Bright-Eyed Beauty: Celtic Elements in Charles Williams, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis

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Abstract
Traces the influence of Celtic style and themes, though sometimes denied by Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, on their works.

Additional Keywords
Celtic mythology—Influence on literature; Lewis, C.S.—Influence of Celtic mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Celtic mythology; Williams, Charles—Influence of Celtic mythology; Nancy-Lou Patterson
Although it was not to be published for forty years, when it appeared after its author's death as *The Silmarillion*, a version of the "Quenta Silmarillion" was praised in 1937 by Edward Crankshaw, a reader for Unwin. Crankshaw wrote that "It has something of that mad, bright-eyed beauty that perplexes all Anglo-Saxons in face of Celtic art." Tolkien was quick to reply that his writings were "not Celtic!" He felt "a certain distaste" for "Celtic things," he wrote to Stanley Unwin, because of "their fundamental unreason. They have bright color, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design. They are in fact 'mad' as your reader says—but I don't believe I am." (Ibid.)

In spite of Tolkien's disclaimer, it is this mad world with its broken designs which we are charged, in this aptly-numbered thirteenth Mythcon, to explore. As everybody in attendance here will know, works related to *The Silmarillion* were read aloud to C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams (among others) and these men in turn read from their works to Tolkien, in that informal gathering called The Inklings, which has inspired members of The Mythopoeic Society to read their works, of comment, praise, and critical analysis, to one another at gatherings like this. In that spirit (or as nearly as I can manage without tobacco, beer, or masculine gender) I offer these comments, which I assure you are preliminary in every sense of the word!

When we speak of Celtic influences upon twentieth century British writers in general, and Williams,
Tolkien, and Lewis in particular, we are thinking primarily of the literature of the descendants of the Celtic tribes of Iron Age Britain and Ireland. Tacitus has given us the picture of these early people, and the tones he uses should be marked well, for we shall hear echoes of it in the remarks of all three of our authors.

On the opposite shore stood the Britons, close embodied and prepared for action. Women were seen rushing through the ranks in wild disorder, their apparel funereal, their hair loose to the wind, in their hands flaming torches, and their whole appearance resembling the frantic rage of the Furies. The Druids were ranged in order, with hands uplifted, invoking the gods, and pouring forth horrible imprecations. The novelty of the sight struck the Romans with awe and terror... Feeling the disgrace of yielding to a troop of women and a band of fanatic priests they advanced their standards and rushed on to the attack with impetuous fury.... The Britons perished...the island fell...the religious groves, dedicated to superstition and barbarous rites, were levelled to the ground.2

The "Britons" of this passage are Welsh tribal people and the Romans are under the command of Suetonius Paulinus. Tacitus' father-in-law Agricola had been governor of Britain, and we have here the full imperial tone, in this vivid account of the slaughter of women and priests.

Is the literature derived from these peoples indeed "mad," "broken," and characterized by "fundamental unreason?" The Celtic literature that we have preserves in written form not only the folk-tales of nineteenth century Ireland and Wales, but the oral traditions of various aristocratic cultures in which court poets wove together history, genealogy, and shamanic ritual. Both poetry and prose are preserved. All this has been filtered through and expanded by Christian writers, for literacy and Christianity came to the British Isles together.

Irish prose is usually divided in four groups. First is the Mythological Cycle, which tells of "The Peoples of the Goddess Danann," the pre-Celtic occupants of Ireland. Second is the Ulster Cycle, which describes King Conochbar's warriors, especially OChulainn. Third is the Fenian Cycle, telling of Finn Mac Cumaill, his warriors, and his son Oisin (Ossian). Fourth is the Historical Cycle, which gathers together tales of kings including the high-kings of Ireland.

Traditional dates for these events range from 300 BC to 800 AD.3

The Welsh stories are gathered in the Four Branches of the Mabinogion, in contents of the Arthurian Cycle, and in poems including those attributed to Taliesin, Merdyn, and others. Related to these various forms but reflecting a new tradition are the specifically Christian works, including saints' tales, and poems of Celtic monastic life.

