy of Nature as maternal, identification, and a reverential attitude" (p.164).]


WATTS, Alan W. "The New Alchemy." In This Is It, and other essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience, pp.125-153. 1960. New York: Collier Books, 1967. [A description of the results of seven experiences of using LSD over a several-year period. A forerunner to the book discussed in this essay (listed above); a few comments on the drugs are also included. (I wish to thank Thom Christopher of Chicago, Illinois, for allowing me to find this essay in his collection of Watts' books.)] WILCOX, Stewart C. [In the spring of 1955 at the University of Oklahoma, I heard Professor Wilcox read a paper on the last verse paragraph of "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" which I still believe the best explication I have found. Although the paper was never published, Professor Wilcox has given me permission to summarize it in this note. He began from the phrase "For thou art with me" (spoken by William Wordsworth to his sister, Dorothy, in L.114), noting the echo of Psalm 23. He pointed out both the imagistic and phrasal echoes of this psalm in other parts of this paragraph, including Wordsworth's reference to "this green pastoral landscape" in L.150. Religious language not derived from the psalm includes "this prayer I make" (L.121), "Our cheerful faith" (L.133), "my exhortations" (L.146), "A worshipper" (L.152). "service" (L.153), "with far deeper zeal Of holier love" (L.154-155). The series of negatives in L.176-180 may echo Romans 8:36-39, and the phrase "Shall ever prevail against us" (L.19) and "15.20.

WILLIAMS, Charles. The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante. London: Faber and Faber, 1943. [The Allison comparison to Wilcox's theory (below); Waldoff, arguing from psychoanalytic theory and Romantic history, finds Wordsworth's return to the Wye Valley a regression to the oral stage, in which the capitalization of Nature of the last verse paragraph of 'Tintern Abbey is definitely Mother Nature. Waldoff sees four main defenses in Wordsworth to "gratify the longings for union and omnipotence as well as against feelings of loss, diminution of self, and depression" (p.163): "regression, the fantasy of Nature as maternal, identification, and a reverential attitude" (p.164).]


To revert to Yeats himself: having always been fascinated by forests I am particularly interested by his remarks about the different natural approaches to things. I am fascinated by the English, the Romans, and even the Ancient Greeks, "see nature without ecstasy," with the affection a man feels for his garden, where nature has faded and is only friendly and pleasant, while in Matthew Arnold's felicitous phrase, Celtic love of nature "comes almost more from a sense of her mystery than of her beauty." This is brought out even more strongly by Heinrich Zimmer when he speaks of the forest as a place of initiation "where demoniac presences reveal themselves—a terrifying abyss, full of strange forms and whispering voices."
his men's names come straight out of the old Norse Ylfafagninn, itself a pretty mysterious piece of work. Boromir and Faramir even sound Slavic to me, though I'm no philologist. Also the grim and noble heights to which some of the main characters rise (even if it sometimes takes them awhile to get there) facing or even accepting destruction in order to save their world, bring a breath of life to the realm of the dead. This spiritual tone, the emphasis on self-sacrifice do not belong to any pre-Christian Western epics that I know of. One could try to read something of it into the words of the Irish King Conchur when the severed head of Saultais rails at him and makes him from his trance, and the real world, at least for the moment, is gone. "Unless the sky with its shower of stars fall upon the earth or unless the ground burst open I will bring back every cow to its byre, every woman to her house." But this is really tribal, not individualizing—humanization of the supernatural. To survive every tribesman must risk his life for it; there is no thought of humanity in general; people outside your own tribe just don't count. In the Mabinogion itself, Emvisyn displays the same mentality when he decides to die in the Cauldron to save his people, while the real Hollis has led to death "Wee is me that I should have been the cause of bringing the men of the island of the Mighty into this strait!" The scene is a strange one, much more complicated than the Irish incident I just quoted—it's a little bit like seeing the devil himself turn into Christ and accept the Cross—but the underlying idea is the same. Emvisyn dies for his people ("Greater love hath no man") but he doesn't give a damn about anybody else. And this has been true for centuries.

