

CHAPTER XIII.

DRUIDISM.

Druidism not a Religion—Of Belgic Origin—Its Headquarters in Britain—Its Educational Syllabus—The Three Orders—Kano—Caesar's Estimate of Druidism—Prof. Lloyd's Views—Derivation of 'Druid'—'Drycraeft' and 'Circolcraeft'—Stone Circles as associated with Druidism.

About Druidism there has been written so much nonsense that even Science has of late become afraid to

approach the subject,¹ and the mere mention of it mostly excites only mistrust. There are, however, two totally distinct Druidisms : the one is that of popular imagination, a *farrago* of morbidity and theatricality blended of misunderstandings, misquotations, and unwarrantable assumptions ; the other is that of which Caesar wrote, the system prevalent in Gaul as he knew it. Caesar may now and again have been misled, but no one could justifiably accuse him of a general lack of understanding. He wrote his all too brief notes upon the subject partly from the first-hand observations of eight strenuous years, partly perhaps from the information of his friend Diviciacus the Aeduan, himself apparently a Druid.² If this be so, Diviciacus evidently did not think Caesar a man to be impressed by the morbid, for Caesar lays no stress upon that side of the matter. On the other hand, Diviciacus could scarcely hope to deceive Caesar by any wilful *suppressio veri*. It may be that, as some think, he was concerned to make out the best possible case for his own people, and with that object erred, perhaps, by way of *suggestio falsi*. But again, Caesar was no fool ; he was not more likely to be misled by 'false philosophy' than by the rattling of bones. He thought the matter of sufficient importance to be considered at some length in his *Commentaries*,³ and his account of it may be accepted as substantially correct.

Druidism was not a religion,⁴ but an organisation (*disciplina*) which made of religion a means to political power, a trick familiar to most ancient peoples and to not a few modern ones. Caesar carefully distinguished between the two.⁵ There is no trace of Druidism amongst the Celts of Spain, of Italy, or of Galatia⁶ ; and as the last-named migrated from cis-Rhenish Gaul as late as 280, Druidism must have been of later introduction⁷ in Gaul.

¹ Dr. Borlase could make the same complaint a century and a half ago (*Antiqs. of Cornwall*, preface, p. vi).

² See Cicero, *de Divinatione*, i, 10, where he is spoken of as the companion and fellow-guest of Cicero in the house of a mutual friend. It is clear that he was no barbarian, and there is nothing in Cicero's language to suggest that the Roman augur regarded him as a charlatan.

³ *B.G.* vi, 13-14.

⁴ Fustel de Coulanges, *La Gaule Romaine*, p. 111. But even so early as Lucan's time it had become confused with religion (*Pharsalia*, i, 450).

⁵ The *Commentaries* treat of Druidism in vi, 13-14, of religion in vi, 16-17. So de Coulanges, remarking that the Gaulish religion went on when Druidism was dead.

⁶ Ridgeway, *Early Age of Greece*, i, p. 386.

⁷ *cp.* de Coulanges, *op. cit.* p. 27.

¹ *Germ.* 9.

² *Germ.* 27.

³ *B.G.* vi, 19, 4.

⁴ O. Montelius, *Civilization of Sweden in*

Heathen Times ; Ridgeway, *Early Age of Greece*, i, 536.

⁵ *Germ.* 27. *Sepulchrum caespes erigit.*

⁶ Above, chap. iii.

Even in Caesar's time it seems to have had small influence in Aquitania and the Narbonnaise, and E. Desjardins¹ denies that it ever reached so far. The Aquitani were still predominantly Iberian,² the Narbonnaise had long been under Roman influence. As one went northward it grew always more actual, but was unknown amongst the trans-Rhenane Germans.³ These facts point to an origin amongst the latest of the Germanic invaders, the Belgae; and with this accords the fact that Caesar found the Belgae, and specifically the paramount tribe of the Bellovaci, to be the most stubborn element in the resistance to the Roman arms. Consistent with this view is the choice of Autricum Carnutum as the meeting-place of the annual Grand Assize, for Autricum is in fact, as Caesar was asked to believe, 'pretty well the centre of Gaul,' if the Roman Provincia (Narbonensis) be excluded: it is almost equidistant from the Rhine on the east, from the extremity of Brittany on the west, from the outfall of the Rhine on the north, and from the frontiers of Narbonensis on the south. It is central, therefore, to so much of Gaul as is known to have come under Belgic hegemony, whereas, if it had represented a power co-extensive with Gaul as far as the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees, the site selected would have been 100 miles further southward in the neighbourhood of Bourges. Consistent also is the indisputable fact that, the Belgae once conquered, Druidism as a power disappears from Gaul. It was apparently a purely political organisation, and as purely Belgic in origin. Organisation is to this day a strong point with the Germans, as religion is not. Where Druidism prevailed it had usurped equally the powers of the priests and the prerogatives of kings: there was never a sacrifice without its assistance,⁴ and it monopolised the sovereign prerogative of justice; and it had influence enough to secure immunity both from military service and from taxation.⁵

Caesar was given to understand that it first took shape

¹ *Géographie de la Gaule Romaine*, ii, 519. But Strabo (§ 197) says it was ubiquitous 'more or less' (ᾤοντο πανταχῶς ὡς ἐνταύθα).