The flavor of Celtic literature can be expressed succinctly by giving three quotations, each of which is in profound contrast to the others save for an astonishing vigour and brilliance of detail: they are the counterparts of Celtic art, pure gold and silver inlaid with intricate spirals and interlacements of bright enamelwork.

In the Tain Bo Cualinge (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), the "centerpiece of the Ulster cycle," the tale begins with a pillow talk between King Alliil and Queen Medb concerning their respective wealth, which leads to a raid upon King Conochbar to steal his finest bull to make up their tally. The following passage describes the hero OChulainn's battle-rage in the conflict arising from this beginning. He goes into battle dressed in twenty-seven tunics of waxed skin, plated and pressed together, and fastened with strings and cords and straps against his clear skin, so that his senses or his brain wouldn't burst their bonds at the onset of his fury.4

But this precaution fails:

The first warp-spasm seized OChulainn, and made him into a monstrous thing.... His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and skins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front.... His face and features became a red bowl: he sucked one eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn't probe it...the other eye fell out along his cheek. (Ibid. p. 150.)

The twisting of the body conforms to the conventions of Migrations Art, and the other distortions suggest the ornaments and animal elements in Celtic Art.

Then,

...the hair of his head twisted like the tangle of a red thornbush...and the hero-halo rose out of his brow.... Then, tall and
thick, steady and strong, high as the mast of a noble ship, rose up from the dead centre of his skull a straight spout of black blood darkly and magically smoking like the smoke from a royal hostel when a king is coming to be cared for at the close of a winter day. (Ibid., p. 153.)

These images reach back through the continental Celtic past to the deepest wells of Indo-European mythology. After this we are not surprised to learn that on a good day, the hero is praised as "handsome" because he had "three distinct kinds of hair" (brown, red, and yellow). (Ibid., p. 158.) "Four dimples in each cheek—yellow, green, crimson, and blue—and seven bright pupils, eye jewels, in each kingly eye." (Ibid.) Crankshaw's bright-eyed beauty and Tolkien's bright colors of broken stained glass are surely derived from passages like these.

My second quotation is from The Mabinogion, a tale called "Owein, or the Countless of the Fountain," which takes place when "The Emperor Arthur was at Caer Lion ar Wysg [Caerleon on Usk]." The narrator, who has desired to find a worthy adversary, tells of a wonderful encounter with a Court where people of unearthly beauty entertain him, and where the lord of that Court directs him to go out to meet the "keeper of the forest," (Ibid., P. 196.) a one-eyed, one-footed man seated upon a mound. This apparition sends him on the following mission:

Take the path at the head of the clearing... and climb the slope until you reach the summit; there you will see a vale like a great valley, and in the middle a great tree with branches greener than the greenest fir. Beneath that tree is a fountain, and beside the fountain a great stone, and on the stone a silver bowl and a silver chain.... Take the bowl and fill it and throw the water on the stone, and you will hear a tremendous thundering.... A shower of birds will come and sit in the tree, and in your own country you have never heard such singing as this...and you will see a rider on a pure black horse dressed in pure black brocade, with a standard of pure black linen on his spear. He will attack you at once...and if you do not find trouble in this you will never find it as long as you live. (Ibid., p. 197.)

In this passage the world of Faerie abuts upon the life of mortals with a brilliantly focussed and sunlit autonomy, so absolute it cannot be gainsaid, the furthest thing imaginable from the "Celtic Twilight" of Romantic thought.

My final quotation comes from a tenth-century Irish poem in which a hermit (a monk pursuing the distinctive eremetic monasticism derived by the Celtic Church from its contacts with Eastern Christianity) describes his hermitage:

I have a hut in the wood, none know it but my Lord: an ash tree on this side, a hazel on the other... Here the hermit lacks for nothing:

Fruits of rowan, black sloes of the dark blackthorn; foods of whorts, spare berries...

A clutch of eggs, honey, produce of heat-peas, God has sent it; sweet apples, red bog-berries, whortle-berries.

Beer with herbs, a patch of strawberries, delicious abundance; haws, yew berries, kernels of nuts...

In summer with its pleasant, abundant mantle, with good-tasting savour, there are pignuts, wild marjoram, the cresses of the stream—green purity! (Ibid., p. 69.)

