

# The Sacred World of the Celts

Nigel Pennick's new book

BY GEORGE FRANKLIN

[Nigel Pennick's new book offers a rich survey of Celtic history and traditions. In this article, *Reclaiming Quarterly* shares some of the insights of the book which are of especial interest to readers from our community.]

Everyone whose family roots lie in central, western, and northwestern Europe has a Celtic lineage. The oldest traces of the Celtic people date from about 3000 years ago, in areas now part of southern Germany, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary.

During the Classical era of ancient Greece and Rome (c. 400 B.C.E. to c. 200 C.E.), Celtic culture predominated north of the Alps. The Roman name for France, "Gaul," comes from the same root as the word "Celt," which itself is of Greek origin, and may have meant "Warrior."

The Romans described the Celts as having fair skin, blue eyes, and light-colored hair. But the Celts do not appear to have been a racially homogeneous group. Nor did they ever form a single political empire. Each tribe, despite sharing a common cultural heritage, had its own traditions, as well as its special gods and goddesses.

Pressure from the Romans, the Northern Germanic tribes, and nomadic peoples moving westward from the Asian steppes forced some Celtic tribes into western France and, particularly after about 100 B.C.E., into

the British Isles and Ireland, where Celtic culture has survived to the present time.

## Celtic Society

Celtic society, while not based on a rigid caste system, contributed to the stratified social structures that became typical of the European Middle Ages. Social boundaries were somewhat fluid, but in general, men and women lived

peasants of eastern Europe.

The nobility controlled most of the wealth and power of Celtic society. This class claimed ownership of the land, and from their ranks came both military and spiritual leadership.

Each tribe or clan in Celtic society seems to have had two supreme leaders. One was the king, or warlord. The power of the king varied, but in general, the kings depended on the support of a formal or informal council of nobles.

Celtic society functioned as an oligarchy, not a centralized monarchy.

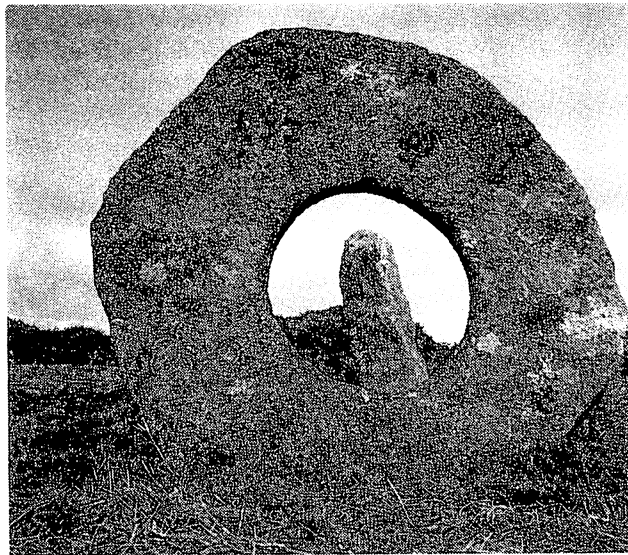
The second leader (as described by later sources, at least) was the "arch-Druid," the high priest at the top of the religious hierarchy.

## BARDS, VATES & DRUIDS

According to the Roman author Strabo, three non-military groups within Celtic Society were held in special honor: Bards, Vates, and Druids.

Bards were the singer-poets of the Celts. In an era when literacy was a rare skill, these men passed on the history and traditions of their people. A gold or silver branch was the symbol of the Bard. The branch was said to create a special sound, which carried the listener into the otherworld. The epic songs of the Celtic Bards helped lay the foundation for the development of European literature of the Middle Ages.

Vates were soothsayers and natural philosophers. Celtic religion was nature-venerating and polytheistic. It recognized many levels of supernatural beings, female as well as male. The Vates, whose abilities came more from a special "calling" than from formal training, were channels through which the natural/supernatural world made itself manifest to humans. Vates watched the flight of birds, studied the



their lives within the social class to which they were born.

Prior to about 1000 C.E., Celtic society (and Europe in general) had no real "middle class," no class whose fortunes were built on trade or manufacturing. The commoners were peasant farmers and/or small craftspeople. They were forced to pay tribute to the nobility, but were not degraded into serfdom (i.e., seen as the property of the lords) as were the

## GRAPHICS

page 40, center: *The Men-an-Tol stones in Cornwall, England. Images Color Library.*

page 41, top: *Willows on the Cam, painted by Charles Butler. Fine Art Photographic Library.*

page 41, lower: *Dramatic re-creation of a Celtic ceremony within a megalithic stone circle such as Stonehenge. Cameron Collection.*

Thanks for feedback from Doug Orton, Reya, Gwydion, John Fox, Mary Klein, and Elka Eastly.

patterns of clouds and flowing water, and cast stones and specially-carved sticks. From such omens, the Vates advised the Druids and nobility in their decisions.

Druids were generally drawn from the aristocratic class. Druids were responsible for public and private ritual, and for the judging of criminal and civil cases for the tribe. They represented the literate elite of Celtic society. Their training consisted largely of memorizing tens of thousands of verses of ancient teachings. This rigorous education covered cosmology, astronomy, theology, and physics.

### Celtic Spirituality & Mythology

There are no known written records of ancient Celtic legend and myth. Our knowledge comes from surviving artifacts, often gleaned from burial sites, and from later (Roman and Christian-era) written accounts. Any modern interpretations must be taken with this caution.

In the Aenid, the Roman-Celtic writer Virgil describes how the woods "were first the seat of sylvan powers, of nymphs and fauns, and savage men who took their birth from trunks of trees and stubborn oaks." Other Celtic sources state that the first woman came from a Rowan tree, and the first man from an Alder. The Druids venerated the native trees of Britain and Ireland, ascribing different virtues (magical and physical)

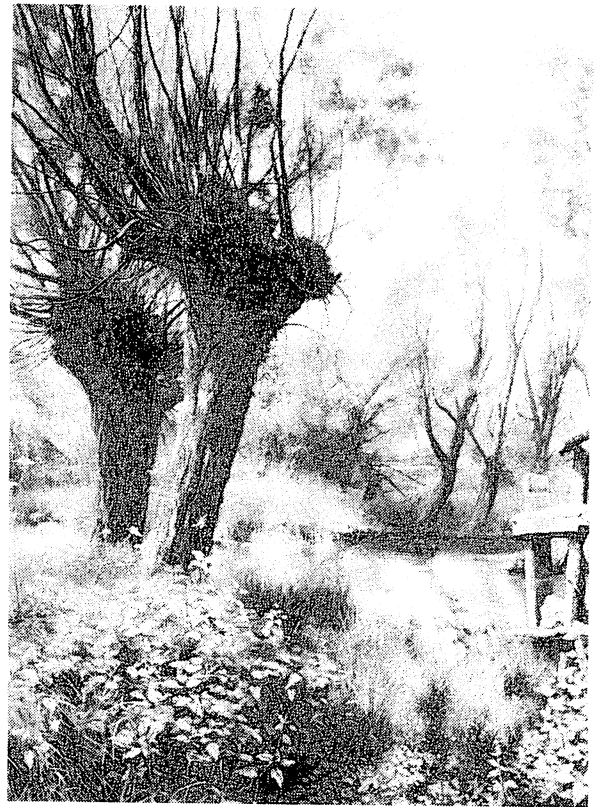
to each species.

For example, willow, used in basket-weaving, symbolizes flexibility and speedy growth. The birch tree, whose twigs are used in broom-making, represents purification. The birch is the customary tree for Maypoles and Yule logs.

The qualities and wisdom of the various trees were eventually formalized into the mystical tree-alphabet known as Ogham, which has been used ever since in divination, sacred teaching, and magic.

Celtic religion honored the tree as a symbol of the cosmic axis. The tree's roots are in the underworld, its trunk exists in this world, and its branches reach to the heavens. The Maypole, with its circular garlands, is another symbol of the cosmic axis.

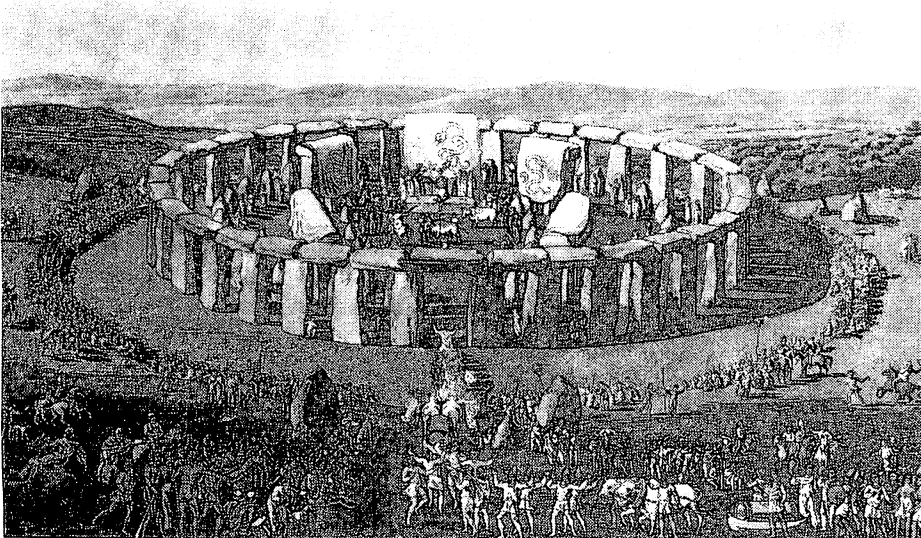
The Celts (like many ancient peoples) recognized five elements. Four can be interpreted as Earth, Air, Fire and Water. The fifth, "nwyvre," is described by a Medieval Welsh text as comprising "every life and motion, every spirit, every soul of man, and from its union with the other elements, other living beings."



Celtic lore acknowledges spirits within the Earth and all living things. In pre-Christian times, these spirits were worshiped as local goddesses and gods. The poet W.B. Yeats said that when the worship of these pagan deities was no longer allowed, they were transmuted into the faery realm, and are most apt to appear to humans on feast days such as Beltane or Samhain.

An important element of Celtic legend is the interplay between the world of humans and the spirit world, the seen and the unseen. The Ballad of Tam Lin (used in the rituals at Reclaiming Witchcamps in 1996 and 1997), and the story of Thomas the Rhymer (see Reclaiming Newsletter, issue #66) tell of meetings between humans and the spirit world, and the lessons to be gained from such encounters.

Druids, Vates and Bards were responsible for conveying and mediating their culture's interactions between the spiritual and the mundane. Central to Druidic teaching was the idea of the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation. At death, the body was buried under a mound, from which the soul passed from the world of the living



*continued on page 49*