In mythology—where you never find our modern preoccupation with good and evil—our performances didn't usually make us noticeably good yet. And perhaps you find it least of all in the Celtic. Yeats says—this time in his Celtic Twilight—that fantasy and caprice would lose the freedom which is their breath of life if they were to unite with either good or evil. This is a result of the religion of the people: they presumably lived among their ancient gods. Mortals may occasionally—just occasionally—stop and worry and have quails about what they have done to each other, and before there is any worry or asking what they have done to each other, there was the worry about what they had done to the gods. And this is to be sent down as a heritage of the inhuman gods. We find this to be sent down as a heritage of the inhuman gods. We find this to be sent down as a heritage of the inhuman gods. We have only children playing with toys, and the toys—we humans—have got desperately the worst of it. Their irresponsible charm seems to be so integral a part of them that I believe I have always there been even there before the monks who wrote down their stories stripped of their godhood in order to free their Christian God of competition.

I was very startled some months ago, when someone wrote to Mythprint magazine saying that he wondered why everybody wrote about the Welsh and never about the Irish. There began writing my Mabinogion tetralogy the Irish held the field, and I thought that the stories in the Red Book of Hergest were still virgin ground. I never would have dreamed of tackling the great Irishmen on their own ground: James Stephens, AE, Yeats, etc. But I was interested in the understanding of the language. Michael O Raghallaigh, one who wrote fantasies that had a sheer beauty of language perhaps unequalled, he wrote very little about Irish mythology.

For awhile the Irish held the center of the world stage, I think, because of the brief, lovely flourishing that started upon a much smaller stage: that of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. There the ancient Irish heroes and heroines rose out of the so-called dead past, and lived and lived and died again with all their ancient fire and glory and mystery. And with them rose the so-called Irish writers who wrote about them, and who they either loved or fought, but never seemed to bow down to. They were loved to have seen some of those performances; especially the one in which AE, who was mystic as well as poet, tried some kind of occult experiment on the audience and willed it to see water at one point during the action of his play, Deirdre. Next day many people, we are told, said that they had had a queer illusion of water pouring out over them from the stage. This, so far as I know, was the only time when anything of a psychic nature was actually attempted on stage, but we are told that a good many things were reported that I think would have done credit to even the old Welsh "Men of Fantasy and Illusion," a long title usually translated into English as magicians. Unfortunately, it was considered undesirable to make many of these things public. But for little while the Celtic Twilight really must have glowed like the West, when all the really important and interesting people wereparity, magic on their own initiative. One will find a magic bag given him by his immortal bride Rhiannon, but he only does what she tells him. Not until the Fourth Branch, when Gwydion and Math appear, do mortal men of sympathetic character work magic on their own behalf. To read the scholars make is that possible expurgation of magic. Through-the scholars make is that possible expurgation of magic. Through-

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Irish counterpart, Manannan son of Lir, and so I borrowed them for him. After all, if the two were originally the same person, they belonged to him.

I do not know why the Welsh monk should have been so particular about some things, for the Irish monks deprived the old gods only of whatever ethical significance they may once have had—also of their control over the dead, which comes out clearly in Irish peasant tales, but is seldom even touched upon in the old manuscripts. They let them keep their immortality, their everlasting youth, and their gorgeous Other-world.

The Mabinogi stands alone. Only a few bits and pieces of its companion myths survive. The great Arthurian cycle has been so thoroughly worked over by courtly French minstrels that we can tell very little about its original Welsh shape. Sir Lancelot, himself chief of the knights of the Round Table, and secret lover of Queen Guinevere, is now generally dismissed as a French addition. Yet the earliest legend in which he appears does not connect him with Guinevere at all, and does surround him with old Celtic supernatural figures. One small instance: we are told that when in his babyhood, while his mother was busy with his mortally wounded father, King Ban, the little Lancelot was stolen away by the Lady of the Lake, and reared in her fairy paradise, the Island of the Maidens. (A place with a name like that must have been a good place for him to get into practice for the Queen.) The Lady of the Lake wished him to grow up to be a warrior to save her son Mabuz, who is generally identified with the mysteriously imprisoned Mabon, the God the Romans identified with Apollo when they found him in Gaul.

And in at least one Welsh district, within the last century, people still believed that the fairies lived beneath the lakes, and used to caution their children about going out into a mist lest they be caught and stolen away. One of the children so warned grew up to be the wife of the great Oxford-born scholar, Sir John Rhys, whose researches turned the key that let me into his native Welsh wonderland. Without the understanding he gave me I could not have had enough insight into them to write my own tetralogy. But I will say no more of Rhys, for I understand that a paper about his influence on my work is to be read here and I certainly don't want to steal its author's thunder. Since he admires my work, he is, in my opinion, a gentleman of excellent taste and judgment (though I haven't yet met him).

