

## Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain

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Adam Stout

Two books on druids in two years, and by the same author! If I were either of Ronald Hutton's publishers I'd be biting my nails over this, but let me reassure them both right at the start that Hutton pulls it off, and in style. The two really do complement each other. So what does *Blood and Mistletoe* have that *The Druids: A History* (1) does not? It is literally more heavyweight, three and a half times the length of its predecessor, which as Hutton explains was 'explicitly written for the popular market' (p. 11). The first book treats its subject thematically, a device that emphasises the variety of different uses to which the druids have been put down the years; *Blood and Mistletoe* reverts to a more traditional chronological treatment which makes it easier to place these often-contradictory usages in proper historical context. Yet Hambleton will be relieved to note that there are still plenty of choice pieces to be found in the first book alone, for instance the lurid and salacious treatment meted out to druidry by 19th-century fantasists. Author and publisher have done their homework: not only are there really are two markets for books on druids, but book one succeeds in whetting the appetite for book two.

Because druidry appears to deal with matters archaeological, the 20th-century heavyweight tomes on druids were written by archaeologists – T. D. Kendrick in the 1920s, Stuart Piggott in the 1960s – whose principle intention was to debunk and to purge prehistory of error. Piggott in particular had little sympathy for people in the present who, as he saw it, pretended to be druids. His book *The Druids*, first published in the fateful year of 1968, sought to stem the rising tide of anti-rationalism by describing modern druidry as 'a compelling magnet for many a psychological misfit and lonely crank'. Much of his book was devoted to disproving the existence of druids in prehistory, and their reappearance at the Renaissance was seen as a slide into confusion, delusion and ultimately unreason.

Hutton does not shirk from dealing with the limited and contradictory evidence for 'original' druids but that is not his focus. It is druidry as a historical phenomenon that interests him; he accepts that druids are essentially modern creatures, products of the renewed interest in the classical ancient world that characterised the incipient nation-states of the early modern period. As such they make what Hutton calls 'a wonderful subject for a student of modernity' (p. 48), and he brings his formidable scholarship and encyclopaedic knowledge of the early-modern centuries to bear, setting the evolution of druidry in its proper historical context for the first time.

Counter-intuitively, it appears that the druids first make their modern appearance in Germany in the 1490s amongst a group of scholars keen to redeem their prehistory from the taint of barbarism inflicted by Caesar and Tacitus. The druids soon became the adopted ancestors of both France and Scotland, but the English were strangely silent in the 16th century. 'There are no druids in Shakespeare', as Hutton points out, suggesting that their popularity amongst England's enemies then counted against them: 'Druidry was not just bad, it was foreign' (pp. 60-1). Hutton's emphasis in later chapters of necessity shifts away from France and Germany but I found myself curious about the later fate of druidry in these countries: a subject for a follow-up, maybe?

Hutton charts the contradictory ideas on druidry that developed during the 17th century, and the crucial linkage between druids and stone monuments of high antiquity that was first made by John Aubrey in the 1660s. He traces the famous image of the Wicker Man, in which the druids' unfortunate human sacrifices were incarcerated, to a drawing made for the lawyer Aylett Sammes' peculiar publication of 1676, *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata*. The figure bears a striking similarity to Hobbes' famous frontispiece to *Leviathan* published twenty-five years earlier, in which a giant made up of human bodies represents the State. To Sammes, druidic power, unlike the fragmented power of little kings and chiefs, was 'universal over the whole island ... their power and interest was infinitely the greater' and they were led by an annually-elected 'primate'. Is it possible that Sammes was satirising Hobbes' very familiar image? Is the Wicker Man *Leviathan's* demonic alter-ego?

Hutton is very good on the blossoming of the druidic idea in the late 18th century, a by-blow both of the Romantic movement and of a growing interest in the world BC. By 1790, druids and their purported monuments 'were virtually everywhere. They loomed out of books, strutted in plays, and peered through shrubbery' (p. 124). The role of William Stukeley is emphasised but also contextualised: the Church of England druid whose fine drawings of Avebury and Stonehenge have led him to be considered as the forerunner of modern archaeology shares the spotlight with William Borlase, the Cornish antiquary, and John Wood, the builder of Bath, whose druidic speculations underpin the layout of The Circus, the circular range of stately houses he erected on druidic principles in the heart of the city, which Hutton suggests 'may, in fact, be the first stone temple ever built in the name of Druidry' (p. 107).

There is a whole chapter on Iolo Morganwg, the Welsh stonemason-polyglot whose pursuit of an adequate foundation-mythology for modern Wales led him to rectify some inexplicable omissions in the Welsh national canon by creating many new texts of his own: his forgeries not only influenced Welsh scholarship for a century but also, through the institution of the *Gorsedd*, placed druidry at the heart of the Eisteddfod. Iolo's opus has been comprehensively reviewed by Geraint Jenkins and his colleagues at the University of Aberystwyth, whose first fruits, in the form of a biography (2) is now essential reading, but Hutton has some important new insights to offer, including the convincing suggestion that Unitarianism *replaced* druidism for Iolo. He is good on what he calls 'Iolo's Children' – the motley collection of wayward scholars and eccentrics who developed Iolo's ideas in the 19th century: Matthew Arnold, who fanned the flames of Ioloism as part of his highly influential rehabilitation of the Celts; the angry Chartist William Price, most famous today for cremating the remains of his baby son. (Hutton plausibly derives Price's rage from his father's mental collapse, which threw the family into penury; I wonder whether Matthew Arnold's Celticism might similarly be attributed to a reaction to the ideology of his own father, Thomas Arnold of Rugby fame, as renowned for praising Teutons as his son is for condemning them?).

