

Irish Druids And Old Irish Religions

by

James Bonwick

Bird Publisher, 2010

CONTENTS

PREFACE 4

PART I. IRISH DRUIDS 5

- WHO ARE DRUIDS? 6
- WELSH OR BRITISH DRUIDISM 6
- IRISH DRUIDISM 10
- ST. PATRICK AND THE DRUIDS 18
- OPINIONS ON IRISH DRUIDS 19
- IRISH BARDS 22
- ISLE OF MAN DRUIDISM 25
- FRENCH DRUIDISM 26
- GERMAN DRUIDISM 27
- DRUIDICAL MAGIC 28
- NEO-DRUIDISM 34
- DRUIDICAL BELIEF 34
- DRUIDICAL MYSTICISM 38

PART II. EARLY RELIGIONS OF THE IRISH 41

- INTRODUCTION 42
- IRISH SUPERSTITIONS 43
- IRISH MAGIC, AND TUATHA DE DANAANS 54
- IRISH GODS 61
- IDOL-WORSHIP 79
- SERPENT FAITH 84
- SUN-WORSHIP 94
- FIRE-WORSHIP 98
- STONE-WORSHIP 104
- ANIMAL WORSHIP 110
- THE SHAMROCK, AND OTHER SACRED PLANTS 113
- WELL-WORSHIP 116
- HOLY BELLS 119
- IRISH CROSSES 120
- THE SACRED TARA HILL 125
- ROUND TOWER CREED 128
- OSSIAN THE BARD 132
- THE CULDEES OF DRUIDICAL DAYS 135
- THE FUTURE LIFE, OR LAND OF THE WEST 138
- ANCIENT IRISH LITERATURE 147
- THE LIA FAIL, OR THE STONE OF DESTINY 151

About James Bonwick 155

PREFACE

Ireland, whether viewed from an antiquarian or an ethnological point of view, is one of the most interesting countries in the world. It is not the less an object of attention from the fact, that in its early history there are traces of nearly every kind of pagan belief.

It is curious that its literary treasures should have been so long neglected. Of late years, thanks to literary and scientific societies, including the new association fostered by Sir C. Gavan Duffy, Irish MSS. have engaged much thoughtful investigation.

The author of this work, conscious of the importance of inquiry into ancient faiths, has collected such information upon Irish religions as a lengthened course of general reading has thrown in his way, since it may benefit those who have less leisure or opportunity for research. He is content to state various views, presented in quotations from writers, rather than to put forth any special conjectures of his own. Examinations of old myths and folklore will often throw light upon current notions of nationalities.

This sketch of the ancient Irish mind might help to confirm the conviction that Religion, in the sense of a reverence for something beyond the individual, has been ever associated with human nature. Anything, however apparently absurd to some of us, that tends to restrain vice, and exalt virtue, is not to be despised in the development of our race. The heathen Irish had a worshipful spirit. As to their morals, they certainly honored woman more than did the favored Jews or accomplished Greeks.

The Druids, forming one subject of this publication, are still an enigma to us. They were, doubtless, neither so grandly wise, nor so low in reputation, as represented by tradition. Their ethical lessons must have assuredly prepared the way for Christian missions.

However open to criticism in literary merit, the book claims some kindly consideration, as coming from one who, in his seventy-seventh year, retains a confiding hope in the march of human intellect, and the growth of human brotherhood.

James Bondwick
Norwood.
January 1, 1894

PART I. IRISH DRUIDS

WHO ARE DRUIDS?

This question has agitated the minds of the learned for a long period; and various, as well as contradictory, have been the replies. Tradition preserves their memory as of a pious and superior race, prominently associated with the British Isles and France, and, in a lesser degree, with Belgium, Holland, Germany, and the lands of Scandinavia.

Much romance has been long attached to them. We hear their chants in the Stone Circles. We listen to the heaven-inspired utterances of the Archdruid, as he stands on the capstone of a cromlech, in the eye of the sun, surrounded by the white-robed throng, with the bowed worshippers afar. We see the golden sickle reverently cutting off the sacred mistletoe. We follow, in imagination, the solemn procession, headed by the cross-bearer. We look under the old oak at the aged Druid, instructing disciples in mystic lore, in verses never to be committed to writing. We gaze upon the assembly of kings and chieftains, before whom the wise men debate upon some points of legislation.

Then, again, we recognize the priests as patriots, resisting the invaders of their homes, and loudly chanting the Battle Hymn. We are at the convocation of Brehons, in their deliberations on law, and, awestruck, wait upon the observers of sun and stars, or of the signs of the times in the investigation of terrestrial phenomena. We go with them to the judgment upon offenders of an unwritten code, and witness the dread ordeal, or the fiery human sacrifice.

