Introduction to Druidry (Celtic Neo-Paganism)

The Neo-Pagan movement is a wide spread, diverse form of contemporary spirituality. It encompasses spiritual revival or reconstruction movements that draw upon the pre-Christian spiritual traditions of Eastern and Western Europe, the British Isles, as well as traditions from Africa, Asia, and North America. In a more specific sense, however, the term "neo-paganism" has come to refer almost entirely to pre-Christian revival or reconstruction movements based in the traditions of Europe and the UK. Wicca, or contemporary Witchcraft, is probably the most popular and widespread of these neo-pagan movements. A second popular version of contemporary neo-paganism is Celtic Neo-Paganism, or Druidism. As we will see, many of the elements of contemporary Witchcraft are also to be found in Celtic Druidry, for Witchcraft has borrowed heavily from celtic sources. There are also considerable differences between Celtic neo-paganism and contemporary Witchcraft, however, and you should watch for those as you are reading the material. Although there is considerable overlap in beliefs and membership, contemporary Celtic Druidry is a separate religious system within the broader Neo-pagan movement from its sister tradition of Witchcraft.

Historical Influences and Precursors

As with contemporary Witchcraft, in order to understand contemporary Celtic Neo-Paganism it is necessary to explore some of the precursors to the modern religious movement. Celtic neo-paganism has three main sources of inspiration.

Palaeo-Pagan Druidism

The first source of inspiration, referred by neo-pagan scholar and ADF Arch Druid Isaac Bonewits as "paleo-pagan Druidism," are the beliefs, philosophies, practices and culture of Celtic peoples in pre-Christian times. Celtic peoples were those peoples who lived in the British Isles...
and in Europe in the Brittany region of France and the Galithia region of Spain. Some suggest that Celts also lived in other areas of Europe. Paleo-pagan Druids were, according the fragmentary records available, the priesthood of Celtic society. As Celtic Neo-pagan historian Christina Oakley puts it,

The written sources [available to us] say that the Druids were the priesthood of the Pagan Celts, and that they were the keepers of the wisdom and knowledge. They knew history, science, and poetry. They were judges, lawgivers, and advisors to kings. They were magicians and ‘shamans’. It was said that they knew the inner meanings of the landscape, could read the stars, and could commune with the spirit of the land.¹

How much of this image of paleo-pagan druids is true is unknown. Most of the records available are Christian records, others are Roman, none of them are Celtic - the history and culture of ancient pagan Celts was entirely oral - in fact, Bards, who were also Druids, were the lore-keepers, passing on the knowledge from generation to generation. As a result, there are only fragmentary accounts available. Some of these record what seem to be fairly impartial accounts, others record clearly biased accounts. Based on all of these accounts, and on some poetry and oral traditions that remain extant, this view of Celtic Druids seems warranted. They were associated with wisdom, scholarship, natural sciences, astronomy, magic, mysticism, law, history, and education. They were part of the larger social order, always working in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, the social order. **The Druid Revival**

The second historical source for contemporary Celtic Neo-Paganism is that of the eighteenth century Druidry Revival movement. According to a bibliography published in 1744 in Europe, over the period of 1514-1744, two hundred and sixty-one authors wrote works on Celtic Druidry. This persistent interest in Druidry by British and European scholars and intellectuals became especially manifest in 1717 with the founding of the philosophical organization An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas (A.D.U.B.), which translates as "The Druid Circle
of the Universal Bond." According to neo-pagan legend, this organization was formed of members of pre-existing Druid groups from all across the British Isles and Europe. These members were called to attend the first meeting by a man named John Toland, an Irish philosopher who, again according to legend, made the invitation according to Druidic practice on the autumn equinox (Sept. 21) of the previous year, by climbing Primrose Hill in London and calling for all Druids who heard the call to gather at the Apple Tree Tavern in London a year and a day later. This group later became known as the Ancient Druid Order, and the currently existing neo-pagan group known as the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (O.B.O.D) traces its lineage back to this eighteenth century group. How much of this story is fact, and how much is religious origin myth, is not certain.

The A.D.U.B. was not the only eighteenth century neo-druidic group to form. In 1781, another group, called the Ancient Order of Druids (A.O.D), was founded by a man named Henry Hurle. This group differed from the first in three main ways: first, it seemed to appeal to a more working class audience, whereas the A.D.U.B. appealed to a smaller, intellectualist group. Second, it incorporated explicitly Christian elements into its beliefs and practice. It is largely due to the influence of this group that the celtic Christian version of Druidry was created. Third, it focused more on practice than on scholarship, including a stress on social services for families of members. One Druid scholar claims that modern British health care and even automobile insurance stems from the social networks originally devised by the A.O.D.

A great many Druid Revival groups split off from these original groups, most maintaining an emphasis on community work and Christian syncretism. A third influential group was founded in 1792 by a man named Edward Williams, or better known by his Welsh name Iolo Morganwg. Morganwg, following in the footsteps of John Toland, chose Primrose
Hill in London as the site of his first Druid meeting, on mid-summer's day (June 21). He called his Welsh Druidic order the Gorsedd. He established guidelines for Druidic belief and ritual for the Gorsedd, and then integrated his movement with a pre-existing Welsh Bardic competition known as Eisteddfodau - a public speaking competition in which people recited poetry and speeches and participated in public debate. This practice, which probably dates back to pre-Christian times itself, became closely linked to Druidism as a result, although again with strong Christian syncretic overtones. Druid author Isaac Bonewits calls the Revivalist Druidic groups above meso-pagan druidism. According to Bonewits, this type of Druidism allowed people interested in pre-Christian religions, philosophies and practices to explore those interests without having to publicly or even personally declare themselves non-Christian.