² The view that Druidism was of Iberian origin arises from the confusion of Druidism with religion. Celtic religion was perhaps

in great part Iberian, especially in the exaggerated importance attached to death and the dead. Druidism was not Iberian.

³ *B.G.* vi, 21, 1.

⁴ Strabo, § 198.

⁵ *B.G.* vi, 14, 1.

in Britain.¹ He was in a position to know the truth, and there is no evidence to contradict him. It arose, therefore, amongst the Belgae of southern Britain, and there in its isolation it continued to flourish while in Gaul it lost ground before Roman influence. When Gaul was conquered British Druidism remained to nurse the spirit of contumacy until (A.D. 43) Claudius undertook the conquest of the island expressly to break the system.² Falling back to Anglesey, it was there wiped out by Suetonius Paulinus (A.D. 61). Thereafter one hears of it only in the remote north (Aberdeenshire) and in Ireland. In Pictish Aberdeenshire it seems to have been well organised, if not of far-reaching power, as also amongst the Firbolgs of Tara; but in neither area did it ever become really great. The Goidelic and Iberian peoples did not readily submit to it.

In Caesar's time its headquarters were certainly in Britain—in what precise part of Britain we are not told—for the disciples of the system mostly went from Gaul thither to be trained for their work. These disciples were numerous. The education was entirely oral, the system setting its face against books, partly as likely to divulge esoteric doctrines, partly as being destructive to the memory.³ Of the educational syllabus we have only a sketch that is tantalising in its vagueness. It taught the immortality of the soul,⁴ the doctrine of transmigration, a good deal of astronomy, geodesy⁵ and physics,⁶ and, of course, theology, poetry and music. As the Druids had usurped the judiciary, the curriculum must have included also law and jurisprudence. Augury and divination were

¹ *B.G.* vi, 13, 11.

² So W. T. Arnold, *Roman Provincial Administration* (Oxford, 1906), p. 152, who speaks of Claudius as 'persecuting' Druidism because of its 'political significance,' and refers to Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.

³ The former was the real reason. Druidism took up the same position as the Athenian and Roman oligarchies when they refused to have the law put into writing, and as the Roman Catholic Church when it forbade the rendering of the Scriptures into the vernacular: cp. Willis Bund, *Celtic Church of Wales*, p. 121. The same secretiveness is illustrated by the ignorance of the Gauls about Britain (*B.G.* iv, 20, 2-4).

⁴ So say Strabo, Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Lucan, and Pomponius Mela.

⁵ Caesar, *Bell. Gall.* vi, 14, 6, *de mundi ac terrarum magnitudine*. So Pomponius Mela, ii, 2. This certainly does not mean geography. Geodesy is defined as 'that part of geometry and trigonometry which applies to the measuring of whole countries or very large tracts of land, and to the admeasurement of a degree of the meridian.' Caesar, perhaps, meant to suggest that the druidical astronomy was chiefly applied astronomy, and that they made a special study of land-surveying. As has been seen, there is evidence to bear this out.

⁶ Caesar (*loc. cit.*) *de rerum natura*. The precise meaning is again doubtful. Cicero (*de Divin.* i, 10) says of the Druid Diviciacus that *naturae rationem, quam physiologiam Graeci appellant, notam esse sibi profitebatur*.

likewise taught : Cicero says¹ that Diviciacus claimed the power to foretell the future, and Pliny says² that the Druids were 'so much given over to magic that they might well pass for the teachers of the Persian *magi*.'

There were three orders in the druidical hierarchy. Of these the Bards were concerned only with production ; they were 'composers—particularly composers of hymns, *ὑμνηταὶ καὶ ποιηταί*.³ The Vates were the officiating priesthood (*ἱεροποιοί*) and also masters of physics. The fully-qualified Druids added to physics the study of moral philosophy, and acted as judges. So says Strabo,⁴ and the statement is in no wise unreasonable. The system, it would seem, was the forerunner, if not the direct ancestor, of the present-day system of graduation in law, theology, medicine, science and letters.

