Celtic Myth in the Twentieth Century

Evangeline Walton
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
a whole chapter is given to "The Dark Night of the Soul," pp. 390-412; 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 Undershill'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 capitalized Nature of the last verse paragraph is definitely Mother Nature. Waldoff sees four main defenses in Wordsworth to "gratify the longings for union and omnipotence as well as defend 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 e'er prevail against us?" (L.132) to 1 John 4:19 and 5:20. This use of a Biblical tone explains the sudden introduction of the capital N on Nature (contrast the lack of a capital in L.70, 72, 89, 108 with the capital in L.122, 152); thus in the last paragraph the personification of Nature, or more than that, the definition of Nature, is clearly from my point of view in this paper, Wordsworth, after discovering a spirit in nature (L.100), fails to penetrate through nature to perceive the spirit clearly, and instead identifies the spirit with nature. (That the Romans refer to Nature at times in their poetry would give Wordsworth precedents, and perhaps a rationalization, for his use.)]

WILLIAMS, Charles. The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante. London: Faber and Faber, 1943. [The allusion in the first paragraph of the above paper to Williams saying Dante and Wordsworth are in the same tradition is based on pp.13-14.]


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Celtic Myth
in the Twentieth Century

by Evangeline Walton

I PROMISED TO SPEAK ON WELSH AND CELTIC influence on Mythopoeic literature, but on thinking it over I see that that is not exactly my thing. I'm a story-teller, not a critic; it's my business to put things together, not to take them apart and analyze them. So I think I'll do better if I just talk about Celtic myth itself, and about the comments made on it and its influence by the Celtic-born authors who can be said to have influenced my own work.

Wm. Butler Yeats, himself every inch an Irishman, felt that it was wrong to nail down certain literary traits as "Celtic." He preferred to look upon them as part of what he called the "Ancient Religion of the World," to which he thought even modern Celts were still closer than most people. In his essay on Magic he described this primeval religion as only a poet could, speaking of gods whose passions flamed in the sunset, of ancient fishermen and hunters, and of the ecstasy that descended upon those who danced on the hills or in the depths of the forest. The balloon-pricking type of person might say that he worked a good deal of W. B. Yeats into primitive man, but now that we are becoming familiar with folklore we must admit that the ancient people became poets long before they learned how to read or write, and if Yeats ignored their expressiveness, there'll always be plenty of others to point it out. Too many of them, in my opinion. 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 modern reconstructions seem than Homer or the sagas ever did. But then our realists seem to me to have cultivated a really wonderful sense of smell, whereas Homer and the Norse "song smiths" appeal to the eye—beauty or terrible images—and the imagination. (Though of course these ancient practitioners may have been too used to the smells to notice them: I admit that.)

To revert to Yeats himself: having always been fascinated by forests I am particularly interested by his remarks about the different spiritual approaches to the forest, 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 demonic presences reveal themselves...a terrifying abyss, full of strange forms and whispering voices."

"The manuscript is titled simply "Lecture"; the present title is editorially supplied. —LK
As far as the psychic phenomena go I will venture no opinion. About the psychic phenomena I know nothing. I am largely self-educated—I am a professional fiction-writer, and few of them are, so I think I have a right to give my own viewpoint. To every craftsman his own craft. And the Mabinogi wasn't always a classic. And in the third place it is possible that only wicked men are allowed to use magic on their own initiative. It is the only magic bag given him by his immortal bride Rhiannon, but he only does what she tells him. Not until the Fourth Branch, when Cwylion and Math appear, do mortal men of sympathetic character work magic on their own. To reconstruct Cymry's mythology this fact won't be apparent, because in the Third Branch he was an emergency, I felt that Manawyddan son of Lyr needed some of the magical tricks of his men's names come straight out of the old Norse Gylfaginning, itself a pretty mysterious piece of work. Boromir and Faramir are only children playing with toys, and the toys—we humans—are so beautiful and airy and innocent. They have no qualms about what they have done to each other, and have no qualms about what they have done to each other, but it doesn't give some a damn about anybody else. Their irresponsible charm seems to be so integral a part of them that I believe it must have been there even before the monks who wrote down their stories stripped them of their godhood in order to free their Christian heritage. This raises comparison with another howling mistake made by the man who wrote down the Mabinogi. He says that "Branwen reared a starling in her kneeling-turf, and she taught it to speak, and told it what kind of man Bran her brother was...and so the bird spoke as if it was Bran's voice through the bird's wing. Why educate the poor little thing so carefully if it was just going to use it like an ordinary illiterate carrier pigeon? Plenty of us modern authors make such mistakes as we move from chapter to chapter, but I don't see how anybody could do it in one paragraph. And they can't always be angry with the bird. A modern editor would also have some thing to say about how Branwen had been of writing materials when she was at best a prisoner among jeering enemies who could neither read nor write, and probably had never even heard of anyone's writing a letter. But she may not even have had the freedom of the kitchen into which she had been thrown, a queen made a slave. She may not even have had the freedom of a pit, because I am told Irish cooks often were back even in early Christian days. It seems to me just possible that another attempt was being made to eliminate magic—on the notice that Branwen's bird not only speaks, but can understand what people say to it—but in that case why not just scratch across the lines about the bird's education? It is slips like that which make me doubt that the Mabinogi was written down by the man who composed it—that unknown author in whose name the Mabinogi have been attributed to the Celtic scholars unite—though Arnold said that he was "pilfering the antiquities of which he did not fully possess the secret" and nowadays Proinsias MacCanna bluntly calls the Mabinogi "mere debris" put together again by somebody who, if you take it out of his scholarly context, is not interested in preserving tradition, but only in spinning a good yarn. It seems to me that the Mabinogi was done by a man who had heard a retelling of it and liked it—the illiterate bardic author might even have dictated it to him if it was the abbot of the monastery who liked it—but I repeat that I suspect this nonsense which he wrote down full-length manuscripts in those days) of having been driven by an impulse to laboring under difficulties of some kind. But no Celtic scholar ever seems to doubt that writer and author were the same man, and if anyone of them ever heard of what I've said tonight they'd laugh themselves into a fit of sycophancy. Yet however ignorant I may be these learned graduates of many colleges—I am largely self-educated—I am a professional fiction-writer, and few of them are, so I think I have a right to give my own viewpoint. To every craftsman his own craft. And the Mabinogi wasn't always a classic. And in the third place it is possible that only wicked men are allowed to use magic on their own initiative. It is the only magic bag given him by his immortal bride Rhiannon, but he only does what she tells him. Not until the Fourth Branch, when Cwylion and Math appear, do mortal men of sympathetic character work magic on their own. To reconstruct Cymry's mythology this fact won't be apparent, because in the Third Branch he was an emergency, I felt that Manawyddan son of Lyr needed some of the magical tricks of his
Irish counterpart, Manannann 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 judgement (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-
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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 worship, but it was Thomas the Rhymer. He was a true, orthodox, 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 sorcerer, Michael Scott; but alas, he never could find a market for his poetry. For some reason, the Scotch have lost their heritage. I am sorry, for I have a good deal of Scotch-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 Brahmans, 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 things. A great deal of that uncertainty is generated 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

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 detail, but have always failed to study the lack of time. Also, I myself prefer to accept Rhy's 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 things. A great deal of that uncertainty is generated 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

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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 the supernatural (feeling at the bottom of it may be misunderstanding the question) is that Lewis and Tolkien—though they maintain the theoretical possibility of such interventions in our world—are tacitly accepting the assumption of most moderns that such things do not occur in our world, and then postulating to another world where did 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?"