The Reformed Druids of North America

The third precursor to contemporary Celtic neo-paganism is much more recent than the previous two mentioned above. This third precursor is a group called the Reformed Druids of North America (R.D.N.A.), founded in 1963 on the campus of Carleton College by a man named David Fisher. According to wiccan author Margot Adler, this group began as a humorous protest against the college's requirement that all students attend a minimum number of religious services. Although the majority of students were expected to attend Christian worship services, the by-law of the college did leave open the possibility of attending services of other faiths as well. The founding members of the R.D.N.A. were largely Christians, Jews, and agnostics and/or atheists, and the founding of the R.D.N.A. was simply intended to protest the school rule, which was abolished under challenge the following year. However, after the rule was abolished the R.D.N.A. continued - much to the surprise, and according to Margot Adler, the horror, of the original founders. Apparently, the beliefs and practices of a movement originally founded in
humorous protest were engaging and attractive enough that certain members were unwilling to abandon them, and these members of the order kept their new faith even after they left college and moved throughout the United States.

The basic beliefs of this group are summarized in a document titled The Book of the Law, written in mock biblical style, as follows:

The object of the search for religious truth, which is a universal and a never-ending search, may be found through the Earth-Mother; which is Nature; but this in one way, yea, one way among many. And great is the importance, which is of spiritual importance, of Nature, which is the Earth-Mother; for it is one of the objects of Creation, and with it do people live, yea, even as they do struggle through life are they come face-to-face with it.ii

According to Isaac Bonewits, this was later shortened to the following statements: "1. Nature is good! and the second is like unto the first: 2. Nature is good!".iii

The theology of this group is primarily bi-theistic: Nature, known as the Earth Mother, represents all that is natural and physical. Spirit, known as Béal, a Sky God, represents the non-material essence of the universe. Female and nature, male and spirit, are understood as the two equal polarities of existence. The object of human search is believed to be the search for unity with Béal, universal spirit, which can in turn only be attained through attaining unity with the Earth Mother. Several other deities, including a God of the forests, are also worshipped. As a result, Reformed Druids are encouraged to develop themselves both physically and mentally, artistically and emotionally, etc., for it is only in attaining physical, mental, emotional and spiritual balance that the Reformed Druid can reach her goal.
It is to this group that most of the current Celtic neo-pagan groups can trace their existence, either directly or indirectly. According to Adler, there are R.D.N.A groups in at least seven states, although Isaac Bonewits suggests that no successful National organization ever emerged. Those who still trace their groups lineage directly back to the R.D.N.A. but include more of a pagan rather than Christian/Zen emphasis now refer to themselves as the "New Reformed Druids of North America," to distinguish themselves from their founders yet still identify with the original group. Other groups have splintered off completely from the R.D.N.A. Isaac Bonewits, ordained in 1969 as a Druid priest by an R.D.N.A. member and Carleton graduate named Robert Larson, has founded the most influential of these.

The Myth of Druidism

All of these sources have been extremely influential in contemporary Celtic neo-paganism. Drawing primarily upon these sources, contemporary Druidry has an "origin myth" that parallels that of Wicca. Like the "myth of Wicca," this story is no longer accepted as literally true by most contemporary Celtic neo-pagans. However, like the "myth of Wicca," it continues to resonate with the worldview and beliefs of contemporary Celtic neo-pagans. The "myth" of Druidism focuses around the link between Christianity and Celtic paganism. Given the fact that most of the surviving texts which speak about ancient Celtic ways were recorded by Christian monks, and given the emphasis in some of the Druidic Revival groups on Christian syncretism, and given the primarily Christian religious affiliation of most of the original members of the Reformed Druids of North America, this emphasis is not surprising.

According to this myth, the Celtic peoples of Great Britain and Northern France were great lovers of knowledge, of Nature, of music, of poetry, of Magic, and of Gods. They had elaborate codes of moral conduct, a legal system based on social obligation, and a hierarchy
based on merit and training. Druids were wizards, and scholars, and natural scientists, who worshipped in groves of oak trees, and underwent mystical transformations into the forms of animals. Bards were also wizards, wizards with magical power to remember, and recite, the histories of the lands, and to compose poetry in reverence of nature that still makes people pause in silence. The Celtic people lived in peace and harmony, and in respect for nature, and Druids worked closely with the Monarchy and the State to ensure the well-being of society.

Then, the myth of Druidism continues, Christianity arrived on the shores of Ireland and other Celtic places. In Ireland, it was brought by St. Patrick. Despite being also known as the saint who chased all the snakes (i.e. pagans) out of Ireland, the myth of Druidism suggests that when Patrick arrived on the shores of Ireland, the Druids were ready to greet him with open arms. One of the eighteenth century Revivalist Druids, a man named William Stukeley, suggested that Druids were in fact "of Abraham's religion [i.e. Judaism] and their religion was so extremely like Christianity, that in effect it differ'd from it only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come, as we believe in him that is come."iv Another suggested that the Druids worshipped a figure named Esus, or Hesus, who was pictured as a man-in-a-tree, which prefigured the image of Christ on the Cross. Although these are somewhat more radical versions of this aspect of the myth, the idea that paleo-celtic peoples had a faith compatible with Christianity is a central component of the myth of druidism.

The story told most often to account for the perceived compatibility between Celts and Christians is the story of Joseph of Arimathea and Glastonbury. According to this story, shortly after the death of Jesus his first disciples, including Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea, Jesus' uncle, travelled throughout the world spreading Christianity. They reached not only Rome, but all parts of the Roman empire, including Gaul (Germany and France) and England.
Mary Magdalene is said to have stopped her travels a druid site in France that eventually became a pilgrimage site, and Joseph continued on to England, where he eventually came to Glastonbury, site of a Druidic college and temple. It was Joseph of Arimathea, the story goes, who introduced Christian teachings to the Celts, and prepared them for the later arrival of St. Patrick and other Christian missionaries. They in turn helped him build Glastonbury Cathedral.