Without meaning any criticism of either famous lady, I do think it a little ironic that women novelists Rosemary Sutton and Mary Stewart should have banished Sir Lancelot from their versions of the Arthurian cycle. For he is the man Zimmer considered all women's ideal male—their animus archetype. Most of the heroes of the Round Table were definitely men's men, but Sir Lancelot, the great warrior who yet puts love ahead of everything else, is the desire of every woman's heart. Considering the rather silly tyranny with which Queen Guinevere often treats him (these squashed medieval ladies must have had some suppressed desire to get even with their lords and masters), it often seems a wonder that Lancelot doesn't walk out on Guinevere; and indeed, once he does take about a fifteen-year's vacation with the beautiful daughter of the Grail King, she who bore him Sir Galahad. Galahad is a figure you can't trace at all on Celtic ground. But one thing does puzzle me (again meaning no criticism): why do both Rosemary Sutton and Mary Stewart substitute Bedyr—Tennyson's Sir Bedivere—for Lancelot? No Welsh fragment yet discovered seems to link his name with Guinevere's, while on the other hand we are told that she was seized by at least two other people: Melwas, a mysterious fair prince, no doubt a shrunken god, and Modred, Arthur's combination nephew-son. Since in the earliest complete Arthurian cycle—Geoffrey of Monmouth—Modred kills his brother, Sir Gawain, and in the French versions it is Sir Lancelot who does this, the substitution is very plain there. Another name coupled with the Queen's is that of Sir Kay, Arthur's foster brother. In Welsh he was anything but the spiteful weakling the Frenchmen (and later nearer our own time, Tennyson) have made of him. He was a great fighter, one whose sword dealt always a wound that no physician could heal, and he became Arthur's enemy. Rhys-believed him to have been one of Guinevere's abductors—she was always getting abducted: the only question is whether she co-operated and these abductions were really elopements. In the oldest French versions it looks suspiciously as if he betrayed her into captivity; also he is ac-
NO OTHER THING THAT SEEMS QUITE STRANGE is that the Scotch, a people just as Celtic as the Irish or the Welsh, have produced no great hero, no mythic cycle of tales. Bits of Arthurian lore have been found among them, and some very poetic versions of old Irish tales; and certainly everybody knows of the highland Scott's fame for the latter, but they have no epic. One would like to think that it was trampled underfoot by the Covenanters, those nice people who made laws forbidding such sinful revelry as the celebration of Christmas, but even if all the written versions had been found and burned, a national epic if it had existed would have survived; it would have been too deeply embedded in the national consciousness for such latecomers as the Covenanters to stamp out. And even while they were going to church every Sunday—they'd have caught it if they hadn't—many Scotch farmers were setting aside one little plot on each farm for the devil himself. One wonders how their hellfire early Protestant preachers ever stood for that. Of course the so-called devil, no doubt originally a pagan god, was no longer being worshipped, but he was certainly being propitiated. The ground on which his tithe must originally have been reared was being left barren, useless to man or beast, something that in itself must have been pretty hard on a thrifty people such as Scots are usually said to be. They did make a few tries at state religion, and Thomas the Rhymer was certainly true of a mad, escaped hell by being carried off by the Fairy Queen, who will keep him with her forever, and there what might be called the shadow of a saga clings to the name of a man who evidently was really a historical figure: the enchantress, Michael Scott; but alas, he never had a chance for further adventures. For one reason, the Scotch have lost their heritage. I am sorry, for I have a good deal of Scottish-Irish blood, and that really means Scotch.

