THE VOICE CONVENTIONAL: Druidic Myths and Freemasonry

© Professor Andrew Prescott, May 2000, of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, University of Sheffield

I have recently been appointed to the University of Sheffield as a Professor Associate to establish there a Centre for Research into Freemasonry, the first such centre established in a British university. In Europe there are a number of centres of this kind, and in both Europe and America freemasonry has long been accepted as an important area of scholarly inquiry. Despite the fact that freemasonry is of British origin, and is perhaps one of the cultural phenomena of British origin which has had the biggest international impact, professional scholars in Britain have only ever had a patchy interest in freemasonry, and the importance of its historical and cultural heritage in Britain has been largely neglected.

Inevitably, the establishment of the new Centre at Sheffield has attracted some media interest. The other day, I received a call from a producer at Radio Wales which was organising a phone in on freemasonry, prompted by the debate in the National Assembly as to whether members of the assembly should be required to declare membership of the freemasons. I think the radio producer was hoping for some anti-masonic titbits, but I pointed out to her that freemasonry in Wales had a long and interesting history. The various Welsh masonic halls are full of items which have fascinating connections with Welsh history. The last attempted invasion of Britain took place at Wales in 1797, when a French raiding party landed at Fishguard. If you go to the masonic hall in Swansea, you will see there a sword which was seized from the hands of a French sailor at Fishguard in 1797, and which is still used by the tyler of the Indefatigable Lodge. Another treasure of the Indefatigble lodge is a glass vase inscribed with the name Brother Richard Trevithick, who built the first steam locomotive to pull a passenger train. This is one of the few relics left in Wales of Trevithick's stay at Merthyr, where he assisted in the building of a pioneering colliery tramway. There are equally interesting items at other masonic halls. At Abergavenny can be seen masonic certificates associated with the lodges held by French prisoners of war billeted there during the Napoleonic Wars. The minute books of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge at Merthyr describe how a lodge meeting had to be postponed because of the riots there in 1831, one of the most important of the various working class disturbances at the time of the Reform Crisis. In trying in this way to explain why historians should take an interest in freemasonry and its important cultural heritage, I inevitably stress its connections with what you might call hard history - the history of concrete events whose political importance is self-evident, such as the 1797 invasion or the riots at Merthyr. But one of the reasons why freemasonry is such a fascinating historical subject are its complex interconnections with myth and tradition. I expect you imagine that historians are somehow not interested in myth and have a jaundiced view of tradition. Historians are supposed to be concerned only with facts, with those events which made up the long litany that we all learnt at school as representing the history of our country. But this is a very old fashioned view of history. This history of events was very much a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Historians are nowadays interested in much wider range of subjects, and are aware of a much more subtle interrplay between myth and reality.

Here is a quote from the eminent historian Eric Hobsbawm which seems to me particularly pertinent: 'History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction. The past is an essential element, perhaps the essential element in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented. Indeed, in the nature of things there is usually no entirely suitable past, because the phenomenon these ideologies claim to justify is not ancient or eternal but historically novel'.

Hobsbawm edited a very influential book called The Invention of Tradition. This illustrates how many of the things that we think of as national traditions are of relatively recent origin and often reflect particular historical themes and movements. Some of these national traditions are the result of curious misunderstandings. You are all familiar, I am sure, with the Welsh national costume, worn by women and characterised by the famous tall black hat. This form of dress is based on everyday seventeenth century dress, and there is little that is particularly Welsh about it. Wales being fairly backward, many women still wore this form of dress at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Lady Llanover, the wife of Benjamin Hall, Lord Llanover, the 'Big Ben' who supervised the building of the Houses of Parliament, was active in Wales in trying to promote a highly romanticised and anglicised view of Welsh culture. She thought that these quaint old women's costumes represented a distinctively Welsh form of dress, and adopted it herself as a Welsh folk costume. Thus was born the Welsh national costume. The contributors to Hobsbawm's volume tell similar tales about, for example, the kilt or the royal ceremonial (royal pageantry is usually assumed to be very ancient, but significant parts of it are only about a hundred years old). Hobsbawm in his introduction places freemasonry squarely in this context, and he cites freemasonry as a key example of an invented, innovative tradition. In the examples assembled in The Invention of Tradition, one can see that myth, legend and tradition operate in history at a number of different levels. At one level are traditions, often regarded as a folk origin, which frequently bolster national self-perception, but which on closer examination turn out to be of relatively recent origin. At another level are myths, where information about a particular historical figure is very limited or shadowy, and what is interesting about that figure is the way in which myths grow up around him or her, and the way in which these myths change and develop over the centuries.

A familiar example of this would be King Arthur. The amount of factual information available about Arthur is negligible, and tells us little more than that he was a Romano-British leader who fought some battles against the Germanic invaders. What is interesting about Arthur is not this negligible factual information, but rather the way in which the legend of Arthur has grown over the centuries. The early Welsh and Brithonic legends about him dating from the seventh century onwards were a means of bolstering an early sense of Romano-British self-identity in the wake of the Anglo-Saxon invasions. With the inventive romances of Geoffrey of Monmouth, this mythical figure of Arthur is taken onto a wider stage. Through the French romances based on Geoffrey's work, Arthur becomes a pivotal figure in the development of the international cult of chivalry. From these French sources, the idea of Arthur is then ironically annexed by the English kings to support their various territorial ambitions, an early example of the way in which Welsh legendary material has consistently been annexed to support English national ideologies. Through Caxton's translation of Malory's Morte d'Arthur, the legend of Arthur became even more firmly embedded in English national ideology, reaching its unlikely apotheosis in the nineteenth century in the identification of Prince Albert as the returned King Arthur. For historians, then, the myth of Arthur is far more interesting and important than the paltry and rather frustrating information about the historical Arthur. The title of my talk today 'The Voice Conventional' is taken from the title of a poem written by a Welsh stonemason, poet and social reformer, Edward Williams, who lived from 1747 to 1826 and is normally known by his bardic name of Iolo Morganwg, which means 'Ned of Glamorgan'. Iolo is a key figure in understanding and investigating the role of myth in history. He was a tireless publicist for Welsh poetry and culture, inspiring such figures as Robert Southey, who wrote of 'Iolo, Old Iolo, he who knows/The virtues of all herbs of mount or vale/ Whatever lore of science or of song/Sages and bards of old have handed down'. Iolo was a highly accomplished Welsh poet, whose poems rivalled those of the great bards of the middle ages. But, in his determination to ensure the preservation of a vibrant Welsh national culture in the face of such threats as anglicisation, industrial development and the growth of non-conformity, Iolo used his unrivalled knowledge of Welsh literary traditions to fabricate a body of legendary lore which was until recently accepted as a genuine survival of ancient Welsh culture. Iolo's poem, 'The Voice Conventional of the Bards of Britain', purported to describe the structure of an order of bards which he portrayed as representing an authentic tradition stretching back to the pre-christian era. Iolo's inventions, grafted onto the revived Welsh cultural institution of the eisteddfod, were at the heart of the creation of a modern Welsh national culture in the nineteenth century. At the centre of Iolo's creations was the figure of the Druid. Much of the inspiration behind Iolo's bardic-druidic fantasies lay ultimately in freemasonry, but this influence was expressed by a very complex patterns, which illustrates vividly the very complex cross-currents by which myth, legend and modern invention intersect to produce national traditions.