The other story told in connection to the link between Druidry and Christianity is the story of King Arthur and Merlin. One of the famous stories of King Arthur, of course, is story of Arthur's search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Jesus drank at the last supper, and which was later used to catch the blood that fell from his side after his crucifixion. Two elements often get stressed here. The first is the symbol of the cup itself, which was also a strong Celtic symbol for eternal life, known as the Cauldron of Ceridwen. Arthur's quest can therefore be seen in Celtic as well as Christian terms, and the idea that Arthur was searching for a Celtic symbol, rather than a Christian one, is reinforced by the figure of the Lady of the Lake, who gives Arthur his famous sword Excalibur, and later takes Arthur to the magical island of Avalon. The Lady of the Lake, and Avalon, are both figures from Celtic mythology rather than Christian mythology, and so the story of Arthur is seen as Celtic and Christian both. The other symbol in the Arthur story that is seen as a tie to Druidism in particular is the figure of Merlin. Merlin, the wizard, is a Druidic figure, who leads the young Arthur to the throne after teaching him the secrets of nature. The fact that Merlin, the Druid, is chief advisor to Arthur, the Christian King, becomes yet another symbol of the unity between Celtic belief and later Christian faith.

Based on stories like these, the origin myth of neo-pagan druidism then continues with the assertion that the Druids and the other Celts were open to the idea of Christianity, and that they in fact underwent mass conversion to Christianity as soon as the beliefs were explained to
them. This resulted in some Druids becoming Christian monks, and preserving their pre-Christian druidic beliefs and practices in conjunction with the practice of their new faith. **St. Columbine** is often cited as an example of this fusion, for in a prayer the saint refers to Jesus as a Druid. It was not until the **Synod of Whitby**, in the year 644, that this Celtic Christianity was lost. Celtic Christianity, it is therefore suggested, is softer, more tolerant, more in tune with nature, and more in tune with the original teachings of the original Celts, than other forms of Christianity. One can therefore be both Christian and Druid, without contradiction.

Although rarely accepted in its entirety, portions of this origin myth are still accepted as true by some British and European Druids associated with orders descended from those offshoots of the eighteenth century Revivalist groups. In North America, however, the majority of Celtic Druids today are pagan rather than Christian, and as a result most are more inclined to question this story, and some argue vehemently against it. They have added their own chapter to the myth of Druidism, centred around the fight between Druids and the first Christians in Celtic lands. They point to the historical records of conflict between Christian missionaries and Druids (the story of St. Columbia is one of these, where Columbia defeats the Druids in a magical war to control the weather) to argue that Christianity and Druidism have nothing in common and that Revival Druidism is not "true" Druidism at all. Nevertheless, even the pagan druids acknowledge the rights of Christian Druids to practice their faith.

**Worldview**

Although the "myth of Druidism" is no more accepted as historical fact by contemporary Druids than the "myth of Wicca" is by contemporary Witches, certain parts of it are very influential in shaping the worldview of contemporary Celtic neo-pagans. In particular, the emphasis on nature, poetry, nature-magic, and compatibility with the powers-that-be as seen in
the myth can also be seen in the worldview of Celtic Druidism. In the discussion of worldview that follows, Celtic neo-paganism will be understood to refer to the worldview of pagan, rather than Christian, Druids.

The worldview of contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans is, first and foremost, an animistic, pantheistic and/or panentheistic one. As we have stressed in the path, it is very difficult to make generalizations about any kind of Neo-paganism, and this is true for the worldview of Celtic Neo-pagans also. Animism is the belief that everything is alive - the rocks, the trees, the lakes, all have a spiritual nature, and one can communicate with these nature spirits and they can communicate with you. Some Celtic Neo-Pagans are animists, stressing the existence of and the need for reverence for the spirits, or souls, in all natural things. Pantheism is the belief that the world itself, or the entire universe, is God. This thesis, often phrased as the Gaia thesis, proposes the idea that the Earth is a Goddess, Mother Earth, and every other living thing is her child. Reverence for the earth is therefore a religious act, and many Celtic Neo-pagans adopt this view. Panentheism is the belief that the gods, plural, can be found all throughout the world and nature. This belief sees deities in storms, in pools, in trees, and in the elements, and therefore stresses the presence, and the actions, of the gods in the world. Many Celtic Neo-pagans are panentheists. Each of these three varieties are similar in their emphasis on the presence of the divine, or the spiritual, in the natural world.

As a consequence of this first element of the Celtic Neo-pagan worldview, the second major element is that spirituality is perceived as nature-based. Whether one perceives the world as filled with spirits (animism), deities (panentheism), or as divine in herself (pantheism), the assumption that spirituality is irrevocably linked to reverence for the earth is unavoidable. From the little that is known about paleo-pagans in Celtic regions, all worship was centred around
nature - sacred trees, sacred woods, sacred animals, and sacred places. Some of the most beautiful surviving paleo-Celtic poetry is nature poetry, and not of the "lame moon/June/tune" variety, as one Celtic Neo-pagan puts it.\textsuperscript{v} Instead, it evokes the power, beauty, and interconnectedness of nature, including the interconnectedness of human beings with nature. Like contemporary Witchcraft, therefore, Celtic Neo-pagans are environmentalists. Celtic Neo-pagans actively oppose anything they see as harmful to the environment, and actively advocate, and practice in their own lives, Earth-reverencing and Earth-nurturing practices. Several Celtic-Neo-pagan groups sponsor tree-planting activities, for example, and most Celtic Neo-pagans participate in environmentalist and animal rights rallies, and in mining/logging/etc. protests.

