

# Myles Dillon & Nora Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms* [History & Civilisation Ser.] (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1967), 355pp.

[Digital Ed. - Part I]

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## Preface

*The Celtic Realms* (1967) - Points of difference stated: '[...] We have not always been in complete agreement, and we have simply given our opinions in matters of doubt. The common opinion now is that Medb and Fergus, Cú Chulainn and Cú Roí Mac Dáire, are not historical persons. Nora Chadwick prefers to regard Queen Medb as having reigned as queen at Cruachain. On the other hand, Myles Dillon regards the druids as heirs to an ancient Indo-European priesthood, represented in India by the brahmins, whereas N.C. believes that they were not priests (Chap. 7). These are the chief points of difference between us [...] The book is a collaboration. We have worked together on each chapter, and are glad to accept joint responsibility.

The attempt to present the Celts in history as one people, with a common tradition and a common character, is new, and in some degree, experimental. It seems to us to have been justified beyond our expectations, inasmuch as there does emerge in the history and institutions and religion, in the art and literature, perhaps even in the language, a quality that is distinctive and common to the Celts of Gaul, of Britain and of Ireland. We hesitate to give it a name: it makes a contrast with Greek temperance, it is marked by extremes of luxury and asceticism, of exultation and despair, by lack of discipline and of the gift for organising secular affairs, by delight in natural beauty and in tales of mystery and imagination, by an artistic sense that prefers decoration and pattern to mere representation. Matthew Arnold called it the Celtic Magic.' (Pref. [ii-iii].)

## Chap. 1: Discovery of the Celts

Herodotus, in the fifth century, twice mentions the Celts (the first occurrence of the name Keltoi), only to say that the Danube has its source - which he seems to suppose is in the Pyrenees - among the Celts, and that they dwell beyond the pillars of Hercules, and are the most westerly people in Europe except the Cynesians. [1]

Over all this area, Austria, Bohemia, southern and western Germany, and France, place-names occur which are compounded of such elements as briga - dunum - magus - nemeton - ritum - seno - uindo [list and vars. abbrev.] [2]

[...] appearance of urnfields in south central Europe ... a cultural continuum from the time when they appear, to the close of the Bronze Age, through the Hallstadt period and down to La Tène. But this is too late, in our opinion, for the separation of Celtic as a distinct dialect, and it is better to regard as already Celtic whatever can be dated to the beginning of the second millennium BC. [2]

Tacitus: 'their Gaulish speech proves that the Cotinini were not Germans. (Germania, 43.) [3]

The Celts then are a people who appear in history in the sixth century b.c. The early writers mention them only casually, as when Xenophon writes of Celts who fought as mercenaries against the Thebans in the Peloponnesus in 369 BC, and Plato includes them in a list of barbarian peoples who are given to drunkenness. Aristotle says: "it is not bravery to withstand danger through recklessness, as when the Celts thake up arms to attack the waves." (Nicomachean Ethics, III, 7 §7.) [3]

With regard to the Celtic settlement of Ireland in particular, O’Rahilly in his ‘Goidels and Their Predecessors’, and again in his great book, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, put forward an entirely new theory. He distinguished four successive immigrations: the Cruthin some time before 500 BC; the Cruthin some time before 500 BC; the Érainn (= Fir Bolg) perhaps in the fifth century; the Laigin (with Domnainn and Gálioín) in the third century; the Goidil who came c. 100 BC. The notion of a series of invasions is traditional, and is first recorded by Nennius who knew of three, those of Partholón, Nemed, and the Children of Míl.

In the *Book of Invasions* as we know it from the eleventh century recension there are five (or six): (Cesair), Partholón, Nemed, Fir Bolg, Tuatha Dé Danann, and the Children of Míl. But these legends are mere learned fiction, and have no value as history. Their interest is of another kind. The only bearing they have upon history is in so far as they betray a state of affairs which the literary men were trying to expound. What does appear from various references cited by O’Rahilly is the presence in Ireland of at least three ethnic groups: Cruthin (or Cruithni) who were mainly in the north-east and plainly akin to the Picts of Scotland (also called Cruthin); Érainn, who were mainly in the south-west and in the south-east corner (Déisi); and Goídil (*Cland Míled*) who reigned over Tara, Cashel and Croghan and were the dominant people in the early historic period. Whether the Laigin were a distinct people or merely a Goidelic tribe is not clear to us.

