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Journal of
The Pendragon Society

XXXI No 3 The Muse Spring 2004

editorial

Themes and things

This issue brings together a number of miscellaneous items which share a sense of creativity, with studies of authors, poets and musicians who used Arthurian themes, plus new Arthurian fiction and poetry. Whether you call it *awen*, or whether it is the personification of the musings of the contributors, ***The Muse*** is *ipso facto* a convenient catch-all title for the theme. The cover shows Beardsley's version of the aftermath of Merlin's infatuation with Nimue. Regrettably, several items have been squeezed out, to re-appear, as appropriate, in future editions.

As promised, next issue will be based around the theme of the **Grail Castle** (a follow-on from **Perceval** of items for which there was no space then, with the addition of newly written articles). For those who still hanker after set themes, the autumn issue is planned as **Arthur Abroad**, with **Arthurian Beasts** for winter 2004-5.

We welcome submissions on these or any other related topics, non-fiction principally but with the occasional original fiction or poetry. Contributions should ideally be between around 800 to 2,400 words; lengthy pieces may take longer to be published, or be serialised or returned for revision. Electronic submissions are preferable (on disk in Word or plain text, or e-mail edpendragon@yahoo.co.uk - in plain text and not as an attachment) and should be accompanied by a printout. Typed or hand-written manuscripts are acceptable, however, if the material is kept manageable!

A number of inserts should appear with this issue, which we hope you will find interesting.

BERYL MERCER

Beryl Mercer, who passed away recently, joined the Society in 1986. She had a wide range of interests as varied as runes, unexplained phenomena, the Titanic and poetry, and edited miscellaneous fanzines, many with her late husband, Archie. She provided much mainstay support with articles for *Pendragon* during Eddie Tooke's editorship and since, and in her last piece was anticipating the challenge of tackling Wolfram's *Parzival*. As Steve Sneyd comments, "Beryl's thoughtful discussion of ways of looking at Perceval was a reminder of how much she will be missed."

W M S Russell writes: "I was extremely sorry to read of the death of Beryl Mercer. I have so much enjoyed her contributions to the journal. They were always interesting, and so expressive of a lively and amiable personality that I felt I knew her, though we had never met. I am sure she will be sadly missed." Alastair McBeath adds, "I was very sorry to learn of the death of Beryl Mercer. I may not have agreed with everything she wrote, but she was always a *Pendragon* correspondent / author whose name I looked out for in the magazine. A significant loss."

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Letters

Pen Dragon

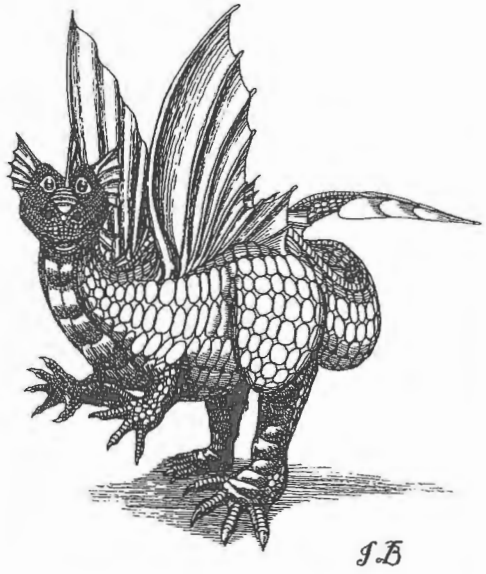
Another interlaced letters section this issue; when writing to the Editor do please indicate if any correspondence is not for publication.

CAERLEON, WOMEN & CHEMISTRY ...
Congratulations and thanks to the Editor and all the contributors for another three splendid issues. The Caerleon Round Table, as described by the Editor (*30.4*: 14–15), was clearly a great occasion. I deeply regret losing this opportunity to meet so many Members, but my movements are severely restricted by my dialysis schedule, which keeps me alive and fit.

Hypatia, discussed in the same issue (18), was the last in a distinguished line of women scientists. 'With the coming of civilisation and written history, the credit for scientific advances was soon monopolised by men. Even at this stage, however, there was an interesting exception. The science of chemistry was the latest to become a systematic discipline. It began as alchemy, which took shape quite late in historic times, in Egypt during or shortly before the period of Roman rule.'[1] Some of the leading alchemists were women, including Theosebea, Paphnoutia, Cleopatra the Alchemist, and above all Maria the Jewess. Maria probably lived in the 1st century BC. 'She was highly inventive and ... elaborated all the essential appliances on which alchemy or chemistry was to carry on for nearly two millennia. And she seems to have perfected the apparatus for distilling liquids. She described her methods of construction in much detail, even to the point of telling how to make copper tubes from sheet metal'[2] ...