My own work has been deeply influenced by Eastern mystics, which often fits in with folklore remarkably well. You could say that one of our present-day scholars is corroborating that a bit by linking old Irish laws with old Sanskrit ones, and druidic practices and beliefs with those of the Brahmins, but I'm sure he would indignantly repudiate the charge. Also, I myself prefer to accept Rhys' theory that the druids are really pre-Celtic, and converted their warlike invaders. But because ancient peoples did get around a great deal, in spite of their lack of comfortable transportation, it is hard to tell about such a long deal of time. A great deal of Rhys' criticism has been directed with the builders of the lost civilization of Mohenjo-daro, which the Sanskrit-speaking invaders presumably overwhelmed. And that folk may very well have been relatives of that lost race whom the Aryans overwhelmed. In view of the great astronomical knowledge displayed in the building of Stonehenge—the comforting idea of Mycenean influence is fading since radiocarbon dating has cast suspicion on the Gothic-Brittonic building farther and farther back—the people who built such an observatory can't have been just ignorant savages. So maybe the Celts themselves were only the heirs of broken and scattered wisdom which they recast and elaborated just as the Norse did, and elaborated the Arthurian cycle, as our unknown Mr. X did with the Mabinogi.

We could take all this still further back, and suggest that perhaps this wisdom was originally brought down from other planets in the surroundings of the Gods. I haven't yet read up on this interesting theory, but while scientists certainly don't accept these chariots yet they're still a bit too scientific to be in my line. I never have been attracted by machinery. I see no beauty in it, and I also find it hard to handle. Make no mistake, it is the estate of kings of the 19th century; I'd be just as unhappy without my electric blanket, my electric washer and toaster, and a few other things as anybody else would. But I can see that machines endanger creativity; not just handicrafts, the fine old hand-made things, but the arts. They've made fiction the exclusive field of the sacred few who can get their work printed, and made extinct the wandering storyteller who used to go from house to house. A cousin of mine who taught in a famous Eastern conservatory of music once told me that it was very hard nowadays to get people to pay for their children's musical education, there were so few jobs for the Brahmans. In childhood every big movie theater had its orchestra—I believe the late Dick Powell got his start at the Circle Theatre in Indianapolis, my own birthplace—but nowadays, thanks to radio and TV, there are only a few big, well-paid orchestras. A city, unless it is in the estate of kings of the 19th century, can't always have an orchestra, an artistic but hard-pressed local organization that depends on private citizens' contributions, and can't hope to make its living at the box-office. Science is saving a lot of lives in our hospitals, and it is also inventing a lot of ways for us to hurt each other, and I'm not happy about that, but it seems to me that it is trampling upon our imaginations with iron feet. Another kick I have against science: none of its discoveries about prehistoric man and his world ever really give us an answer; they just take everything one step back. It's like the old saw about which came first: the hen or the egg. Personally, I would say that since all creatures lay eggs, the first egg came out of an egg laid by what you might call some proto-hen, herself doubtless the product of untold ages of evolution. But what started that evolution? If matter and energy somehow col-lide so violently that they do the matter and energy come from? If the chariots of the Gods brought us our civilization, where did they come from, and how did their planet become inhabited and civilized? Religious people say, God, Those who aren't religious have no better answer than the old proverb so well-known here in the Southwest, "¿Quién sabe?"

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**Missives to Mythlore**

John L. Leland, New Haven, Connecticut

Dear Sir:

Your call in Mythlore & for more commentary on the work of Lewis and Williams has led me to decide to mention a point which I noticed some time ago, when you published The Notes That Weren't There, and which I have always meant to examine in depth, but which I have always feared I might not manage to do. This point is that the passage in the Notes which discusses the desire of evil spirits to create life, their concern with succubi, etc., is very closely paralleled—I believe in fact for some distance—is the one on the somewhat similar topic in Williams' Witchcraft. This raises, of course, a number of questions about the relationship between the two texts, from a purely bibliographical standpoint—that is, when did Williams write the passage which he did originally intend to use in the book, did he ever intend it to actually appear in the published works, etc.—and also the more generally interesting question of the relationship between Williams' views on magic in the natural world and the processes he describes as actually occurring in his novels. I will say this in full: Williams' Witchcraft—though as the only full-length study of "real" magic by a major fantasy author (so far as I am aware), it would seem to merit careful attention—but it seems to me possible that one reason Williams set his novels (by and large) in an approximation of this world, rather than a new world like those of the other Inklings, was because he in some ways took more seriously the open intervention of magical forces in our world and in the world of the gods than he could in any of the other Inklings, was at least as unhappy with our twentieth-century civilization, where did they come from, and how did their planet become inhabited and civilized? Religious people say, God, Those who aren't religious have no better answer than the old proverb so well-known here in the Southwest, "¿Quién sabe?"