O’Rahilly’s most novel suggestion is that his first three groups spoke Brythonic dialects, that is that they were ‘P-Celts’, and that the Goidil were the only Goidelic speakers, the only ‘Q-Celts’. And he seeks to prove this from the evidence of Irish words that are not Goidelic in form and may be Brythonic. His demonstration is not convincing, and the notion that this more archaic language was brought latest, by a migration of the Quariates from south-east Gaul, is inherently improbable. We think it more likely that Goidelic was first established in Ireland, and that Brythonic tribes made settlements there, just as Irish settlements were made in Wales both north and south. In those early centuries, when there was constant intercourse across the Irish Sea, there [5] was every chance of linguistic borrowing. [...] O’Rahilly’s doctrine has been accepted by some scholars (M. A. O’Brien, *Early Irish Society*, p.37) and dismissed by others (Vendryes, *Etudes Celtiques*, I, 352ff.) [5]

[...]

[...] The shrine at Delphos was plundered in 278 [...] At that time a territory stretching from Ireland to Galatia was in Celtic hands. ‘For two centuries,’ says Grenier, ‘they (the Celts) were the greatest people in Europe ... About 300 BC the power of the Celts was at its height and seems inexhaustible in energy and in manpower.’ [6]

This rapid expansion over an enormous area implies great fecundity and a great spirit of adventure. Moreover, like the Greeks in the Mediterranean, the Celts brought with them their civilization, and they imposed it upon the lands they occupied. And though they were ‘barbarians’ in the strict sense, theirs was no mean way of life. We have accounts of it from Polybius in the third century BC, from fragments of Posidonius who lived in the first century BC, and from Julius Caesar. Some of what Posidonius tells us is worth quoting at length, because it finds such extraordinary confirmation in later Irish sources.

Polybius tells of the conquest of Cisalpine Gaul with a good deal of detail, and of the later struggle of the Romans with the Celtiberi in Spain, and the defeat of the Galatians in Asia Minor. He describes the weapons of the Celts, their preference for fighting naked, the habit of [6] taking the head of a slain enemy, and he mentions the splendid gold torques and bracelets worn by Celtic warriors. He also says that they attached great importance to clientship as the measure of a man’s rank in society.

The best known passage describing the Celts is that in the sixth book of Caesar’s *Gallic War*, but Posidonius, who wrote a continuation of the Histories of Polybius, is the main source of information. His works are lost, but Diodorus Siculus and Strabo have preserved a good deal of what he said about the Celts. Here is Strabo’s account of the Celts of Gaul:

The whole race, which is now called Gallic or Galatic, is madly fond of war, high-spirited and quick to battle, but otherwise straightforward and not of evil character. And so when they are stirred up they assemble in their bands for battle, quite openly and without forethought, so that they are easily handled by those who desire to outwit them; for at any time or place and on whatever pretext you stir them up, you will have them ready to face danger, even if they have nothing on their side but their own strength and courage. On the other hand if won over by gentle persuasion they willingly devote their energies to useful pursuits and even take to a literary education. Their strength depends both on their mighty bodies, and on their numbers. And because of this frank and straightforward element in their character they assemble in large numbers on slight provocation, being ever ready to sympathize with the anger of a neighbour who thinks he has been wronged ...

Among all the tribes, generally speaking, there are three classes of men held in special honour: the Bards, the Vates, and the Druids. The Bards are singers and poets; the Vates interpreters of sacrifice and natural philosophers; while the Druids, in addition to the science of nature, study also moral philosophy. They are believed to be the most just of men, and are therefore entrusted with the decision of cases affecting either individuals or the public; indeed in former times they arbitrated in war and brought to a standstill the opponents when about to draw up in line of battle; and murder cases have been mostly entrusted to their decision. When there are many such cases they believe that there will be a fruitful yield from their fields. These men, as well as other authorities, have pronounced that men's Souls and the universe are indestructible, although at times fire or water may (temporarily) prevail.

To the frankness and high-spiritedness of their temperament must be added the traits of childish boastfulness and love of decoration. They wear ornaments of gold, torques on their necks, and bracelets on their arms and wrists, while people of high rank wear dyed garments besprinkled with gold. It is this vanity which makes them unbearable in victory and so completely downcast in defeat. In addition to their witlessness they possess a trait of barbarous savagery which is especially peculiar to the northern [7] peoples, for when they are leaving the battle-field they fasten to the necks of their horses the heads of their enemies, and on arriving home they nail up this spectacle at the entrances to their houses. Posidonius says that he saw this sight in many places, and was at first disgusted by it, but afterwards, becoming used to it, could bear it with equanimity. (Quoting J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60 C, 5, 1960, pp.189–275.)