A further implication of this nature-based aspect of the contemporary Celtic Neo-pagan worldview is the positive valuation placed on the body and bodily senses. Celtic Neo-pagans see the body, male and female, as an essential part of what it means to be human. They also see being human as being part of nature. The body is not devalued within this context, therefore, and the acceptance of simple bodily pleasures of food, sex, or appreciation of beauty as found in poetry, music, nature, or visual arts are part of what it means to be both human, and spiritual.

Another aspect of the Celtic Neo-pagan worldview, similar again to that of contemporary Witchcraft, is the assumption of the \textit{cyclical} nature of life and the universe. As with contemporary Witchcraft, the symbol of the circle is therefore of central importance within the context of Celtic Druidry. The Druid symbol, suggested by Druid author Isaac Bonewits and adopted by most varieties of Celtic Neo-pagans, is the circle bisected by two upright staffs - understood to represent the earth mother - the Goddess - and the world tree - the tree which is understood to hold all of existence, with the underworld at its roots, this world in its trunk, and the otherworld in its branches. Another favourite symbol is that of Celtic knotwork - where
loops and spirals turn into one another, and neither endings nor beginnings are apparent. Unlike contemporary Witchcraft, however, contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans tend to see the cyclicity of nature more in terms of the interconnectedness of all living things than in the more personal or individualistic terms of birth, life, death and rebirth. Celtic Neo-pagans do believe in reincarnation, and this is part of their cyclical worldview, but they also believe in cross-species transformation. One of the favourite, paleo-celtic stories cited by Celtic Neo-pagans is the story of the Salmon of Wisdom.

The story of the salmon of wisdom is the story of Druid visionaries, who attained mystical wisdom by eating a sacred substance taken from the body of the Goddess - the Earth - and the substance most often eaten was that of the salmon. In the story of Finn mac Cumaill, the seer begins to compose poetry in praise of the seasons, the animals and the earth, immediately upon having eaten the salmon. In another, that of Tuan O'Cairell, the seer himself, after a long and full life, becomes a salmon, and is then caught by fishermen, fed to the wife of the O'Cairell Clan chief, who becomes pregnant with him and subsequently gives birth to him once again as a human. As Celtic Neo-pagan author Mara Freeman summarizes the story of the Salmon of Wisdom,

In a mysterious reversal which serves to highlight the magical interplay of human and nonhuman forms in the Celtic tradition, the man that eats the salmon to become a seer turns into the salmon who is eaten so that a man can be born. The circle is complete.\(^{vi}\)

The cyclicity of the Neo-Celtic worldview, therefore, links not just birth, life, and death, but also man and animal, to the round of life, death, and rebirth.
Another aspect of the Celtic Neo-pagan worldview is the assumption that the universe is a place of *magical powers*. Unlike the underlying basis for magic that we saw in our discussion of the contemporary Wiccan worldview, which stresses the spiritual interconnectedness of all things, and the subsequent ability of people to manipulate that connectedness to effect the physical world, within the context of Celtic Neo-paganism the underlying context for magic is somewhat different. Celtic Neo-pagans see the world as inhabited by a number of different "powers" - including the gods, the Sidhe (fairies - who may or may not be gods), the spirits of nature, and human beings. Like these other powers, humans are powers in and of themselves, and like these other beings, they too have the power to effect the world around them. Celtic Neo-pagans stress the abilities, believed to be inborn, of certain human beings to effect the world through the force of their trained, disciplined mind and will. Psychic abilities are thought to be part of what it means to be human. Everyone has these abilities, but some have them more than others. All such abilities need to be trained and focused through discipline and scholarship before they can be used effectively. Magical manipulation of the world is also possible through intercession of the gods. Prayer therefore also becomes an access way to magic or miracle.

Another aspect of the Celtic Neo-pagan worldview, taken in conjunction with the element of magical powers, is the assumption that the universe, and everything in it, operates according to natural, graspable laws, including magic, miracle, spirits, and gods. The worldview of contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans is therefore *rational*, although the rationalism of Celtic Neo-pagans encompasses a belief in and contact with the magical and spiritual. Paleo-celtic Druids, as far as Neo-pagan Druids have been able to determine, were known, first and foremost, as scholars, magicians, and natural scientists. They understood what made seeds grow, animals act, and human beings function. They stressed scholarship and training and discipline, and to
become a Druid reportedly took three times seven years of training. Contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans therefore also stress the need for scholarship, training, and discipline. This emphasis on study of the natural world, and on history, is what sets Neo-pagan druids apart from other aspects of the Neo-pagan movement. As Neo-pagan Arch Druid Isaac Bonewits suggests, however, scholarship is just as central as worship to the essence of Druidism. He writes,

The Earth Mother and the other Goddesses and Gods do not need us to tell lies on their behalf, nor can we understand the ways of our paleopagan predecessors by indulging in romantic fantasies, no matter how 'politically correct' or emotionally satisfying they might be. So we promote not tall tales of universal matriarchies, of Stonehenge being built by Druid magic, nor of the ancient Druids originally having been shamanic crystal-masters from Atlantis. We do not whitewash the occasional barbarism of our predecessors, nor exaggerate it. We use real archaeology, real history and real comparative mythology - and we're willing to change our opinions when new information becomes available, even if it destroys our pet theories.... The Gods and Goddesses deserve the very best that we can give them.vii

This emphasis on rationalism as a further implication, and this is the assumption that Druids have a religious responsibility to teach others what they know, and to serve the State in a religious and educational capacity. Again, paleo-druids were primarily teachers of esoteric and natural knowledge, and Celtic Neo-pagans have adopted this emphasis also. Many contemporary Celtic Druids are therefore in teaching professions, or act as independent scholars and reporters, or work in public-service oriented jobs. Religion is something that is connected with learning
and society, not separate from it. No single aspect of life can be singled out from any other, for all of life, and all of the world, are interconnected.