... NORTHERN VOYAGES ...
... In connection with Fred Stedman-Jones' fascinating account of early real and legendary Northern voyages (*31.1*: 29–32, *31.2*: 36–39), there is an interesting book by Farley Mowat.[3] He offers convincing evidence for early *settlement* in Canada, as far as Ungava and Hudson Bay, by the Alban people of Scotland, who were first invaded by and later amalgamated with the Picts. They seem to have settled Iceland by the seventh century AD, and to have moved to Greenland and later Canada to avoid the Vikings ...

W M S Russell, Reading, Berkshire



[1] Russell, W M S (1974) "Women as Innovators, with Special Reference to Mathematics, Science and Technology" *Biology and Human Affairs 40* No 1, 21–36, especially 26

[2] Lindsay, J (1970) *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Frederick Muller) 243

[3] Mowat, F (2000) *The Alban Quest: the Search for a Lost Tribe* (London: Phoenix) *passim*

Part two of "Voyages of Arthur" [Fred Stedman-Jones, last issue] fascinates as much as part one ["The Arthurian Empire"]. Concerning the "hollow earth" theory, a recentish news item in *Metro* mentioned that the Mormons, who accept the idea, have sent an expedition to the North Pole to look for the portal there. (Possibly the idea being that in future their missionaries, if turned away at the door, would be able to get in from under your floorboards?)

On the Welsh voyages to North America (and Mandans as descendants thereof) theory, one very intriguing treatment is the "postmodernist epic" poem *Madoc* by Paul Muldoon (Faber 1990, but still in print). To simplify wildly, this depicts an alternative history: in reality, the poets Coleridge and Southey, although they talked of founding a Pantisocratic utopia in America, never did anything practical to achieve the dream. In the poem, however, they do go to the New World. Gradually, the wilderness unsettles the sanity of both. Southey sets himself up as a tyrannical king among the Native American tribes, while Coleridge becomes obsessed with finding Madoc's descendants, and travels West to a drug-filled doom.

Steve Sneyd, Huddersfield, W Yorks

• *I understand that historians Wilson and Blackett have recently espoused the cause of Madoc, but set him in the 6th century.*

... BOAR-HUNTS, CUMBRIA ...
... In the Editor's intriguing account of Culhwch's boar-hunt (*31.2*: 20–26), he notes the parallel with the hunt for the Calydonian boar. It is interesting that both hunts involved such armies of heroes, in some versions of the Calydonian hunt *all* the heroes of Greece. But there is no Welsh equivalent of Atalanta![4] The Editor tells us that *twrch* means "hog", but that (in modern Welsh) *trwyth* 'translates as "decoction" (unrelated, surely, to *troeth*, "urine"?)'. I can't help wondering whether *trwyth* may once have been related to French *truie* and (probably) Italian dialect word *truia*, both meaning "sow".[5] The famous boar would then have the tautological name "boar-pig", like the French *loup-garou* ("wolf" and mis-pronunciation of English "werewolf", so equivalent to "wolf-man-wolf").[6]

Ian Brown tells of an old man informing him that King Arthur lived in Cumbria as a boy (*31.2*: 30). I don't know of any such legend, but Arthur was certainly there as a man and king, according to the ballad of *The Marriage of Sir Gawain.*[7]

W M S Russell

One little thought that sprang to my mind: am I being really daft or obscure when, in reading the phrase "a *banw* and a *benwic* (a young boar and a young sow)" ["The Hunt for the Cambrian Boar" page 24, paragraph 3, last issue] my immediate response was to subliminally read "Ban of Benwick"? I'm not suggesting there's any kind of connection in those words but, well, it kind of intrigued me.

Ian Brown, Middlesborough

• *Benwick is of course Malory's version of Benoye, Benoyc or Benoïc from the* Prose Lancelot *section of the* Vulgate Cycle. *Lancelot's father Ban, who was a king in Brittany, may have acquired his name by association with the Breton city of Vannes (and not just through an adaptation of the name Bran). The juxtaposition of the names however is very striking!*

Now, I have always been intrigued by the name of the Grail Castle of Corbenic (Carbonek), and unhappy with the scholarly derivation from cor benoit *or "blessed body" (of Christ). However, if Corbenic is "really" Caer Benwick – that would also be rather intriguing! More on this next issue, the theme of which is of course Grail Castles.*

Alastair McBeath rightly points out to me that only Robert Graves, in The Greek

[4] Russell, W M S (1984) "Heroes in Ancient Greece" in Davidson, H R E (ed) *The Hero in Tradition and Folklore* (London: Folklore Society) 112–141, especially 131–134

[5] Russell, C and Russell, W M S (1991) "English Turf Mazes, Troy and the Labyrinth" *Folklore 102* No 1, 77–88, especially 80

[6] Russell, W M S and Russell, C (1978) "The Social Biology of Werewolves" in Porter, J R and Russell, W M S (eds) *Animals in Folklore* (Ipswich and Cambridge: D S Brewer for the Folklore Society) 143–182, 260–269, especially 151

[7] Russell, W M S (1995) "Sir Gawain in Reading" *Pendragon 25* No 1, 5–7, especially 6

Myths, *appears to credit Jason of the Argonauts with an alternative name of Diomedes (as I neglected to point out in "The Hunt for the Cambrian Boar" page 22).*

Dave Burnham's "Arthur and the UK" put over some interesting points. Personally, I don't need heroes – real or imaginary – but understand that there are those who do. Nevertheless, Arthur may well have been very much parochial. I accept that there can be agendas in certain books but it is possible that Arthur never fought a countrywide war against the Anglo-Saxons, who were far from being Churchill's "foul barbarians" anyway. It is highly possible that Arthur's campaigns were small scale and that later writers, like Geoffrey of Monmouth, were trying to create a Charlemagne for Britain.

The King Arthur of legend belongs more to literature rather than history, as does the Chieftain Arthur of *Culhwch ac Olwen*. Behind them may be a real person but what was he, Collingwood's Roman cavalry leader or a Romano-British warlord defending his territory against attack, whether by the English or his own Celtic neighbours? Personally, I am very happy with the parochial Arthur because it makes historical sense. Where he lived is another question. If it can be proved that Arthur fought the English then I would suggest he lived in what is present day England. However, if this cannot be proven – he could have lived as easily in Wales as in Scotland. I continue to have an open mind on the subject.

Concerning Ian Brown's Llant y llwch [*Letters* last issue] – I agree with him that Gantz pointed out Llwch meant lake but he also suggests that the Llwch listed amongst Arthur's warriors was Llug, the Irish hero, the meaning of his name *not* being lake. Llwch may well be an approximation of the Irish Lough or Loch but does it exist in Wales? It would be necessary to check its origins in the *Geiriadur Prif Ysgol Cymru*. Lancelot makes his first appearance in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, and though Chrétien may have visited the English court he probably had no real knowledge of the Welsh. At that time the Anglo-Normans considered the Welsh to be barbarians.

However, there is a strong Irish element in *Culhwch ac Olwen* and some of the areas used in the story – particularly the hunting of the Twrch Trwyth. It is in this particular area that Irish settlers lived and ruled. One of these rulers was actually an Arthur – Arthur son of Pedr, descended from those Irish settlers and the only known possible historical Arthur in Wales during the Dark Ages. I am not saying he was the Arthur of *Culhwch ac Olwen* or the chronicles but the connection is possible. Arthur ap Pedr has never really been investigated as far as I am aware though I am way behind on Arthurian studies.

Not sure if I agree that the later part of the Grail story is much different – it may have been part of Chrétien's build up to a finale. How inconsiderate of him not to finish the story!

Charles Evans-Günther, Japan

• *In the seventies, Richard Barber's* The Figure of Arthur *discussed both Arthur of Dyfed and Arthur of Dalriada as candidates for a composite early Arthur. The processes by which this may have come about may well now be due a revisit.*

... CORRIEVRECKAN ...

In her fascinating account of the Corrievreckan, Eileen Buchanan mentions the legend that 'Prince Brecon used the tresses of nine maidens to cross it' (*31.2*: 31–33). A much more dramatic version of the legend was told in the excellent film *I Know Where I'm Going* (written and directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; cast included Roger Livesey, Wendy Hiller, Pamela Brown and Finlay Currie, 1945). In this version, the Prince undertook to anchor on the edge of the whirlpool three nights running, if he could have cables made of the tresses of virgin girls. All went well on the first two nights, but on the third one of the girls was no longer a virgin. Her tress broke, the whole cable broke, and the Prince was engulfed in the whirlpool ...

W M S Russell

Eileen Buchanan's setting of the *Preiddeu Annwn* at the Corrievreckan whirlpool (Ian Brown's illustration captures the essence of her account magically, also) is so beautifully and atmospherically written as to convey immediate poetic conviction.

However, I still feel that accounts of real fortresses do instead underlie Taliesin's names and descriptions (a vitrified fort is literally a castle of glass, a fortress with complex spirally defended approaches could render onrushing attackers dizzy enough to feel they were revolving, and so on).

Steve Sneyd

"What greater place of initiation could there be for any warrior than sailing The Corrievreckan in full spate?" asks Eileen Buchanan [last issue, page 31].

About 15 years ago my father and I sailed a small yacht through the Corrievreckan, at slack tide of course – you have an hour or so's grace. It's a eerie place, the water oily and slick, bubbling away, and odd cross-currents, but I really think you'd have to be a bit of an idiot to sail it in full spate. Nevertheless, have any of our readers tried it?

Geoff Sawers, Swansea

Eileen Buchanan's account of the Corrievreckan whirlpool off the northernmost tip of Jura in the Scottish Western Isles (*Pendragon XXXI* No 2, 31–33), was fascinating, but incomplete. There is a second, less well-known, "Cauldron of Brecain" whirlpool, which lies between the "L"-shaped Rathlin Island, Co Antrim, and the Irish mainland, off Rue Point, the island's southernmost tip.

This whirlpool has an association with St. