

Early Celtic Scholarship and the Romantic Celt: Charles Squire, The Mythology of the British Islands: An Introduction to Celtic Myth, Legend, Poetry and Romance (1905)

Juliette Wood
Cardiff University

Charles Squire's often republished introduction to the mythical and legendary traditions of the Gaelic and British Celts retells the stories associated with important figures of Celtic tradition. Tales from Gaelic tradition include the fight for the Bull of Cooley between Cuchulain and the heroes of Ulster against Queen Maeve of Connaught, the magical adventures of Finn macCool and the Fenians, and the tragic love of Diarmuid and Grainne. From British tradition come the stories of the Welsh *Mabinogion*, and the adventures of King Arthur and his Knights. In the last century, these tales influenced W.B Yeats, Lord Dunsany and J.R.R. Tolkien and today, amidst yet another revival of interest in Celtic myth and legend, readers are again drawing inspiration from Celtic narratives.

Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Charles Squire described his introduction to Celtic mythology as 'the only attempt yet made to put the English reader into possession, in clear, compact, and what it is hoped may prove agreeable form, of the mythical, legendary and poetic traditions of the earliest inhabitants of our islands who have left us written records - the Gaelic and the British Celts'. The needs of readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century have not changed much, and a popular introduction to the subject of Celtic mythology is a very desirable resource. In some ways, Squire's book still fulfils the criteria he himself established. His summaries of Irish, Scottish and Welsh tales are still readable, although the translations are outdated. The comparatively few references to Manx, Breton and Cornish material reflect the relative scarcity of medieval material in these languages. Theoretical material is drawn principally from d'Arbois de Jubainville, John Rhys and Alfred Nutt, but Squire's clear and precise use of what he calls 'his authorities' makes the task of updating the theory for the modern reader much easier.

At the time Squire compiled his guide to mythology, interest in Celtic cultures was high. Thanks to the publishing house of David Nutt & Co, newly collected folktale material and well-edited texts were becoming more readily available, and the noted Welsh scholar, John Rhys had been appointed to the first chair of Celtic at Oxford. The foundation laid by scholars on whom Squire based his book at the turn of the last century has enabled the subject to move forward although many of these early assumptions need revision. A fundamental assumption at the time was that medieval tales and folktales were the remnants of a decaying mythology, but that new and innovative techniques from the disciplines of anthropology and folklore could strip away subsequent accretions and reconstruct ancient myths. One consequence of this approach was that the creative input of later redactors, such as the writers of the Arthurian romances, was given little attention,

and the efforts of monastic writers was seen to be an attempt to rationalise or otherwise diffuse earlier pagan material. This progressive and rationalistic approach has given way to a more complex view of the relationship between myth and later narrative tradition. In consequence many of the earlier chapters in Squire's book, while important in the history of the discipline, are now of little use to a modern reader. The general approach to mythology focuses on a pantheon of gods with Greco-Roman parallels. We are thus presented with a Celtic sun-god (Lugh/Lleu), a Celtic god of love (Aenghus), and a Celtic Achilles (Cuchulain). The result is an often procrustean attempt to get one system to fit the other. We no longer think in terms of pan-celtic religion or mythology, and assumptions that druidism was the state religion of the Celtic race or that there was a Celtic solar cult based at Stonehenge have drifted to the popular and non-academic fringe of the discipline. Equally folklorists no longer see modern day practices such as corn-dollies, bonfires etc. as the survivals of an orgiastic nature religion. The treatment of the Arthurian material is perhaps the most contentious section of the book. Squire follows John Rhys in seeing Arthur and his knights as the remnants of Celtic gods. Even for its day, the view that Merlin was a Celtic sun-god with a cult centred at Stonehenge was idiosyncratic. More than any other area of Celtic studies, the approach to Arthurian literature has changed, and current work stresses the pseudo-historical nature of the character. However there are certain similarities between Arthur and the stories of Finn and the *fianna*, and Rhys's approach, despite its shortcomings, balances out the rather fruitless searches for a historical Arthur.