Ethics

The ethical system adopted by most contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans is of course shaped by their worldview. Like many of the worldview elements, the ethical system of contemporary druids is shaped by the beliefs of paleo-celtic peoples, although it has also been considerably adapted to fit the late twentieth century context. Celtic Neo-pagans stress that the paleo-celtic peoples lived in violent, warlike times, and like every other people of that age, they engaged in practices that today we would consider unethical. Nevertheless, according to contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans, there was a lot to be admired in the ethical system of paleo-celts. Although this ethical system is open to interpretation by individual druids and other Celtic Neo-pagans, there are several principles by which Celtic Neo-pagans try to live.

The core of Druidic ethics lies in something called The Triads. The triads are sets of three words or phrases that summarize the ethical and legal teachings of the ancient Celts. There are many, many triads, but contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans often draw upon one in particular. This is the statement of ethics made by the paleo-celtic Druids in Gaul:

The people should worship the Gods,
do no evil, and exercise courage.

As the basis of an ethical system, this triad is both all encompassing, yet open to multiple interpretations. Given that contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism is pluralistic and non-doctrinal (there is no single, correct path to follow), this triad allows contemporary Neo-Celts to assert their religious faith, their commitment to virtuous conduct, and their commitment to personal integrity, without imposing a specific list of do's and don'ts on each other. Some contemporary
Neo-Celts have tried to elaborate on this code, again drawing upon paleo-celtic triads, as well as other sources. Two other triads drawn upon are:

Three things of ill repute:
inertness, grudging, close-fistedness.\textsuperscript{ix}

truth in our hearts, strength in our arms, and fulfilment in our tongues."\textsuperscript{x}

Drawing upon these and other triads and additional paleo-celtic sources, one contemporary Celtic Neo-pagan named Erynn Rowan Laurie has developed an ethical code that she suggests draws upon history and insights of paleo-celtic peoples yet is relevant to modern times. She writes,

Owing this history does not mean that we, as the spiritual descendants of the Celts, must follow the ancient Celtic paths precisely, in all their ways and with all their faults. For one thing, we cannot know everything about what the Celts did and believed. But accepting it does mean that we need to understand the ethical framework of the Celts so that we can modify it intelligently and call it our own. With this understanding, we can safely call upon the Celtic deities in full knowledge of who and what we invoke. We can also live lives of honor in a modern society without a great deal of conflict with the overculture.\textsuperscript{xi}

The ethical precepts that she suggests can be adopted from paleo-celtic sources begins with the triad of worship for the gods, no evil acts, and the exercise of courage, and encompasses the paleo-celtic virtues of honesty, loyalty, justice, and hospitality. Honesty, she suggests, was central to the paleo-celtic ethical system, for paleo-celts felt that promises were binding because they were made in the names of the gods, and in context of the community. "When the Gods are real," she writes, "their displeasure is as real as their favor, and they do not like their names being
Furthermore, a broken promise or a spoken untruth was thought to shatter a tuath (community, tribe, people). Without honesty, there can be no life, no love of the Gods, and no trust in or by others. Without these things, there can be no community.

Loyalty was also central to paleo-celts, for the survival of the tuath depended upon mutual aid and assistance for farming, herding, shelter, clothing, love, and protection. To help others was therefore a central duty, for without loyalty to your clan, life and community would not be possible. Community is central to a healthy existence, and social concern vital to a spiritual life.

Justice was also central to the ethical precepts of paleo-celts, for paleo-celtic peoples had elaborate legal codes. Justice was the process whereby honour, ethics, and the law were upheld. Honour and social obligations were upheld through the imposition of the "honour price" on those found guilty by the brehons (lawyers) of breaching the honour of others. Restitution for any wrongs committed must in all honour be paid.

And finally, hospitality was also central to paleo-celtic peoples, in fact it may have been the highest virtue known to them. Hospitality to others was seen as a religious duty. Kings, poets, and slaves must be made welcome and offered food and drink, and freely, and gladly, at that. The spirits of the land, and the gods themselves, must also be offered food and drink. Fosterage was a common practice, taking in the children of other families and raising them as your own. Generosity, kindliness, and charity, to all members of society, not just blood kin, is vital to the spiritual life.

Based upon a paleo-celtic system, Laurie identifies honor, loyalty, justice, courage, community, hospitality, gentleness, wisdom and eloquence as the basis of her Neo-Celtic ethical system. Every ethical precept within this system is based on the idea of community.
Contemporary Druidism is above all a religion of community and public service. Courage and wisdom, gentleness and eloquence, are the virtues of the individual Celtic Neo-pagan. Study, scholarship, poetry, commitment, and service are ethical virtues as well as religious duties. Each contemporary Neo-pagan is free, within these guidelines, to decide for themselves how to act, but intolerance, prejudice, selfishness, etc. would clearly be impossible to justify within this ethical system. Many Druids and other Celtic Neo-pagans encapsulate this kind of ethical system in what is known as the Universal Druid Prayer. It reads:

Grant, O God/dess, 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 that love, the love of all existences,
   And in the love of all existences, the love of God/dess
   God/dess and all Goodness