We know a little more about the druids than we do about Arthur, but nevertheless the reliable historical information about the druids is very fragmentary and a great deal of the surviving information relates to druids in Gaul rather than Britain. As with Arthur, it is the later career of the druids, and the way in which since the sixteenth century they have exercised a recurrent fascination for the British, which is more interesting. It is striking that many of the figures in this story, such as John Aubrey, John Toland, and William Stukeley, are names that are also important in the early history of freemasonry. The druid first starts to appear as a stock literary figure, an ancient British priest and philosopher-seer, in the sixteenth century. Inigo Jones included in one of his masques a druid portrayed as a bare legged, long-haired, bearded figure in a shaggy tunic, wearing an oak garland and carrying a phial and dagger. This was apparently based on a description by John Selden of ancient German statues thought wrongly to represent druids. This was to become the standard visual representation of the druid, right down to the present day. This early interest in druids perhaps reflected the concern of sixteenth-century English writers in the wake of the Reformation to show that there was a distinctive indigenous religious tradition. These concerns were to become more evident as druidic lore became more established in the eighteenth century. This growing body of speculative romance about the Druids was to be further complicated by the cross-currents associated with the formation of a unified British state in the wake of the Hanoverian succession and the defeat of the Jacobite rebellions in the eighteenth century.

Sometime between 1665 and 1693, John Aubrey, whose voluminous collections are such a vital source of seventeenth century antiquarian lore and gossip, proposed that Stonehenge and Avebury were associated with the druids. Aubrey's ideas were popularised by Edmund Gibson's edition of William Camden's antiquarian work Britannia. Aubrey's theories helped inspire William Stukeley to undertake pioneering investigations which recorded in detail the remains at Stonehenge and Avebury. The role of the druids as guardians of an indigenous religion and culture had become widely accepted in the literature of the period. It was assumed that they embodied the pre-christian wisdom of the patriarchs, and the suggestion that they readily converted to christianity was held to bolster this view. John Milton summed up the widely held orthodoxy when he declared that 'writers of good antiquity and ablest judgement have been persuaded that even the school of Pythagoras and the Persian wisdom took beginning from the old philosophy of this island'. William Stukeley pushed this view only a little bit further when he said that 'our predecessors the Druids of Britain, tho' left in the extremest west to the improvement of their own thoughts, yet advanced their inquiries, under all disadvantages, to such heights, as should make our moderns ashamed to wink in the sunshine of learning and religion'.

Up to this point, the druids had been considered largely in their English context. A further dimension was introduced by the work of John Toland. Toland was an Irish freethinker whose 1696 work Christianity Not Mysterious was a controversial assault on the institutions of established religion. Toland has been claimed as a radical freemason by the American scholar Margaret Jacobs, but it seems that the groups with which he was connected had organisational features inspired by freemasonry but were not masonic as such. Toland wrote two books on the Druids. In these he used the Druids to satirise the established church and particularly the Irish priesthood. He saw the Druids as deceivers of the people, as can be seen from this snippet:

To arrive at perfection in sophistry requires a long habit, as well as juggling, in which last they were very expert: but to be masters of both, and withal learn the art of managing the mob, which is vulgarly called leading the people by the nose, demands abundant study and exercise.

Toland's use of the Druids as a vehicle for anti-clerical satire seems particularly to have annoyed the respectable Anglican clergyman Stukeley, and accounts for his determination to show at length how the religion of the Druids embodied the original wisdom of the Patriarchs. As a result Stukeley's Druids begin to sound almost like priests of the Church of England, who simply had the misfortune to be born before the arrival of the Messiah.