Hutton deftly demonstrates the importance of new money in the creation of old culture in 19th-century Wales – Augusta Hall (who designed the Welsh national costume) and Charlotte Guest (editor of *The Mabinogion*) were both married to major ironmasters. He points out that Pontypridd, an important druidic centre in the mid 19th century, not only takes its name from a bridge built in 1756 but was actually known by its English name of Newbridge until the 1860s. I feel that he could perhaps have made more of the appeal of ‘ancient’ culture to the uprooted lower orders in South Wales; it is surely significant that chapel preachers felt so strongly about the druidical utterances of Myfyr Morganwg on Pontypridd Common that their flocks were urged to buy his books and burn them.

The nonconformists of South Wales were not the only Christians to feel that druidry posed a threat. The Oxford Movement evangelist Frederick William Faber apparently felt that the populace was in danger of forsaking Christianity and reverting ‘to Druid rite once more’, but Hutton convincingly shows that both were swept away by post-Darwinian prehistory: ‘Druids had been too completely absorbed into the old, biblically based, model of the ancient past ... Noah’s Flood and the Druids had to go out together, as part of the process of reformation, evangelism and conversion’ (p. 304).

Hutton also demonstrates how the Freemasonic rituals of what he calls ‘fraternal Druidry’ were able to function as ‘an alternative form of spirituality, which could exist within Christianity but was not part of it’ (p. 217). He has much new information to offer on fraternal druidry in general, the druids of the Friendly Societies and Ancient Orders that flourished in the 19th century. Except that, as he shows, the most famous group of all, the Ancient Order of Druids, was not originally a Friendly Society at all, but a convivial drinking-club whose lack of any ‘redeeming touch of utility’ engendered a major split in 1831, an event which Hutton puts masterfully into the context of the contemporary transformation of the British political system.

Hutton writes with style and wit. The verbose Romantic poet Richard Polwhele, saved from druidic nostalgia by a timely cherub, simultaneously lost control of his verse and was thereby ‘cleansed of sin and scansion’ (p. 203). Another druid-stigmatiser, Michael Wodhull, ‘is probably unique in accusing them, along with most of the usual vices, of halitosis’ (his druids were ‘subtle priests with venomous breath’: pp. 199-200). Sidney Sedgwick’s *Daughter of the Druids*, required to participate in the ritual roasting of their sacrifices, is ‘despite her unpromising relatives and job description ... really a nice girl’ (p. 336).

The text sparkles with observations such as these that lighten the density of his scholarship without diminishing it; and also defy the reader to take any contemporary pronouncement too seriously. For, in spite of 500 years of scholarly debate about druids and their role in prehistoric society, no consensus has ever been reached. Druidry remains a conceptual clothes-horse, bedecked with the ideas and aspirations of people from all parts of the political and religious spectrum, keen to ground their agendas in the soil of high antiquity. Druidry is fundamentally elusive; that’s why it’s proven so useful.

This means that this book is first and foremost a history of scholarship: Hutton himself suggests that it could have readily been called ‘*Thinking with Druids*’ (p. 419). It is the story, affectionately but insightfully told, of the historians and others who made and re-made druidry to their own measure, some well-known but many less so, previously peering but dimly through the historical shrubbery, now brought convincingly into the limelight. I was particularly taken with his portrayal of the deist John Toland and his ‘firework display of ideas’, and the summary on page 84 of the distinction between Toland and his orthodox counterpart Henry Rowlands is a little *tour de force*, demonstrating how Toland ‘blundered onto the right path out of a maze, while others, like Rowlands, chose the wrong one on equally rational grounds’.

Shambolic Aubrey, arrogant Toland ... this catalogue of antiquarians could have been dry as dust but is enlivened by the understanding and the sympathy that this historian feels for his predecessors. His harshest words are reserved for Iolo Morganwg, who he sees as having ‘sabotaged’ Welsh history by having ‘substituted an imagined early Wales of his own ... In doing so, he had at once betrayed his friends and his country’ (p. 164). This is strong language, the understandable wrath of a scholar whose own work depends

upon the sanctity of the original text. But from the point of view of the ‘ordinary literate Welsh people’ that Hutton sees Iolo as having bamboozled, was there really so much difference between Iolo and the hundreds of other writers whose arbitrary scholarship, so convincingly chronicled in this book, was equally available to them? Iolo gave the Welsh a sense of nationhood and dignity at a time when apologists for all the incipient nations of Europe were doing much the same thing. There was little succour for the literate Welsh in the anti-druidic pronouncements of Oxford dons such as Algernon Herbert, or for that matter the musings of more prominent English historians such as Charles Kingsley or Edward Freeman, who sought to minimise pre-Saxon influence in the English national narratives they were creating. Were the Welsh so wrong to prefer the Iolo-fostered culture of the Eisteddfod? Whose interest does ‘pure history’ serve, and does it exist anyway? *Blood and Mistletoe* meticulously records five centuries of contradictory and self-serving speculation, most of it now rejected. It is an object lesson in how much history is the plaything of the historians, and just how wrong they can be.

Beautifully written, lucidly argued, carefully illustrated, comprehensive. A scholarly delight, and thoroughly recommended.

## Notes

1. Ronald Hutton, *The Druids: A History* (London, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *A Rattleskull Genius: The Many Faces of Iolo Morganwg*, ed. G. H. Jenkins (Cardiff, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)

### Other reviews:

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telegraph

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