\textsuperscript{xiii}
Theology

The theology of contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans is polytheistic. Unlike the contemporary Wiccans, whose theology is bi-theistic, worshipping one Goddess and one God, each with many names and many aspects, contemporary Druids worship many gods. These gods, furthermore, are conceptualized as real, external beings, independent of human psychology. Although many Neo-pagans conceive of the gods as human psychological archetypes or projections, within the Celtic Neo-pagan movement this is rarely the case (remembering, of course, that no generalization is ever applicable to every practitioner.) The theology of Celtic Neo-pagans is furthermore firmly associated with the earth. Deities are associated with both natural and cultural aspects. The first deity, the one from whom all others were born, is Dana, associated with nature or the Earth. In this way, the earth itself is divine, but she is not the only divine force. The other gods and goddesses are her children, and are referred to as the Tuatha Dé Danann. Within the context of Celtic Neo-pagan theology, it is assumed that communication with the gods and goddesses is possible, and that such communication can be initiated by either humans or the gods and goddesses themselves. The theology of contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism is also strongly pluralistic: different deities, different concepts, different conclusions, drawn from the worship of deities are accepted, tolerated, and encouraged.

The Tuatha Dé Danann

Celtic Neo-pagans choose the deities they wish to worship, but these deities are drawn from the deities of paleo-celtic peoples. There are dozens of deities to choose from, many of whom have multiple names, for the name for a goddess or god in Ireland was rarely the same as the Breton name, or the Welsh name, for the same deity. Often, the names were similar enough that it's easy to tell that a single deity is being referred to (for example, Dana is the Irish name for
the Mother of all Gods, while Don is the Welsh name for the mother goddess.) Other times, however, the names are widely diverse - in Gaul, on the continent, the name for Dana was Epona. Contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans are free to choose whichever language and whichever Celtic country they prefer to provide the source for their deities' names. They can also pick and choose names from several different regions, although generally this is not the case.

It would be impossible to discuss all of the deities worshipped by contemporary Celtic Neo-pagans. However, there are a few who have more prominence than others. These are:

**Arawn**, King of Annwn, the Celtic (Welsh) Otherworld. Arawn hunts traitors and promise-breakers with his red-eared white hounds. Arawn might therefore be appealed to when Celtic Neo-pagans wished to have a witness for a promise or commitment made, as well as when they wished to appeal to a god to ensure safe passage for loved ones to the Otherworld following death.

**Bel** - god of sunlight, fire, and also death, rebirth. Often pictured as a horseman against the disk of the sun. Beltaine is his festival. Because of his association with sunlight and fire, Bel can be appealed to witness and bless any new beginning, including a handfasting or a birthing. Because of his association with death and rebirth, he can also be called upon to bless the dead - for within the paleo-celtic and Celtic Neo-pagan contexts, a death is simply a point at which a new birth becomes possible.

**Brigid** - triple goddess of smiths & forges (fires, creativity), healing, and fertility and poetry. Daughter of Dagda, the Good God. Imbolc is her festival. Brigid is probably the most widely worshipped deity within contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism. She is a complex and multi-faceted goddess, patroness of many of the things that are central to Celtic Neo-pagan belief and practice, in particular of artistry and creativity, poetry, as well as healing and fertility. Brigid might be appealed to whenever creative inspiration (also called Awen) is required, and whenever one wishes to have a child, or a fruitful life, or fruitful accomplishments, as well as when ill health strikes.

**Cernunnos** - god of the hunt, lord of animals. God of forests and wild things. Appealed to for anything connected to wilderness, the environment, and animals. Sometimes associated with the Dagda.

**The Dagda** - the Good God, son of Dana, father of the gods. The patron god of Druids. Dagda is pictured as a man clothed in common clothes, carrying a club, one end of which slays his enemies, and the other end of which heals them. He therefore stands for law, justice, and mercy. He also has a cauldron, which can feed anyone who comes to it, and a magic harp, that can sooth anyone. The Dagda is appealed to for any issues dealing with social justice.
**Dana** - the Mother Goddess, the Earth Mother, and the first deity. She gives her name to all the other gods and goddesses, who are collectively known as the Tuatha Dé Danann.

**Donn** - god of the dead. Donn kept the house of the dead, where ancestors lived in peace and prosperity until it was time for them to be reborn, often into the same family life after life.

**Lugh** - god of arts and crafts, inspiration, sun god, warrior god, fostered by Mannanán Mac Lir. His festival is Lughnasadh. Lugh is also a widely worshipped deity within the context of contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism. Lugh is a creator, a craftsman, and creator and sustainer of society. Ultimately, he is the king of the other gods and goddesses. He is appealed to for anything to do with society, with skill, and with harvest (cultivation of crops being a skill necessary for the survival of society.

**Mannanán Mac Lir** - god of the sea. In Celtic mythology, the Otherworld is often pictured as "out" rather than "down" or "up" from the earthly world. In this sense, Mannanán Mac Lir, like Arawn and Donn, is a god of the Otherworld. Mannanán rides the waves in a chariot drawn by magical horses, and can cause storms to prevent people from reaching the Otherworlds (usually pictured as Islands), or he can make your journey there smooth and trouble free. Mannanán Mac Lir can be appealed to for anything having to do with the sea, and with boundaries, including the boundaries between life and death.

**The Mórrígán**, the triple goddess of death, war, and battles, known also as Badb, Nímain, and Macha - triple goddess of death and battles. Badb (fury); Nímain (Venomous, battle madness) and Macha (personification of battle) are symbolized by a crow or raven. One story of the Mórrígán in her guise of Macha tells how Macha placed a curse on the men of Ulster, that they should suffer five days and five nights of birth pains in times of greatest difficulty for the city, and that this curse would last for nine times nine generations. Another tells the story of how she can be seen as an old woman washing blood stained clothing by a river just prior to battle, thereby indicated who will live and who will die. The Mórrígán might be appealed to for aid in struggle, in battle, or competition, as well as in aid of attaining a good, timely death.