Squire talks quite confidently of a 'scientifically established' theory that two distinct racial stocks colonised the British Islands before the Roman period. One was the small dark-haired, dark-eyed and long skulled Iberian stock who built what we now call megalithic monuments, and had a distinctive language. The tall, fair, light-eyed and broad-headed Celts, on the other hand, spoke an Indo-European (here called Aryan) language, and consisted of two branches; Gaels (or Goidels) and Britons (or Brythons). The Goidels had a more primitive Celtic religion and culture and conquered the Iberian natives then occupying the British Isles. The Brythons, with a more developed religion and mythology, followed them. Thus, the invading Romans found Brythons (modern day Welsh and Cornish) in possession of the south and west, Goidels (modern day speakers of Irish, Manx and Scots Gaelic) in possession of Scotland and Ireland, and Picts (a hybrid Iberian and Goidelic peoples) in the far north. A century after Squire's book, the issue of language and its relationship to culture is still contentious, especially in regards to the use of the concept 'celtic'. No one disagrees that Irish, Manx, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, Breton and Cornish, the six remaining Celtic languages, share a vocabulary and a grammatical structure which was related to languages spoken on the Continent (such as Gaulish) at the time of Greek and Roman expansion. However, the way these languages developed, the exact point at which they became independent of one another, the relationship between language and other aspects of culture, and, most crucially, the genetic and cultural make-up of modern day speakers is far from settled.

There is, however, a degree of consensus among scholars that peoples with broadly similar traditions of art, culture and language dominated large areas of Europe

over two thousand years ago. The Greeks and Romans used the terms *keltoi* or *celtae* (among others), and their rich material culture enables us to understand their pivotal role in the emergence of Europe. Archaeological evidence suggests that, rather than a unified civilisation with a distinct ethnic identity, they formed a complex and varied group of societies, ranging from loose federations to small, tightly knit tribal units. Social and religious practices differed widely, but classical sources, coloured by the inevitable distortions of outside observation, created a picture of a coherent Celtic world dominated by a warrior elite and a highly crafted art which remains to this day at least in the popular image of the Celt. The Renaissance rediscovered the Celts through such sources and saw, not warriors or master craftsmen, but a people with similar languages and a philosophy of life. The nineteenth-century romantics viewed them as poets and mystics with unbounded imagination and a unique form of Christianity.

Between 800 and 300 b.c.e, various groups with an iron-based metal economy expanded to include central Turkey through the Balkans and Bohemia, parts of Italy, Spain, Portugal, southern Germany and France and eventually Britain and Ireland. However, during the third century b.c.e., the autonomous tribes of the Celtic world found themselves sandwiched between northern Germanic people and the expanding Roman Empire. No single set of cultural characteristics, much less psychological or spiritual ones, can adequately describe Celtic civilisation. Each society developed in response to differing historical and geographical circumstances. Warrior elites or princely aristocracies dominated some groups, while others formed hybrid cultures with local ethnic groups. In some areas, they depended primarily on trade, in others the main activity was farming or stock breeding. These gifted people, whose descendants still cling to the fringes of Western Europe, have excited the imagination of countless observers. However, our knowledge of them comes from archaeology and classical sources, and from the tales and poetry of medieval literature and must be used with caution. The earliest cultures with features we have come to think of as Celtic appeared in central Europe about 800 b.c.e. The newly-founded Greek trading port of Marseilles commanded the Rhone River and provided access to the classical world. Rich tombs, full of native and imported goods, fortified sites, and the existence of salt mines suggest a princely ruling class whose power depended on trade. About the fifth century b.c.e., the focus of power shifted southeast to an area stretching from France to Bohemia in order to exploit the Alpine trade routes to powerful Etruscan centres. This period is characterised by a particular form of artwork, named for the Swiss site of La Tène which spread into every area of Celtic influence. The La Tène phase marked the maximum extension of Celtic civilisation. In 390 b.c.e. Rome was sacked by La Celts whom the Romans called *Galli* or Gauls, a name which remained with them. Other groups moved through the Balkans into Greece, perhaps attacking Delphi in 279 b.c.e. The Greeks called these people the *Galatae*, and they eventually created the easternmost Celtic kingdom, Galatia, in central Turkey. Many tribes actively sought the benefits of classical lifestyle and the picture of Celtic/Roman contact is one of absorption as much as conflict.