In these lines, a few among many, the most exquisite illuminated manuscript world is evoked, a sensibility entirely different from the others, yet couched in the same bright language of images. A world of primeval power, a world of faerie wonder, a world of natural delight: each of these passages shows an aspect of the Celtic cosmos.

I have chosen passages which are not only typical of Celtic literature, but will perhaps, strike echoes from the writings of Williams, Tolkien, and Lewis, as a song may cause a glass to chime in sympathy. There are elements drawn from Celtic sources in the works of all three writers. Getting them to admit it is another matter!
I will consider the three authors in the chronological order of their births. Charles Williams was born in England of British parents in 1886. His Arthurian poetic cycle, published in *Taliessin Through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944), like all Arthurian works, contains elements from Celtic sources, and his novel, *War in Heaven* (1930) makes the Holy Grail, arguably a Celtic element, and certainly an Arthurian motif, its centerpiece.

When in his posthumously-published essay, "The Figure of Arthur," (1948) Williams outlined the early mentions of Arthur, he included, along with Nennius's history, Gildas's *De Excidio Britannaie*, which describes the leader Ambrosius, and the *Annales Cambraiae*, in which the name Arthur appears, but he makes no mention of Arthur's appearance in "Culhwch and Olwen," which is probably the most primitive part of *The Mabinogion*. And he flatly denies the relationship between the Grail and "vessels of plenty and cauldrons of magic" from the Celtic tradition, declaring that "The Eucharist, in Europe, was earlier than any evidence of the fables." Like Tolkien, Williams was uncomfortable with Celtic elements: "Cauldrons of magic...are all very well at first, but maturing poetry desires something more," he opened, and passed on quickly to Geoffrey of Monmouth. On the other hand, Myrddin and Tallesen are admittedly bards "in the Welsh tales," (Ibid., p. 33.) and Williams agreed that Geoffrey drew upon this tradition.

In his commentary, "Williams and the Arthuriad," C.S. Lewis pointed out that Williams did "not pretend to investigate...the original sources, the Celtic tales or the French romances." This omission Lewis proceeded to correct. After all, "Taliessen is a poet and magician in the *Mabinogion*," (Ibid., p. 97.) he wrote. Lewis compared Williams' evocation of Taliessen with "the originals in the *Mabinogion*" and the reader soon learns that Ceridwen and her cauldron find a place in the poems as well. In fact, the mood and motifs of Williams' poems make full use of the idea of Celtic magic and mystery as it was understood by early twentieth century Romantics.

Lewis remarked in his essay that Williams "assumes that you know the Bible, Malory, and Wordsworth pretty well, and that you have at least some knowledge of Milton, Dante, Gibbon, the *Mabinogion*, and Church history." (Ibid., p. 189.) This puts the Celtic element in Williams into the context and emphasis which it is given in his work—as one of the many aspects of Western culture upon which he drew freely to enrich and embellish his own visionary re-creation of the Arthuriad.

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in 1892 in South Africa of a British mother and father, the latter of German descent. Much has been written of the Germanic element in his works, but the Celtic element is present as well, despite his protestations of distaste. Specific motifs appear in *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (1945), which is based upon Breton lays of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. His poem *Imram* (1955) is based on the Irish seafaring tales, in particular *The Imram of St. Brendan* (eighth century). And Wales itself is a place in his humorous medievalizing story, *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949). But it is Celtic language which plays an intimate role in the development of his masterworks, the tales of Middle-earth, of Arda and the Children of Iluvatar.

Tolkien saw the Welsh names of railroad coal-cars in King's Heath Station in 1901 (he was nine) and on a later journey to Wales he heard the language spoken. As an adult he wrote of the beauty of its sound. His Elvish language, Sindarin, is modelled on the phonology of Welsh. On a visit to Brittany (circa 1913) he was disappointed to find that instead of people speaking Breton there were only bathing machines. Humphrey Carpenter recounts how a teacher presciently encouraged Tolkien's interest in Welsh, telling him to "Go in for Celtic," because there was money in it!