Diodorus describes the habits of the Celts of Gaul at a feast:

... the nobles shave the cheeks but let the moustache grow freely so that it covers the mouth. And so when they are eating the moustache becomes entangled in the food, and when they are drinking the drink passes, as it were, through a sort of strainer. When dining they all sit not on chairs, but on the earth, strewing beneath them the skins of wolves or dogs. At their meals they are served by their youngest grown-up children, both boys and girls. Beside them are hearths blazing with fire, with cauldrons and spits containing large pieces of meat. Brave warriors they honour with the finest portions of the meat, just as Homer introduces Ajax, honoured by the chieftains, when he conquered Hector in single combat: 'He honoured Ajax with the full-length chine'.

Athenaeus, who names Posidonius as his authority, confirms the statement about the Hero's Portion:

'In former times', he says, 'when the hindquarters were served, the bravest hero took the thigh-piece, and if another man claimed it, they stood up and fought in single combat to the death.'

This practice is vividly recorded in the Old Irish saga of Mac Da Thó's Pig (inf. p. 249), and it is the principal theme also of 'Bricriu's Feast'.

Another passage is of special interest from this point of view. It is the account by Diodorus of the Gauls in battle:

For their journeys and in battle they use two-horse chariots, the chariot carrying both charioteer and chieftain. When they meet with cavalry in the battle they cast their javelins at the enemy and then descending from the chariot join battle with their swords. Some of them so far despise death that they descend to do battle, unclothed except for a girdle. They bring into battle as their attendants freemen chosen from among the poorer classes, whom they use as charioteers and shield-bearers in battle. When the armies are drawn up in battle-array they are wont to advance before the battle-line and to challenge the bravest of their opponents to single combat, at the same time brandishing before them their arms so

as to terrify their foe. And when some one accepts their challenge to battle, they loudly recite the deeds of valour of their ancestors and proclaim their own valorous quality, at the same time abusing and making little of their opponent and generally attempting to rob him beforehand of his fighting spirit. They cut off the [9] heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses. The blood-stained spoils they hand over to their attendants and carry off as booty, while striking up a paean and singing a song of victory, and they nail up these first fruits upon their houses just as do those who lay low wild animals in certain kinds of hunting.

Here again the Irish sources match closely the description of the Celts of Gaul. The warriors of the Ulster sagas go into battle in chariots, and the challenge to single combat is the central theme in the great prose epic *Táin Bó Cualnge*. Cú Chulainn, with Loeg his charioteer, in his two-horse chariot, armed with shield and spear and sword, is a Celtic warrior just such as Posidonius describes.

And here is a description of the Gauls by Diodorus, also based, it seems, on Posidonius:

Physically the Gauls are terrifying in appearance, with deep-sounding and very harsh voices. In conversation they use few words and speak in riddles, for the most part hinting at things and leaving a great deal to be understood. They frequently exaggerate with the aim of extolling themselves and diminishing the status of others. They are boasters and threateners and given to bombastic self-dramatization, and yet they are quick of mind and with good natural ability for learning. They have also lyric poets whom they call Bards. They sing to the accompaniment of instruments resembling lyres, sometimes a eulogy and sometimes a satire. They have also certain philosophers and theologians who are treated with special honour, whom they call Druids. They further make use of seers, thinking them worthy of high praise. These latter by their augural observances and by the sacrifice of sacrificial animals can foretell the future and they hold all the people subject to them. In particular when enquiring into matters of great import they have a strange and incredible custom; they devote to death a human being and stab him with a dagger in the region above the diaphragm, and when he has fallen they foretell the future from his fall, and from the convulsions of his limbs and, moreover, from the spurting of the blood, placing their trust in some ancient and long-continued observation of these practices. Their custom is that no one should offer sacrifice without a philosopher; for they say that thanks should be offered to the gods by those skilled in the divine nature, as though they were people who can speak their language, and through them also they hold that benefits should be asked. And it is not only in the needs of peace but in war also that they carefully obey these men and their song-loving poets, and this is true not only of their friends but also of their enemies. For oftentimes as armies approach each other in line of battle with their swords drawn and their spears raised for the charge these men come forth between them and stop the conflict, as though they had spell-bound some kind of wild animals. Thus even among the most savage barbarians anger yields to wisdom and Ares does homage to the Muses. [10]

The testimony of Julius Caesar, which is widely familiar, is the most valuable in some respects. He presents Gaulish society as divided into three classes, druides, equites and plebs, the three functions (priest, warrior and husbandman) of which Dumézil has made so much. And of the *equites* he says that the nobler and wealthier have numerous clients about them.