The educational system of druidism was as thoroughly organised as the administrative and the political system. That numbers of young Gauls, many of them of high birth, flocked to Britain to study—they were the university men of their day, and their education was sometimes a matter of some 20 years—implies necessarily the existence of systematic schools, with all the needful concomitants. Druidism must have had its equivalents for professors, lectures, class-rooms, courses, examinations and degrees. The students must have required lodgings also, and if their numbers were really so large, this means that each educational centre was a community in itself, a 'college.'⁵ The druidical educational system must have been something very closely resembling monasticism, that is, the form of monasticism which became presently so remarkable a feature in the early Christianity of Ireland and Wales. In fact, wherever Druidism was established, there appeared in succession thereto the Celtic form of monasticism.⁶

¹ *de Divin.* i, 10.

² *Nat. Hist.* xxx, 1.

³ Tacitus, *Germ.* 3, mentions a form of battle-chanting called *barditus*, which must be related to the term 'Bard.'

⁴ § 197. Pre-eminence in 'justice' seems to have been the Druid's practical ideal.

⁵ Ammianus quotes Timagenes as saying that the Druids lived in confraternities like those of the Pythagoreans. Pomponius Mela adds that they carried on their educational

work 'in caves or in secluded groves.' In a rainy and cold climate such rudimentary shelter was distinctly desirable.

⁶ Baring Gould in *Arch. Camb.* 5th ser. xvii (1900). One very prominent feature of early Celtic Christianity was the 'mixed' monastery of monks and nuns, and another was the persistence of marriage among the clergy. The latter held its ground in England until the very eve of the Reformation, after which event it was at once re-established—only

Those who question the likelihood of the coexistence of any such intellectual activity with an otherwise backward and even barbarous civilisation, may find parallels in history both ancient and modern. One is that provided by the Ireland of the sixth to ninth centuries, when a people, who in morals and economy were unqualified savages, carried to an amazing height letters and certain of the applied arts. The other is furnished by West Africa : when the first white entered the Fulah city of Kano in Nigeria towards the close of the nineteenth century, he found a naked black professor in his class-room expounding to a throng of naked black pupils the philosophy of Aristotle.

Caesar, himself an augur and Pontifex Maximus, might have been expected to be the first to sneer at the quackeries of rival diviners, but in fact he speaks of Druidism with respect only, and like Cicero, who was also an augur, he counted the Druid Diviciacus amongst his personal friends. Of its alleged barbarities he says never a word. As a politician he admired its amazing political efficiency, and it appealed to him also as an aristocrat and as a man of extraordinary intellectual powers. If he does not frequently mention it in his narrative of the conquest of Gaul that is because it was no part of the normal Gallic polity, as were 'senate,' 'people,' and *rex*, but an adventitious growth. It was a larger and infinitely more powerful form of those political clubs which were familiar in old Greece and in old Rome. Like those it owed much of its power to its secrecy, but the more real sources of its strength were two-fold : it admitted only picked men, and it educated them most thoroughly. Probably there was never so thorough a system, even in the greatest days of Roman Catholic supremacy, and the fall of Druidism was in its day an event as cataclysmic as the dissolution of the monasteries.

To hold with Professor Lloyd¹ that Roman imagination was chiefly impressed by the grim theatricalities of the Druidism of vulgar imagination is impossible : the Romans were not the men to be impressed by human sacrifices, things by no means unknown in their own history. The

one of many points in which the Anglican has reverted to its true ancestor the Celtic Church. Irish Druids were allowed to marry, although we do not hear much of

female Druids. The women-priests of Sena (Strabo, § 198) are not styled 'druidesses.'

¹ *Hist. Wales*, i, pp. 42-46.

cause of attraction must have been something different, and nothing is more likely than that it was primarily the complete organisation and consequent political power of Druidism. Nor can one well agree with Professor Lloyd that 'Druidism represents, not the high-water mark of early British civilisation, but a survival from the less civilised past'¹; and when he contrasts² 'the enlightened and philosophical form of Druidism' described by Caesar, with the 'true and unadulterated' variety as presented by Tacitus.³ The Druidism of the refugees in Mona can scarcely have been more like Druidism at its best than was that which Caesar described in the days of its power a century earlier.

Mention has been made (p. 305) of Maximus Tyrius' assertion that the oak-tree was the Celtic symbol of Zeus, as it was also a Roman symbol of Jupiter.⁴ There is no question that the Celts regarded the tree with veneration: Pliny gives⁵ at some length details of the ceremony of cutting the mistletoe-bough from the parent oak, and Strabo mentions⁶ the 'Field of Oaks,' Drynemetus, which was the meeting-place of the Asiatic Gauls. Sir Arthur Evans was at one time prepared to believe that a sacred oak was the central object within the *limes* of Stonehenge. The matter bears upon the vexed question of the origin of the name of Druid. The modern view, which works exclusively upon the principle *placet difficillima lectio*, would explain the word as meaning 'exceeding wise, learned men,'⁷ yet in view of the admitted prominence of the oak-tree in Celtic ritual, it would be sheer affectation to brush aside the suggestion of any connexion between *Druid* and *derw*, 'oak.' Sir John Rhys accepted it,⁸ H. Munro Chadwick approves it,⁹ and Macbain flatly says¹⁰ that the derivation of *druid* from *derw* is still 'the only one worth consideration.' Probably the confusion

¹ *ibid.* p. 46.