In 1955 Tolkien in his role as philologist delivered a lecture on the Celtic element in the English language, entitled "English and Welsh," in which he acknowledged that *The Lord of the Rings*, of which the final volume had just been published, "contains...much of what I personally have received from the study of things Celtic." (Ibid., p. 224.) It was Tolkien's desire to create "a body of more or less connected legend," Carpenter quotes him as saying, "which I could dedicate simply to England." Among other qualities, it would possess "the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things)"—but "it should be 'high,' purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult
mind of a land long steeped in poetry." (Ibid., p. 90.)

The suggestion that "genuine Celtic things" contain much that is gross and immature might remind us, ever so gently, of that mentality which found the Druid groves "dedicated to superstition and barbarous rites."

C. S. Lewis is, of the three writers, not only youngest, but the only one who was, in fact, a Celt. He was born in 1898, of Welsh and Irish descent, in Ulster, but his boyhood brush with mythology took a Teutonic form: the Rhinegold, Siegfried, Balder, Norse, Icelandic, the Eddas. On the other hand, in his evocation of a personage from Welsh tradition, Merlin, he drew a powerful figure:

"Fellow," he said in Latin, "tell the Lord of this House that I am come." As he spoke, the wind from behind him was whipping the coat about his legs and blowing his hair over his forehead: but his great mass stood as if it had been planted like a tree, and he seemed in no hurry. And the voice, too, was such as one might imagine to be the voice of a tree, large and slow and patient, drawn up through roots and clay and gravel from the depths of the Earth.23

In 1930, writing to Arthur Greeves, Lewis characterized Celtic myth with the following penetrating remarks: "M [atthew] Arnold...said that German Romanticism...was a kind of clumsy attempt at the 'natural magic' of the Celts." Not so, Lewis concluded:

The Celtic was much more sensuous: also less homely: also, entirely lacking in reverence, of which the Germanic was full. Then again the Germanic glowed in a sense with rich sombre colours, while the Celtic was all transparent and full of nuances—evanescent—but very bright. One sees that Celtic is essentially Pagan, frivolous under all its melancholy, incapable of growing into religion, and—I think—a little heartless. (Ibid., p. 374.)

We have here Lewis writing at his most unguarded, not for publication but to the friend to whom he had confided his most intimate adolescent fantasies as well as his deepest religious intuitions. He goes so far as to say that "They"—Germanic and Celtic myth—"are almost one's male and female soul." The Germanic, that is, is masculine for Lewis, and the Celtic is feminine. In this context we can also infer that the male is mature and the female is immature, perhaps even that the male is pure and the female gross. Lewis wrote elsewhere that "the imaginative man" was older in him than the rational. Today's readers may prefer to compare these elements to the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Lewis continued that Germanic myth uses earth images while "Celtic runs to the elements," that is, to wind, water, and fire.

Besides the insights these passages give us into Lewis' psychology, they tell us much, not of what Celtic literature contributed in itself to his works, but of what his apprehension of them contributed. But Lewis' writings have a powerful, even wildly inventive quality that we might dare to call Celtic in itself, a true continuation of the Celtic tradition. In his most richly imaginative works the very qualities of Celtic literature might almost be said to appear again.

In the blue waters and rosy forests of Malacandra there can be heard the brittle tinkle and seen the brilliant flash of that stained glass world in which a hero has three colors of hair and seven jewelled pupils in each eye. In the lush landscapes afloat on Perelandra, the fragrances of Faerieland, the Sid, the place of the Goddess come wafting. In Merlin's call to the powers of the natural world in That Hideous Strength—

one might have believed that he listened continually to a murmur of evasive sounds; rustling of mice and stoats, thumping progressions of frogs, the small shock of falling hazel nuts, creaking of branches, runnels trickling, the very growing of grass24

—and on every page of the seven novels of Narnia, that poignant evocation of a perfected world of nature, its fruits, nuts, flowers, and leaves, gilded with
praeternatural brilliance, finds its place again. As Lucy found in the resurrected Narnia of Aslan's Country, "every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more."¹³ In C.S. Lewis' writings, as in early medieval Celtic literature, the Celtic element finds fulfillment in Christian form.

NOTES

⁸ C.S. Lewis, "Williams and the Arthuriad," Arthurian Torso, p. 93
¹² That Hideous Strength, p. 355.

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