**Ogma** - god of eloquence and literature, and also guide or companion to souls on the path to the otherworld. Credited with the invention of the Ogham script. Ogham is the earliest form or Irish writing.

**Organization**

Contemporary Druids can be solitary practitioners, but because of the strong emphasis on community within contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism, they are much more likely to belong to a group. It has been suggested that the difference between contemporary witchcraft and contemporary Druidism is that while witchcraft is individualistic and private, Druidism is
communal and public. The basic unit within contemporary Druidism is the grove. A grove is a group of people, as few as three, or as many as thirty-plus, who meet together to worship the Celtic deities, to celebrate festivals, to engage in rituals of weddings, funerals, blessings, etc., and to study magic, history, mythology, and nature.

Groves are organized along several different lines, but usually have a senior Druid to lead the rituals, a seer to read omens and prophecy the future, and administrative roles like treasurer and secretary. Many Celtic Neo-pagan groups also have a hierarchical ranking system based on education and training. The terms applied to various ranks differ, but are often called bard, ovate, and druid. The bardic grade places primary emphasis on the development of creativity and intuition, and the learning of basic elements of druidry. The Ovate grade stresses mysticism, magic, and communication with spirits, gods, and nature, and the continuation of learning in the history, myths, and rituals of druidry. The Druid grade stresses mastery of scholarship, history, magic, mysticism, and knowledge of nature. An Arch Druid is a druid who is recognized by his peers as excelling in all these areas. Within the A.D.F. organization, these ranks are called first, second, and third circle Druids.

Varieties of Celtic Neopaganism

There are numerous different varieties of contemporary Celtic Druidism. In England and Europe, many of these varieties trace their histories, in fact or in legend, back to the Druid Revival of the eighteenth century. The largest, best known Druid order in England today, with some American groves, is the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (O.B.O.D.). It was founded in 1964 by a man named Ross Nichols, who had previously been a member of an organization called the Druid Order, which claimed to trace its lineage back to John Toland's 1717 Revival group. The O.B.O.D. is best known for its firm commitment to environmental activism. It is
still somewhat within the tradition of Revival Druidism, although when it was founded in 1964, and when it was reestablished and reorganized in 1988, it had a stronger pagan emphasis than previous druid traditions. The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids has a clergy training program (not all bards, ovates, and druids wish to be clergy), and has recently added a new rank, that of Modron, for women clergy. Fifty-one percent of its members are women.

The largest Druidic order in North America is ArnDraiocht Fein (A.D.F.), which means "Our Own Druidism." It was founded in 1983 by Isaac Bonewits. Bonewits wanted to organize a system where interested Celtic Neo-pagans could study Druidic lore, receive training in Druid rituals, and meet other interested Neo-pagans for worship and fellowship. ArnDraiocht Fein is committed to what Bonewits calls excellence in scholarship, artistic excellence, excellence in clergy training, spiritual excellence, and liturgical excellence. He puts great stress on public rituals, or public paganism, suggesting that the only way to change the world, and its destructive practices, is to paganize it by letting mainstream members of society see an alternate path. For that reason, groves within the A.D.F. are required to enact a number of public rituals each year, in public parks or publicly accessible places. The A.D.F. suggests that groves could have as many as several hundred members, divided into smaller working groups such as environmental activism, bardic musical training, healing circles, scholarly groups, etc. The A.D.F. differs from most other Druid groups in that it draws upon the religious and mythic traditions not only of celtic peoples, but from the whole Indo-European region. Grove members are encouraged to pick, and study, the tradition of one particular region - Ireland, India, Iceland, etc., and then use those symbols, deities, etc. as the focus for their Druidism. While the clergy training program and many of the liturgical forms of the A.D.F. have been adopted, and adapted, by most of the
other Druid groups in the U.S., this emphasis on Indo-European culture and symbolism has not, and remains unique to the A.D.F.

Another popular and influential Druidic order in the United States is the Henge of Keltria. The Henge of Keltria split off from the A.D.F. in 1986, and was founded by five people. Keltria differs from the A.D.F. in a number of ways. It stresses private worship and rituals, rather than public ones. It stresses Celtic deities, rituals, and culture, rather than Indo-European. It stresses mysticism and magic, more than scholarship. It also celebrates two monthly lunar rituals, the Mistletoe Rite and the Vervain rite. The Mistletoe Rite is held on the sixth night of the moon, in the first quarter of the lunar cycle, because that is the time when paleo-celtic Druids collected mistletoe. Because one of the old names for mistletoe is "all-heal," these rituals focus on healing. The Vervain rite is held in the third quarter of the lunar cycle, at a time when neither sun nor moon is in the sky. Again, this is based on paleo-celtic Druidic practice, for this was the time when vervain, the herb to aid in magic, was collected. These rituals focus on magical workings. Henge of Keltria groves also have a "patron" and a "matron" deity for each of the eight seasonal festivals.