Toland's stress on the Irish connections of the Druids - he extended Aubrey's arguments by adding cairns, standing stones and cromlechs to the list of Druidical monuments - and Stukeley's depiction of Druidism as prefiguring English characteristics meant that from the mid-eighteenth century, Druidism becomes connected with issues of nationality. As the concept of a unified British mainland state settled down after the failure of the 1745 rebellion, so a fascination with the exotic Celtic fringes of this newly unified country became more widespread. This may be read at one level as in itself part of the process of colonialisation, but at another as an attempt by the Scots and Welsh to maintain a sense of continuing cultural identity. A crucial moment in this process of Celtic Revival was the publication by James Macpherson of an epic poem called Ossian. Macpherson claimed it as a great poem passed down by oral tradition, which demonstrated the sophistication of Scottish highland culture; it was of course as we now know a forgery. Macpherson sought to portray the Celtic highlanders as the ultimate noble savages, well versed in natural philosophy, valiant, free of malice, kind and considerate, but a terror to their enemies. In his non-Ossianic writings, such as his Introduction to the Ancient History of Great Britain and Ireland (1771), Macpherson portrayed the Druids as the people who taught the Celts these qualities. It was Wales, however, which most effectively annexed the Druids. Welsh scholars such as the Morris brothers from Anglesey were anxious to emphasise that the Welsh language provided a direct connection with some of these ancient mysteries, and the title page of the publications of the society they established to promote the study of Welsh literature and history, the Honourable Society of the Cymmrodorion, bore the image of a druid. The most scholarly attempt to identify Wales with the Druids was however the work of Henry Rowlands, the vicar of Llanidan on Anglesey, which sought to prove that Anglesey was the heartland of the Druidic order in Britain, and supplied an extensive account of Druidic rites on Anglesey and the archaeological remains on the island associated with them. Rowlands work was exceptionally influential, underpinning much of Stukeley's research. Rowlands helped establish the Druids as figures especially associated with Wales, and his work can be taken of an example of the Welsh annexing a tradition which had particularly taken root in England - the reverse of the usual practice.

The fascination with the Druids as indigenous bearers of an ancient patriarchal wisdom which was held to be common to all pre-flood races from Ireland to the far East made it almost inevitable that attempts would be made to connect Druids with freemasonry. The most famous embodiment of these early attempts to investigate how far the Druids might lie behind freemasonry was of course William Stukeley himself, who became a freemason in the hope that it might help him discover the secrets of the ancients. Likewise, Jonathan Swift, in an amazing overview of the potential possible links between freemasonry and a thousand and one ancient sects and movements (a kind of primer of almost every subsequent connection which has been claimed for freemasonry) inevitably dragged in the figure of the Druids as the keepers of the ancient flame.

In 1754, the wayward and drunken Anglesey poet Gornowy Owen joined a masonic lodge at Walton near Liverpool. He was a friend of the Morris brothers who took such a prominent part in promoting and preserving Welsh literature in the middle of the eighteenth century. Owen wrote to William Morris describing his new hobby. Part of his letter is very interesting in the way in which it explicitly links freemasonry to the national sentiment in the wake of the Hanoverian succession. Owen wrote:

Here we are (as to nation) Welsh, English, Irish, Scots and Manks, and (as to religion) Protestants and Papists, and (as to politicks) high and low fliers, but all Georgites (within doors at least) and yet, so far are we from national reflections, that the only apellation is brother, and, as I have the honour to be chaplain, I can assure you our form of prayer (which is in Englisdh, as being the common language) is such that no Christian would refuse to join in, of what persuasion soever he should be.

William Morris expressed some doubts about the freemasons, but Owen reassured him, writing back:

There is no point of learning which harms a man so long as he does not abuse it. The Craft would deserve praise were there no other virtue in it than its capacity to keep a secret...But the chief thing that urged me to look into this secret craft was that I fully believed it to be a branch of my old ancestors, the Druids of yore, and I didn't guess badly. But, tut, tut! I nearly forgot who and what I am, and must restrain myself. But possibly you too are one of the privileged fraternity!'.

Owen was an impossible man, but a wonderful poet, and his ideas on epic poetry were to overshadow Welsh literature for alomst a century. But Owen's masonic career also prefigures a lot of other important themes in the development of Welsh culture. The key phrase in Owen's comment about the druids is 'my ancestors of yore'. Owen, as was appropriate to a native of the island of Henry Rowlands, claimed the Druids as specifically Welsh figures and saw any connection between freemasonry and the Druids as a matter which should be of interest to any Welshman. Owen was this for the first time linking druidism, freemasonry and issues of Welsh national identity. This theme was to reemerge forty years later in an astonishing development the results of which transformed Welsh national culture and, it could be claimed, were among the most substantial cultural results of freemasonry in Britain.