Caesar tells more about the druids than do the others, their twenty years of study, their oral tradition, and so on. And he says of the Gauls: *Natio est omnis Gallorum admodum dedita religionibus* 'The whole Gaulish people is much given to religion'. We are told that the druids taught the doctrine of transmigration of souls, that they were concerned with the worship of the gods, and that young men flocked to them for training.

It is said that they commit to memory immense amounts of poetry, and so some of them continue their studies for twenty years. They consider it improper to commit their studies to writing, although they use the Greek alphabet for almost everything else.... They have also much knowledge of the stars and their motion, of the size of the world and of the earth, of natural philosophy, and of the powers and spheres of action of the immortal gods, which they discuss and hand down to their young students. (De Bello Gallico, vi, 14; quoted in Tierney, op. cit., p.202.)

This class of professional learned men, priests and scholars, seems to share a common Indo-European inheritance with the brahmins of India, for the later and fuller evidence of Irish sources shows a similar class, the *filid*, who, while shorn of their priestly office in a Christian society, have retained the

scholarly functions of the druids as poets, genealogists, lawyers, and the practice of oral rather than written tradition. Both the form and content of their learning show astonishing similarity to brahminical tradition.

The archaism of this tradition can best be shown from the Irish evidence which is presented later (chap. 10), but two matters deserve mention here as requiring the assumption of a learned tradition inherited by the druids of Gaul and transmitted by them to the filid of Ireland.

The metres of the *Rigveda*, the earliest known forms of Indo-European verse, are based upon a line with a fixed number of syllables, of which the first half was free and the cadence was fixed in the form [symbols for short short long SHORT] It was shown long ago by Meillet that the Greek metres have the same origin, and more recently Roman Jakobson has traced it in modern Slavonic verse. Calvert Watkins has now demonstrated, we think convincingly, that the Old Irish heptasyllabic line derives from this Indo-European form, and that other Irish metres are variants of it, thus confirming the antiquity of Celtic tradition, and the common heritage of the druid and the brahmin. ('Indo-European Metics and Archaic Irish Verse', in *Celtica* VI, p.194.) [10]

[...]

Dr Binchy has drawn attention to the resemblances in certain points between the Irish and Indian law-books. In both countries the law consists of canonical texts, invested with a sacred origin, and interpreted exclusively by a privileged caste. There were law-schools in each with varying traditions of interpretation. The relations between pupil and teacher (Irish *felmac* and *fithithir*; Sanscrit *sísya* and *guru*) were similar, with eventual right of succession. The Hindu *sapinda*, a family group of four generations, descendants of a common great-grandfather, seems to have the same significance and functions as the Irish *derbfine* and the Welsh *gwely*. The basic family unit was the same in both systems [...] (Binchy, 'The Linguistic and Historical Value of the Irish Law Tracts', 23, 27, 30, Proceedings of the British Academy, XXIX, 1943).

[...]

We can even claim agreement in the number of forms of marriage, for Binchy has suggested that two of the Irish 'unions' are a later development. (*Studies in Early Irish Law*, p.vi.)

[...]

Irish society was based on the family-group of four generations, and this may be assumed for the Celts. The wider unit was the tribe. In Caesar's time there were about fifty tribes in Gaul, of which only a few still recognised the institution of kingship. Most of them had adopted an oligarchical form of government. It is, therefore, from Irish sources, that we learn most about Celtic kingship. [12]

[...]

About the religion of the Celts much has been written, but the picture remains obscure. Caesar tells us that the Gauls worshipped Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva. But he is simply equating Gaulish deities with his own Roman gods. He does not give us a single Gaulish name. Other historians do give us names, and many names occur in dedications all over the vast area once dominated by the Celts, from Galatia in Asia Minor to Spain and Britain. We have more than 400 names in all, and more than 300 of them occur only once. Perhaps these are names of local deities, each tribe or group of tribes having a special cult.

One important name is that of *Lug*, Welsh *Llew*. It occurs in dedications at Avranches in Switzerland and at Asma (Tarragona) in Spain as a plural, *Lugoues*, *Lugouibus*, and is common in the place-name Lugudunum, which is the name of Lyons, Loudon, Laon and Leon in France, of Leiden in Holland and Liegnitz in Silesia. Lugus must have been a great Celtic god, but we do not know what his special

character was. In Ireland he was the god of *Lughnasad*, 1 August, which was evidently a harvest festival, and Lug may have been the god of fertility. At Lyons the feast of Augustus was celebrated on that day, apparently in substitution for the ancient feast of Lug. Máire MacNeill has shown that his feast was celebrated all over Ireland into our own times. (*The Festival of Lughnasa*, 1962; see also M. Tierney, 'Lugh and Dionysius', in *Éigse*, x, p.265.) 2 Lug's other name was Find, 'the Fairhaired One', and he survives on the Continent as Vindonnus, and in a few place-names: Uindobona (Vienna), Vindonissa, &c.