A fourth popular group of Celtic Neo-pagans are a group called Celtic Reconstructionist Pagans (C.R.P.). Like the Henge of Keltria, the C.R.P. reject the idea that Indo-European religion and culture are part of Druidism. They also explicitly reject any element of Christian Druidism. While their worldview, ethics, and theology are in keeping with other Druidic orders, they celebrate only the four fire festivals of paleo-celtic peoples (which they call Oíche Shamhna, Lá Fhéile Bríde, Lá Bealtaine, and Lá Fhéile Lúnasa), rather than both fire and solar festivals, based on scholarship which suggests that the solar festivals were a later addition to Celtic worship.
**Rituals**

No matter which Druidic order Neo-pagan Celts belong to, the primary organizational group is called a "grove." When members of a grove meet to worship, or work, they usually focus their meeting on three key symbols **fire**, **water**, or **the Well**, and **the tree**. Fire is symbolic of the Overworld, and is symbolic of thought and inspiration. Within the ritual of offering in the ADF, fire is invoked with the phrase "I kindle the sacred fire in wisdom, love and power. Sacred fire, burn within me." Water, or the well, is symbolic of the Otherworld or Underworld, and of emotions, and of rebirth. Within the ADF rite of offering, water is invoked with the phrase "In the deeps flow the waters of wisdom. Sacred Well, flow within me." The Tree is a gateway to all three worlds - the Overworld, the Otherworld, and this world. It stands in the centre of sacred space, and is a symbol of the completeness of creation. Within the ADF offering rite, the Tree is invoked with the words, "From the deeps to the heights spans the World Tree. Sacred Tree, grow within me." The powers of fire, water, and the tree are invited into the ritual, and called upon to bless and support the ritual. To close the ADF ritual of offering, the phrase "The Fire, the Well and the Tree Flow and Flame and Grow in me. Peace and Blessings."

Grove rituals also invite the powers of other forces to attend and bless the ritual: ancestors, who are believed to reside in the Otherworld, a land of peace and prosperity, for a period of time before being reborn here on earth; the Nature spirits, the fairies and the spirits of animals, trees, and wild places; and the Shining Ones, the gods and goddesses of the world. Each is invited to attend, asked to bless, and offered a sacrifice - usually wheat or corn meal, silver, and oil.

Rituals can be held for any occasion. The largest, most formal rituals are held on the seasonal festival days. The festival days within contemporary Celtic Neo-paganism are very
similar to those within Contemporary Witchcraft. Some of the names of festival days differ, however, and the symbolism of some of the festivals differ also. The wheel of the year in the Druidic context includes four fire festivals (the cross-quarter days) and four solar festivals (the quarter days). The solar festivals Each festival has its own symbols, gods and goddesses, and rituals associated with it.

The Celtic Wheel of the Year

Yule: (Dec. 21) Also known as Alban Arthuan, which means "light of Arthur," Yule is the celebration of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and is the first of four solar festivals. Arthur is honoured here, for he becomes associated with the sun god. Yule is celebrated with bonfires and yule logs, lit to help the sun return to strength in the passing of winter and the approach of spring. From this day forward, days, and light, grow stronger. Within the Druidic tradition, live evergreen trees are decorated to honour the Gods (but trees are never cut - a blasphemous idea, according to Isaac Bonewits) on this day.

Oimelc: (Feb. 1) Oimelc, which means "in milk" is the celebration of the coming of spring and new life. It is the first (or fourth) fire festival, and is celebrated with candles. It is the festival sacred to Brigit, goddess of poetry, inspiration, craftsmen's fires, healing, and fertility. Oimelc marks the birthing season of animals, and therefore celebrates creativity in all its aspects.

Spring Equinox: (March 21) Also known as Alban Eiler, which means "light of the earth," it is the celebration of the spring equinox, the day on which night and day, dark and light are equally balanced. It is the second solar festival. It is also called Eostara (Easter), and "festival of trees." Rabbits, eggs, and children are sacred here, symbols of fertility and renewal. Trees begin to waken after their winter rest, and new life flourishes.
**Beltainne:** (May 1) Beltainne, or Beltane, means "fire of Bel." It is the celebration of spring, and is the second fire festival. Here, the forces of light and darkness are in balance, with the light growing stronger than the dark. It is celebrated with twin bonfires, and celebrants run between them to attain the blessings of Bel. It is also a fertility festival.

**Midsummer:** (June 21) Also known as Alban Heruin, which means "light of the Shore," Mid-summer is the celebration of the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and is the third solar festival. Because the sun is at its peak, this is both a celebration of summer and a recognition that autumn is coming, and that the days will be shorter from now on.

**Lughnasadh:** (Aug. 1) Lughnasadh, or "Lugh's day" is the celebration of the beginning of autumn. It is the third fire festival, and is celebrated with "cultural" fires - the hearth and the oven fires. This festival marks the beginning of autumn, and the ripening of fruits and crops. Apple cider and mead are consumed in honour of Lugh.

**Autumn Equinox:** (Sept. 21) Also known as Alban Elued, which means "light of water," it is the celebration of the autumn equinox, the day on which night and day, darkness and light balance. It is the fourth solar festival. This is also a harvest festival, but also a festival for hunting and fishing. It is celebrated with outdoor picnics and rituals of thanksgiving, and with contemplation of the past year.

**Samhuin:** (Oct. 31 - Nov. 1) Samhuin, which has come to mean "summer's end" or "the day between years," is the Celtic New Year, and is the fourth (or first) fire festival. The day before Samhuin is the last day of the old year, and the day after it is the first day of the new year. Samhuin itself is therefore caught between years, and this is why it is thought to be the time when the veil between worlds is thinnest. It is therefore sacred to Donn, and to the Mórrigán,
who watch over death, ancestors, and rebirth. It is celebrated with a bonfire to variously keep spirits away, and to light the way of spirits to the Otherworld.

Endnotes


Bonewits, 1997, p. 2, citing the R.D.N.A. text The Outline of the foundation of Fundamentals.


O'Grady, Standish H. Silva Gadelica: Translations and Notes. London: Williams & Norgate, 1892, p. 104. Cited in Laurie, 1997. The full quote reads: "What was it that maintained you so in your life? Patrick enquired; and Caelte answered: 'truth that was in our hearts, and strength in our arms, and fulfilment in our tongues.'"

Laurie, 1997, p.3.

Laurie, 1997, p.3.


Shallcross, 1996, p. 73.