But our inquiry is: What has Irish tradition or literature to say to these interesting details concerning Druids?

Were the Irish Druids like those of whom we read belonging to other lands? Did they spring up from among the Irish people, or were they strangers from another and distant shore? Could they have formed a distinct community, like the tribe of Levi, intermarrying among themselves only? Amidst much ignorance, and even barbarism, can the Druids have been distinguished by the learning and refinement attributed to them?

With our conceptions of the ancient religions of Ireland, should we credit the Druids with the introduction of Sun worship, Serpent reverence, and the adoration of Idols? Were they, on the contrary, new comers, arriving subsequent to the establishment of these various forms of paganism, and merely known a little before the rise of Christianity in Erin?

WELSH OR BRITISH DRUIDISM

Druidism has been of late years so persistently appropriated by the Welsh, that English, Scotch, and Irish have seemed to have no part in the property. Even Stonehenge has been claimed by the Welsh, on the very doubtful story of the Britons, Cæsar's Teutonic *Belgæ*, being driven by Romans to Wales. The true Welsh - the Silures, or Iberians - were in the land before the Romans appeared. Gaels from Ireland, Cymry from Scotland and England, Belgæ from Germany, Bretons, Britons, Saxons, Normans, English, Irish, and Flemings go to make up the rest. We know nothing of Welsh prehistoric races.

Even allowing cromlechs, circles, and pillar-stones to be called Druidical, there are fewer of these stone remains in Wales than in Scotland, Ireland, England, or France. As to other antiquities, Ireland is richer than Wales in all but Roman ruins.

It is hard upon Ireland that her Druids should have been so long neglected, and the honors of mystic wisdom become the sole possession of Wales. It is true, however, that the Irish have been less eager about their ancestral glory in that aspect, and have not put forward, as the Welsh have done, a Neo-Druidism to revive the reputation of the ancient Order. But Ireland had its *Druids*, and traditionary lore testifies that country in the acknowledgment of those magi or philosophers.

The Welsh have a great advantage over the Irish in the reputed possession of a literature termed Druidical. They assume to know who the Druids were, and what they taught, by certain writings conveying the secret information. The Irish do not even pretend to any such knowledge of their Druids. The Welsh, therefore, look down with pity upon their insular neighbors, and plume themselves on being the sole successors of a people who were under true Druidical teaching, and whose transmitted records reveal those mysteries.

The revival of the ancient faith, in the organization called *Druids of Pontypridd*, - having members in other parts of Wales, but claiming a far larger number of adherents in America, - has given more prominence to Druidical lore. The fact of the late simple-minded but learned Archdruid, Myfyr Morganwg, a poet and a scholar, after thirty years' preaching of Christianity, publicly proclaiming the creed of his heathen forefathers, has naturally startled many thoughtful minds. The writer can affirm, from personal knowledge of Myfyr, that he was no pretender, but an absolute believer in the tenets he taught; it is not therefore surprising that students of anthropology should inquire into this revival.

Such teaching is quite different from the *Neo-Druidism* which arose a few years ago, and whose imaginative interpretation of writings in Welsh, under the names of Taliesin, &c., were endorsed by several distinguished ministers of the Christian religion. Neo-Druidism was brought forward at Eisteddfods, and works were written to show that Welsh Druidism was simply the truth as recorded in the biblical account of the Hebrew Patriarchs.

The Pontypridd Archdruid held quite another doctrine. He embraced within his fold not only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but the promulgators of Hinduism, Buddhism, and all the ancient systems of so-called idolatry. He recognized his principles in them all, as they simply represented the forces of Nature, under the guise of personalities.

The mantle of the octogenarian leader has fallen upon Mr. Owen Morgan, better known as *Morien*, long an able and voluminous writer for the Press. His version of Welsh Druidism can be studied in the recently published *Light of Britannia*. He assumes for his Druids the priority of learning. From the mountains of Britain proceeded the light which produced the wisdom of Egypt, Babylon, Persia, India, Phœnicia, Judea, and Greece.

They who deem this too large a draft upon faith for acceptance, will assuredly discover in that unique work a mass of curious facts bearing upon ancient science, and be constrained to admit that the *Light of Britannia* is not the product of unreasoning Welsh enthusiasm, but is among the most candidly expressed books ever printed.