In 1792 a letter appeared in The Gentlemans Magazine describing an event on Primrose Hill in London. It read as follows:

Saturday September 21 (1792). This being the day on which the autumnal equinox occurred, some Welsh bards, resident in London, assembled in congress on Primrose Hill, according to ancient usage...The wonted ceremonies were observed. A circle of stones formed, in the middle of which was the Maen Gorsedd, or altar, on which a naked sword being placed, all the Bards assisted to sheathe it. This ceremony was attended with a proclamation, the substance of which was that the Bards of the Island of Britain (for such was their ancient title) were the heralds and ministers of peace...On this occasion the Bards appeared in the insignia of their various orders...The Bardic traditions, and several odes, were recited. Two of the odes were in English; and the first that were ever in the language recited at a congress of Ancient British Bards. This was with an intention to give the English reader an idea of what, though very common in Wales, has never been properly known in England. The Bardic Institution of the Ancient Britains, which is the same as the Druidic, haas been from the earliest times, through all ages, to the present day, retained by the Welsh, and is now exactly the same as it was two thousand years ago.

The author of this letter was our old friend, Edward Williams, Iolo Morganwg, who on this occasion at Primrose Hill pulled off his most daring coup and the feat for which he was most celebrated, the creation of the gorsedd of bards. For, despite the claim that this institution had existed in Wales for two thousand years, and that the English had remained ignorant of it, the gorsedd was an invention of Iolo Morganwg, and dates back no earlier than about 1791. Moreover, a significant component of the origins of the gorsedd lie, through an indireect but interesting path, in freemasonry.

Iolo developed the myth of the Gorsedd in his Poems Lyric and Pastoral, which bore the motto of the Gorsedd, created by Iolo, and still used:

Truth against the World. Iolo described how

.. the bardic, or which is the same thing, the druidic institution originated in Britain, according to Julius Caesar, the ancient Welsh writers, and the traditions still retained by the bards. It is not yet extinct, for we have in Wales a small number still remaining, in an uninterrupted succession from the ancient British bards and druids. A Welsh bard of the present age retains the ancient title of bard, [which is] in English, bard according to the rights and institutes of the bards of the island of Britain. The druidic theology also still remains in Wales, where it was never entirely abolished; yet druidism has been sought for everywhere but in Wales, and the Welsh language, where it is only to be found.

Iolo goes on to describe how the Welsh bards …

.. only meet in open air whilst the sun is above the horizon, where they form a circle of stones, according to the ancient custom; this circle they call the circle of concord or confederation. In these days however it is formed only of a few very small stones, or pebbles, such as may be carried to the spot in oine man’s pocket; but this would not have been deemedd sufficient by those who formed the stupendous bardic circle of Stonehenge’.

Iolo claimed that by the 1770s this order had been reduced to just one person, the poet Edward Evans of Aberdare, and that it was Evans who himself had invested Iolo into the order. On Evans’ death, Iolo had been left as the last surviving representative of this institution which, he claimed, pre-dated Christ. In various publications, he outlined the rules, hierarchies and ceremonies of the gorsedd, which he claimed to have transcribed from an ancient manuscript in Raglan Castle. He described the regalia and costumes to be worn by the different ranks of the order. As he travelled around Wales, he carried the stones to form the circle in his pocket and held meetings of the gorsedd, which frequently aroused great suspicion: on one occasion a gorsedd was dispersed by the militia from the nearby town of Cowbridge. Doubts were expressed about the validity of Iolo’s claims. Critics declared that the whole gorsedd was a fraudulent concoction of modern druidism, cabala and freemasonry (and of course they were right).