The poet Lucan says that Esus, Taranis and Teutates were the gods of the Celts, and two of these names are echoed in Welsh *taran* (Irish *torann*) 'thunder', and *tud* (Irish *tuath*) 'tribe'. The faintness of the echo suggests a long interval in time between the first Celtic settlement of the British Isles and the date of our Gaulish evidence. Ogmios, the god of eloquence, described by Lucian, and Irish Ogma, who figures in the Battle of Moytura, are close in form, if not in function, although Thurneysen opposed the identification.

The cult of the Mothers was certainly Celtic, i.e. Mother Earth as a source of fertility, worshipped in triple form under the title *matres* or *matronae*. The dedications that survive on monuments in Gaul are in Latin, and the figures are sometimes represented with baskets of fruit or horns of plenty, or with children in their laps. There is a Welsh place-name Foel Famau 'the hill of the mothers', which preserves the tradition. [14]

[...]

Another feature of Celtic religion that emerges clearly is that wells, rivers and sacred trees were objects of devotion and had patron gods or goddesses. Some rivers were themselves divine. There was a sanctuary of the Dea Sequana at the source of the river Seine, and one of the Dea Matrona near to the source of the Marne. In Ireland Bóinn (the Boyne) and Sinainn (the Shannon) were goddesses. Then there were animal gods: the bull, Taruos Trigaranus, who appears on the famous Paris monument in the Cluny museum [Plate 14]; the boar, Moccus; the goddess Epona, whose name suggests the cult of the horse; and the goddess Artio, perhaps a bear. The horned god Cernunnos appears on the Gundestrup Cauldron with a stag [Plate 4], and the goddess Damona suggests a cult of the cow.

The priests who maintained the cult of these gods were the druids, and Caesar tells us a good deal about them. They conducted the private and public sacrifices. They taught that the soul was immortal and passed after death into another body, rather as the Hindus believed. They also thought that all men were descended from Dis, the god of the Underworld, and they were learned in astronomy and natural philosophy).

After a victory, the captured animals were sacrificed to the god of war. Sometimes human victims were sacrificed, and Caesar says that criminals were preferred as being more pleasing to the gods, but that, failing them, others were chosen. This savage custom is mentioned by Lucan in a well-known passage where the gods Esus, Taranis and Teutates are said to be appeased by human sacrifice. (Lucan, *Pharsalia*, I, p.144.)

[...]

The Celts impressed the ancient historians as being impetuous and fearless in battle, easily roused and with a high sense of honour, arrogant in victory and desperate to the point of suicide in defeat, delighting in ornament, in feasting, in the recitation of poetry, *admodum dedita religionibus* 'much given to religion'. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* says: 'We have no word for the man who is excessively fearless; perhaps one may call such a man mad or bereft of feeling, who fears nothing, neither earthquakes nor waves, as they say of the Celts' (iii 7.7.). And Strabo quotes Ptolemy for the story that Celtic settlers on the Adriatic, when asked by Alexander the Great what they feared most, answered that it was lest the sky should fall. Cato the Elder says of the Celts of Cisalpine Gaul:

*Pleraque Gallia dual res industriosissime persequitur, rem militarem et argute loqui* ‘they have two great passions, to be brave in warfare and to speak well’.

The picture that we get is of a people brave and gay, physically powerful, and amazingly successful in the early period. From Galatia in Asia Minor northwest to Scotland, and south again to Andalusia, one could travel in the third century BC without leaving Celtic territory. And although there was no empire, it was one culture.

Jacobsthal says that Celtic art, in all its variety and even though spread over so wide a territory, is one culture. And he adds:

We are told that the Gauls were valiant, quarrelsome, cruel, superstitious and eloquent: their art also is full of contrasts. It is attractive and repellent; it is far from primitiveness and simplicity; it is refined in thought and technique, elaborate and clever, full of paradoxes, restless, puzzlingly ambiguous; rational and irrational; dark and uncanny far from the lovable humanity and transparency of Greek art. Yet, it is a real style, the first great contribution by the barbarians to European art, the first great chapter in the everlasting contacts of southern, northern and eastern forces in the life of Europe. (Celtic Art, I, p.160.)

Such were the ancestors of the peoples who emerge into history in the first centuries of the Christian era as *Britanni* and *Hiberni*, the Britons and the Irish.

[End Chapter]