It was Dr. Lanigan who asserted, "The Christian missionaries early opened schools in opposition to Druids." It was the opinion of Arthur Clive that much Druidism "blended with the Christian learning of the seventh and subsequent centuries." The same might be affirmed of Welsh Druidism. Alluding to an astronomical MS. of the fourteenth century, Clive says, "I believe that it, or rather the knowledge which it contains, is a Druidic survival, a spark transmitted through the dark ages." Gomme tells us, "that Druidism continued to exist long after it was officially dead can be proved."

Dr. Moran, Bishop of Ossory, in his *Irish Saints*, associates the Welsh Saint David with an Irish Druid. St. David was the son of an Irish Christian lady. He came to Menevia, on the Welsh promontory, made a fire on the shore, and its smoke filled the land. The Bishop then goes on to say: "The owner of the district

Skene determines that the Lia Fail "never was anywhere but at Tara," while the other stone "never was anywhere but at Scone." Mr. G. Hudson rightly exclaims: "It is a matter of surprise that the Council of the Royal Irish Academy, if they believe this (at Tara) to be the Lia Fail, have made no effort to save such a relic." But Skene's conclusion upon this vexed question of, authenticity is as follows:

"There was no connection between the stone at Scone and the Lia Fail at Tara, and the legends of their wanderings, like those of the tribes with whom they were associated, are *nothing but myth and fable*."

It is uncomfortable to have one's pleasing romances disturbed; and the *Stone of Destiny* has had to encounter the searching light of modern inquiry, to the destruction of many pretty fancies. It is good to be *happy*; it is better to be *true*.

About James Bonwick

Bonwick was born Lingfield, Surrey, England, the eldest son of James Bonwick, carpenter, and his second wife Mary Ann *née* Preston. James Bonwick, the elder, was a man of some mechanical ability, but he suffered from ill health, and his children were brought up in poor circumstances. His eldest son was educated at the Borough Road school, Southwark, and at 17 years of age teaching at a school at Hemel Hempstead and similar positions followed at Bexley and Liverpool. In April 1840 he married Esther Ann Beddow, the daughter of a Baptist clergyman, and in the following year obtained a position at the Normal School, Hobart, Tasmania.

Bonwick and his wife arrived at Hobart on 10 October 1841. He was a successful teacher in Hobart for eight years and published the first of his many school books *Geography for the Use of Australian Youth* in 1845. He went to Adelaide in 1850, and opened a private school. In 1852 made his way to the Victorian gold diggings after finding himself in debt. He did not find much gold, but his health benefited. He then went to Melbourne where he established a monthly magazine, *The Australian Gold-Diggers' Monthly Magazine*, which ceased publication with the eighth issue in May 1853. He then established a successful boarding school at Kew now a suburb of Melbourne. He had already published several school books and pamphlets, when in 1856 he published his *Discovery and Settlement of Port Phillip*, the first of his historical works. About this time he joined the Victorian government service as an inspector of denominational schools, and in 1857 made a tour of inspection through the western district of Victoria. He then made Ballarat his centre and worked there for about four years. During his journeys he suffered from sunstroke and a coaching accident, and became so ill that he had to retire from the service. He was given 18 months' leave of absence, but was unable to continue this work. His head had been injured in the accident. He was never able to ride a horse again, and he was always liable to have an attack of giddiness. He visited England in 1860 and then returned to Melbourne in July 1862 and opened a school in the suburb of St Kilda, which became very prosperous. He paid another visit to England with his wife, leaving the school in the hands of a son and a friend of his. They, however, mismanaged the school, and Bonwick was compelled to return and put things in order again. He was doing much writing, and in the ensuing years travelled in various parts of Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

Some of Bonwick's more important volumes were *The Last of the Tasmanians*, *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians*, and *Curious Facts of Old Colonial Days*, all of which were published in 1870; *Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought* (1878), *First Twenty Years of Australia* (1882), *Port Phillip Settlement* (1883), *Romance of the Wool Trade* (1887) and *Irish Druids and Old Irish Religions* (1894). He had now finally settled down in England and in this year was appointed archivist for the New South Wales government. He traced and copied the information that became the basis of the *History of New South Wales*, vol. I by G. B. Barton, and vol. II by A. Britton. His materials were afterwards printed as *The Historical Records of New South Wales*. Though he published other volumes, these records were his principal work until in 1902, at the age of 85, he resigned his position. In 1900 he had celebrated with his wife the sixtieth anniversary of their wedding. She died in 1901 and he felt her loss keenly. He completed and published in 1902 his final volume, *An Octogenarian's Reminiscences*, and died on 6 October 1906. He was survived by five children.

Source: [Wikipedia](#)