Nevertheless, in 1819, old Iolo pulled off a coup. The old institution of the eisteddfod had been taken up by Anglican reformers as a means of preserving Welsh literary culture. A leader in this movement was the Bishop of St Davids, who proposed that the Cambrian Society should publish a comprehensive edition of old Welsh manuscripts and printed books under the supervision of Iolo. The 1819 eisteddfod was held in Carmarthen, and shortly before it began Iolo invested the Bishop into the gorsedd (the ceremony taking place in the graden of the Ivy Bush hotel, which had been the meeting place of the first Welsh masonic lodge in the eighteenth century). The full meeting of the gorsedd took place as part of the eisteddfod, and the two institutions became inextricably linked. Following Iolo’s death, his son Taliesin edited his surviving manuscripts. These transcripts included a great deal of material purporting to elaborate further the ancient institution of the gorsedd. The descent of the gorsedd from the druid bards came to be unquestionably accepted, and control of the gorsedd was seen to be the key to control of the eisteddfod (actually a much older institution). Iolo had in effect given Wales a ready made national tradition which was to be at the heart of Welsh cultural and social development right up to the present day. Although doubts about Iolo’s claims were frequently expressed, it was not until the 1950s that the scholar G. J. Williams systematically demonstrated the extent of Iolo’s fabrications, and showed how Iolo was of interest as much as a social engineer as a literary figure.

On the way, Iolo had fooled a lot of people. In 1907, the astronomer and Director of the Solar Physics Association, Sir Norman Lockyer, gave a lecture in Swansea on the antiquity of the gorsedd. Lockyer had made his reputation by being among the first to propose astronomical connections for Stonehenge and the Pyramids. He declared that ‘in my opinion your Gorsedd in Wales is a thing forty centuries old...It makes the Gorsedd I take it just about the oldest thing that we have on the planet connected with any human activity past or present’. Lockyer based his opinion on an astronomical interpretation of the alignment of the stones of a circle of the gorsedd shown in a manuscript drawn by...why of course, by Iolo Morganwg. Even masonic scholars were taken in. In 1924, J. E. Shum Tuckett, a past master of Quatuor Coronati lodge, published an article on the Welsh Triads. He cited extensively the Reverend John Williams, one of the most gullable of the Welsh readers of Iolo. Tuckett pointed out a line in the Welsh Triads which referred to ‘The Stones of Gwyddon Ganhebon on which were to be read all the Arts and Sciences of the World’. This refers to the preservation of the arts and sciences at the time of the Flood, and in particular to ‘Gwyddon Ganhebon who was the first man in the world to make vocal music; and Hu Gadarn who adapted poetry to the preservation of record and memorials’. Tuckett pointed out that this seemed to bear some similarity to the story in the version of the Old Charges found in the Cooke manuscript of the story of the pillars of Jobelle. It is a very learned article, and Tuckett’s conclusion that the Triads and

Cooke manuscript may both embody ancient legends seem very convincing, until one realises that the section of the Triads to which Tuckett refers was one which was forged by Iolo Morganwg.

Iolo's motives in creating the gorsedd and engaging in this wholesale literary fabrication, which makes Ossian seems puny by comparison, are clear. The ancient Welsh literary tradition was endangered particularly in South Wales by the rising tide of industrialisation, nonconformity and anglicisation. By grafting this further spurious antiquity on the tradition, Iolo hoped to help preserve it. In this he was remarkably successful. He also seems to have been anxious to cock a snoop at the North Welsh, by drawing attention to the claims of the much richer literary tradition of South Wales. Likewise, Iolo was also anxious to draw English attention to the importance of the Welsh cultural heritage. He had strong ideas about the importance of oral tradition, and also wanted to show how antiquity might be found as mujch in the language of the ordinary people as in ancient tomes.

Iolo's motives are clear. More intersting, and difficult, is the question of where he got it all from. Some was doubtless the result of the laudunum he took for his asthma. He delved deeply into the manuscripts and books at the British Museum, and he inscribed the copy of his book of poems which he presented to the museum as 'his only mite of a tribute so justly due to that noble institution the British Museum'. While he was in London, Iolo formed part of the circle of William Blake, and Blake's own mythology may well have influenced Iolo. But the most recurrent charge, made from almost as soon as the gorsedd appeared, was that much of Iolo's mythology was inspired by freemasonry. Certainly, much about the procedure and hierarchies of the gorsedd is very reminiscent of freemasonry, but it is freemasonry where the druidic connection has been made explicit. Iolo always hotly denied he was a freemason himself, though some recent Welsh commentators have claimed that he was indeed one. No firm documentary evidence showing that Iolo was a freemason has yet been traced. However, Iolo was an operative mason. He plied his trade in London and Kent, and set up a masons shop near Cowbridge in the Vale of Glamorgan. The advertisement he issued described how he ..