According to classical tradition, Celts worshipped the forces of nature and did not envisage deities in anthropomorphic terms. Whatever the truth of this, contact with the

classical world encouraged naturalistic depiction of divinities with unmistakable Celtic affinities and this carried through into later literature. Although the existence of a pan-Celtic religion is unlikely, inscriptions from the Roman period and numerous place-names preserve deity names and often link them with classical figures. Such veneration was expressed in local or tribal contexts, and about two-thirds of recorded divine names appear only once. At the beginning of the last century, Lugh was equated with the sun god, and solar religion was considered central to Celtic mythology just as it was in the classical world. However, Caesar claims that Mercury, the inventor of arts and patron of commerce, was paramount among the Gauls. Because of the links with commerce, Mercury is a better parallel for Lugh whose name come from *lugios-oath and who presided over an August harvest festival celebrated at Lyon in Gaul (one of several cities which bear his name). In the Irish tales, the figure Lugh Samhildánach (Lugh who possesses all the arts) also reflects Gaulish mythology and the first of August in Ireland, is marked by a similar festival, Lughnasadh. Gaulish mythology does resonate with insular Irish tradition, but in a manner rather different from the way it was conceived of a century ago. Squire depicted Celtic religion as more organised and formal than current thinking suggests. Deities undoubtedly formed a background to everyday life, and both archaeology and the literary record indicate that ritual practice in Celtic societies lacked a clear distinction between natural and supernatural realms. This implies a precarious balance between sacred and profane in which rituals, offerings and correct behaviour maintained equilibrium between gods and men and harnessed supernatural forces for the benefit of the group. Sanctuaries were sacred spaces separated from the ordinary world, often in natural locations such as springs, groves or lakes. Many divine names refer to specific locations or geographical features, a clear indication of how closely Celtic societies identified with place. Small thank offerings were placed in domestic storage pits, while more elaborate deposits were left in specially dug ritual shafts and in lakes. Votive deposits at sanctuaries included precious objects, such as the magnificent torcs discovered at Snettisham, or small images like the mother-goddess figures deposited at many local shrines. These objects linked the donor to the essence of the place in a concrete way since complex and varied rituals involved the individual in personal contact with the sacred sites dedicated to their gods. This picture of worship is rather different from the idea of druids administering a pan-celtic religion.

Hunting deities whose role acknowledges the economic importance of animals and the ritual nature of the hunt highlight a different relationship to nature. The animal elements in half-human, antlered deities suggest that the forest and its denizens possessed a numinous quality as well as an economic value. Some scholars explain shape-shifting and magical motifs in terms of Celtic beliefs about rebirth and the afterlife, but it is more likely that such deities had a regenerative function. Attributes like fruit and grain imply fecundity, while animals such as snake and deer (who shed their skins and antlers) suggest cycles of growth. The theme of a visit to a Celtic Otherworld may offer some clue to beliefs about the afterlife. In Ireland the most prominent inhabitants of the Otherworld were the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the People of the Goddess Danu, who lived in the Land of Youth (*Tir na nÓg*) or the Land of the Living (*Tir na mBeo*). Storytellers located these mysterious, beautiful countries within the *sidhe* mounds, but they also envisaged idyllic

overseas realms such as *Emhain Abhlach* ('the Region of Apples') or *Magh Meall* ('the Delightful Plain'). Irish tales known as *immrama* described sea voyages to Otherworlds in which small bands of heroes or holy men visited a series of islands where mysterious and symbolic adventures tested their bravery and cleverness. The role of the storyteller is considerably less passive than Squire recognised, and the Celtic narrative tradition is the result of a fusion of many strands rather than a simple process of one system replacing the other.