² *ibid.* p. 44.

³ *Annals*, xiv, 30.

⁴ Plutarch, *Romulus*: cp. Vergil, *Georg.* iii, 332, *magna Iovis antiquo robore quercus*, and in Achean Greece the famous oaks of Dodona.

⁵ *Hist. Nat.* xii, v. 1.

⁶ § 567.

⁷ Whitley Stokes connected 'druid' with Welsh *dryw* 'wren'—one of the augural birds of Celtism—and these with the German *treu*, Eng. 'true.' Thus 'druid' would mean 'man of truth,' a meaning quite accordant with their claim to be above all 'seekers after justice.'

⁸ *Lectures*, p. 221.

⁹ *Journal Anthropol. Inst.* 1900, p. 34.

¹⁰ *Celtic Mythology*, p. 154.

between the two is almost as old as Druidism itself, even if the correct derivation be other.¹ It is not a matter which in the least affects the argument of this book, but it is pertinent to remark that the thing which we call popular etymology is not peculiar to modern times, and that, therefore, it is in the highest degree likely that the confusion between 'wise man' and 'man of the oak-tree' may go back to a very remote period indeed. It may be that philology is correct in asserting that *Druid* really means 'wise man,' but it may be equally true that as early as the days of Pliny the mass of even the Celts themselves had come to find another meaning in the name. Popular etymology being still so active in these days of universal education, it is absurd to pretend that it was not active in the days when Druidism kept knowledge strictly to itself.²

As St. Columba, so late as the sixth century, could still call the Almighty 'my Druid,' that is, my wonder-worker, it is plain that no derogatory sense as yet attached to the word; and if in subsequent times it came to bear a wholly bad sense, such was the necessary consequence of the identification of Druidism with paganism, and with knowledge and powers not to be commanded by common men. It is the fate of those whose intelligence is in advance of their times that less intelligent folk should associate them with the Devil and black magic, this being, in fact, the highest tribute that ignorance can pay to knowledge. In this perverted form the memory of the intellectual abilities of the Druids lingered on for centuries amongst the Saxons, and *dry-craeft* is found not merely in the *Orosius* of the enlightened Alfred, but even three centuries later in the Saxon *Exodus*³ (*circa* 1250).

Caesar is witness that in the last days of Gallic paganism

¹ E. C. Quiggin in *Encycl. Britann.* asserts that no ancient form of the word for *Druid* is known in Welsh, and that the Welsh *derwydd* and *dryw*, Breton *drouiz* and *druez*, are 'all probably of modern coinage.' Prof. Lloyd (*Hist. Wales*, i, 42) declares that no connexion can be established with *derwa*, the Celtic original of *derw* 'oak,' or its congeners *dari*, *darik*, *daru*, of the same meaning. How the sacred tree and the sacred stones might be associated in one *limes* is sufficiently indicated by the story (Rhys, *Lectures*, p. 191) of Diarmait's

coming to 'a great tree, laden with fruit, over-topping all the other trees of the plain. It was surrounded at a little distance by a circle of pillar-stones, and one stone, taller than the others, stood in the centre near the tree.'

² 'Modern linguistic research,' writes Sir W. Ridgeway, 'has too often worked much mischief to historical enquiries' (*Early Age of Greece*, i, 352).

³ vii, 11, rendering the 'enchantments' of the Egyptian priests.

the Druids controlled the moot ; and as the moot itself was frequently a stone circle, it was inevitable that folk-memory should associate the two. In this way *circol-craeft* might come to be a synonym for *dry-craeft*.

The ultimate virtue aimed at by the druidical *disciplina* was justice. The Druids were the justices of their time. As nothing was done without their intervention they must have been accessible. Further, as the one immemorial court of justice was the moot, the Druids must have been as ubiquitous as the moot, and there must have been Druids in every community where the system was prevalent ; for every community of necessity had its own moot. The moot was also the scene of all communal ritual, and the Druids had usurped the position of the priests, making profit of that superstition to which 'all the Celtic peoples were given over.' We have learnt what was the form of the moot, and may therefore recognise in the constant attribution of the stone circles to the Druids a genuine folk-memory that the stone circles were moots.¹ As the other evidence has led to precisely the same conclusion, one may believe the conclusion to be correct. If tradition does not so consistently associate the Druids with other forms of the moot, with the *circus* and the mound-moot, the reason is that these are not as a rule so striking as are the gaunt stones of the great circles. As other forms attract little notice now, so probably they mostly went unnoticed in earlier times, and in any case they were not, as were the stone circles, the characteristic moots of the Belgic tribes from whom Druidism came.