.. makes all sorts chimney pieces, monuments, tombs, headstones and every other article in the marble and freestonemasonry, in the newest and neatest manner, and on the most reasonable terms.

His poems include a stonecutters song of 1785, written specially for the use of a little select society of journeymen masons at Cowbridge. This club was established to enable these journeymen masons to 'meet weekly to spend a cheerful hour at the moderate, and restricted, expence of fourpence'. The purpose of the song makes the aims of the club clearer. It was not to engage in speculative discussion, but 'to blunt and soften that irritabilability of mind which, from their condition in life, must necessarily often be experienced by those who forms the great majority of mankind, persons that subsist by manual labour, who are not always treated as well as they should be.' The whole tone of Iolo's involvement with operative masonry is of profound respect for the actual craft of stone masonry, and contempt for those who are rich and no nothing about physical work of this kind. It seems that he would have been unsympathetic to the concept of speculative masonry, and this may well account for the fierceness of his denials that he was a mason. It is more likely that the masonic components of the gorsedd - such as the use of ritual initiation, secret oaths and carefully prescribed degrees expressed by costumes and regalia - derived from an intermediary. This intermediary was probably the Ancient Order of Druids. The Ancient Order of Druids was founded in 1781 at the Kings Arms Tavern in Poland Street in London. The founder was, according to the traditions of the order, a man named Hurle. It has been suggested that he was Henry Hurle, a builder and surveyor of Garlick Hill, but this cannot be substantiated. The order self-consciously saw itself as a revival of the Druids and it was declared that, in establishing a grand lodge, the aim was to preserve information about the druidic community and promote the practice of those fraternal precepts which had distinguished it. The introduction of profane, political or immoral talk was forbidden - when Charles James Fox made a political speech on his admission to Lodge No. 3 in 1784, he was shouted down. The ritual is heavily based on freemasonry, with further specious druidic symbolism thrown in; likewise in the titles used for offices, grand archs and vice archs jostle with bards. The order operated a royal arch chapter. The kind of mixture of druid and masonic symbolism is evident from a description of a druid apron supplied by the Grand Secretary of the Order in 1932.

The All-Seeing Eye represents God or the Great Archdruid of the Universal...the "pavement" is made up of triangles and the archway will probably represent one of the trilithons as seen at Stonehenge; the scales represent justice; the Sun was looked upon by the Druids as the source of lighht and life, ..

The Ancient Order of Druids became very popular. It seems that Past Grand Arch Hurle was particularly active in promoting the order, opening three lodges in Bristol and Bath in 1789 and 1790. From the West Country, the Druids spread to Wales, becoming particularly popular in the 1820s and 1830s. By 1933, the Ancient Order had a million and a half members; it is now virtually defunct in Britain. The Druids seem to have been both more proletarian than the freemasons. They were certainly regarded with more suspicion by the authorities. The Order did not, like the freemasons, enjoy exemption from the 1799 act outlawing societies using oaths. It could only register as a friendly society by abandoning its ritual. Some druid lodges in Essex were prosecuted under the terms of the 1799 act (an offence then carrying the penalty of transportation). These pressures caused progressive splits in the order from 1810 onwards. Nevertheless, the order remained popular and well-known, and would certainly have been known to Iolo Morganwg. His vituperative complaints about Englishmen searching for Druids and ignoring Wales would seem to particularly have had the Ancient Order in mind. Iolo's wideranging scholarship and natural curiosity doubtless led him to penetrate deeply into the mysteries of freemasonry. Nevertheless, the specific conjunction of druidism and freemasonry, and the inspiration in creating an order which amalgamated masonic, druidic and other components, seems to have come to Iolo from the Ancient Order.

I think I've certainly said enough to indicate the complexity of the cross-currents by which traditions and myths are created, but there is an interesting little coda. In 1836, the Reverend D James, curate of Almondbury in Yorkshire, published a book called the Patriarchal Religion of Britain or a Complete Manual of Ancient British Druidism, dedicated to the Ancient Order of Druids in the West Riding of York. The dedication described how the revived order of druids was devoted to preserving information about the ancient druids, and ‘to the cultivation of those social and moral virtues which distinguished the original institution’. James attempted to provide a comprehensive review of information about the ancient druids, and he had no doubt where it could be found: in Wales.

Druidism was not forgotten, but looked on with disgust. All this time a vast treasure of original records on the subject lay undisturbed in various parts of the Principality, covered with the dust of ages and suffering woefully from the ravages of time. The ancient British Druids and Bards had committed their traditions to writing, at the time they were in danger of being lost through the invasion and persecution of the Romans.

James cites various Welsh scholars in elucidating this forgotten tradition, but the one he cites most extensively is, of course, Iolo Morgannwg. Thus, by a curious twist, the myths of a druidic order created by Iolo and inspired partly by the Ancient Order of Druids, became embodied, by a sort of back formation, in the legendary lore of the druids assembled by the Ancient Order and to which the order continued to refer. Iolo Morganwg's activities provide a kind of fascinating primer of the difficulties and deeceptions that inevitably occur whenever one is studying myth, legend or tradition, and particularly the relationship of freemasonry to those subjects. However, it isn’t enough to consider Iolo in isolation. Part of the great genius of Iolo was the way in which, in creating a distinctive Welsh national tradition, he fused it with broader currents in Britain. The formation of the Ancient Order of Druids and the development of Iolo’s gorsedd were to some extent inspired by theories based on emergent ideas of philology and archaeology put forward by writers such as John Cleland and William Borlase. These in turn influenced Thomas Paine, a friend of Iolo, who, in developing his ideas that christianity was a blasphemous distortion of an ancient deist religion of the sun, argued that freemasonry was an underground survivor of that old druidic religion. These ideas were taken up a greater length by the Yorkshire radical writer and pioneer of comparative religion, Godfrey Higgins, who in two heady works, The Celtic Druids and Anacalypsis served up a heady brew of etymology and comparative religion which anticipates almost every new age speculation that has been concocted ever since.

Higgins became a freemason to penetrate its mysteries further and declared that ‘I have no doubt that the masons were druids, culidei or chaldei, and Casidaees. The Chaldeans are traced downward to Scortland and York, and tyhe Masons backwards from this day to meet the Culidei at York...

The ideas of both Paine and Higgins were to be popularised by Richard Carlile, most famous for his battles to establish the freedom of the press. Carlile published an immensely influential Manual of Freemasonry, which not only contained a comprehensive collection of masonic rituals but also sought to portray freemasonry as the remnant of the original true religion. There is a direct connection from Carlile to the atheist MP, Charles Bradlaugh, who also became a freemason (resigning in protest at the appoiintment of the Prince of Wales as Grand Master) and thus to Bradlaugh's close associate Annie Besant, who, in the theosophist phase of her life, introduced co-masonry to England.

Iolo Morgannwg’s gorsedd, which was to be held ‘in the face of the sun and the eye of light’, stands in radical tradition stretching from Paine to Besant and beyond which sees the druids as the custodians of the ancient religion of the sun and freemasons as their much debased descendants. This is a thread of continuity within British radicalism which has been largely forgotten and ignored. It is features like this which are the really interesting things about myths and traditions. Iolo Morgannwg wrote at one stage that,

Truth was held so sacred by the ancient British bards and druids, that they would never admit into their poetical compositions anything whatever of a fictitious nature; their fundamental maxim was to search for the truth, and to adhere to it, with the most rigid severity.

This might seem to offer a very good motto for the historian, and it might be suggested that the business of the historian is also to search for the truth, and to ignore the way in which men like Iolo built their fictitious castles in the air. However it is watching how these castles in the air are built, how they deceive others and in turn encourage them to build yet more castles in the air, which is at the heart of historical study.

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