According to Julius Caesar, the Gauls met each year at the sacred centre of their country. Comparable interest in assemblies exists in early Irish literature which records the names of four seasonal festivals marking important temporal divisions. The summer half began at *Beltainn* ('great fire') on the evening before the beginning of May. In Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man, bonfires were lit at this time well within recent memory. The winter half began on the evening before the first of November, *Samhain* ('end of summer') in Ireland and Scotland, or *Calan Gaeaf* (Winter's Eve) in Wales. *Lughnasa*, the feast of the god Lugh, was celebrated on the first day of August, while *Imbolg* (lactation?) took place at the beginning of February. It was originally dedicated to the goddess Brigid and, later, to her successor St Bridget in Ireland. Seasonal festivals reflected the pastoral as much as the agricultural cycle, and key events in Irish mythology, such as the arrival of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, took place at times when boundaries between the real and supernatural worlds were at their weakest and the *sidhe* mounds, which housed the people of the Otherworld, were open.

In classical opinion, Celtic warriors displayed a bravery bordering on recklessness. The hero-figure possessed a combination of skill and preter-natural bravery. Although archaeology reveals a picture of a complex people who were pastoralists, farmers and keen traders, richly furnished tombs, dating from 800-500 b.c.e, emphasise the influence of a princely and warrior class. Combat provided an arena where personal, tribal and familial alliances could be tested, strengthened and destroyed. The practice of cattle raiding became enshrined in several Irish tales, notably the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. The picture that emerges from such tales is of a society where courage and fighting skill were paramount, but this is not reflected with such clarity in the archaeological record.

Although druids were known only among western Celtic tribes in Gaul and Britain, other Celtic societies may have had similar priestly classes. Classical sources stress that knowledge among Celtic tribes was conserved orally by special groups of professionals who were involved in religious matters, such as divination and prophecy, as well as the supervision of ritual activities and the settling of legal disputes. Druids were required to memorise complex law codes and to give judgements in legal cases. After the decline of Roman power, the learned class was dependent on the patronage of a native aristocracy. In Irish tradition the bard and the *filidh* (poet) took over the role of the druids, although the latter retained an important position in literature. There is ample evidence for a complex system of poets and patrons in Scotland, Wales and Brittany which continued into the seventeenth century in some areas.

An association between water and numinous power is evident at an early period in Europe. Rivers figure prominently in Celtic mythology, and many have a tutelary goddess. Irish tradition recounts the sad tale of Bóinn who gave her name to the river Boyne after she was drowned for interfering with a sacred well. Thermal springs were often the site of healing sanctuaries which offered a combination of medicine and supernatural healing. During the Romano-Celtic period, extensive baths and hostels for pilgrims were constructed at a number of curative sanctuaries dedicated to healer deities. Sulis Minerva presided at Bath, Sequana, the goddess of the Seine, had an important healing shrine at the headwaters of that river. The variety of votive objects indicates the confidence of the devotees at therapeutic shrines, although less prominent, deposits of weapons, together with human and animal sacrifice, may indicate that water deities needed to be propitiated as well. Once again the attitude to water, like so much else about Celtic societies, was characterised by a degree of ambiguity and variation.

Squire described a pantheon of gods within a distinctly Aryan pan-celtic state religion which gave way in the face of Roman political power and Christian religion. He shows us 'what can be gathered of the broken remnants of a mythology as splendid in conception and as brilliant in colour as that of the Greeks'. A better image for the modern reader would be one in which syncretism replaces conflict, and fusion replaces repression and survival. Many of the ideas in this book resonate with modern thinking. Rhys's racial division separated Goidels and Brythons with the result the Gaelic and British narrative traditions are treated separately anticipating the modern comparative linguistic and cultural theories which follow the spirit of Rhys and de Jubainville even if they work on quite different principles. Our knowledge on matters Celtic is still in flux and a century after Charles Squire introductory book, perhaps it is best to repeat the sentiments of the author and hope that readers will find this introduction a 'stepping stone' into these wonderful traditions.

Juliette Wood
Cardiff University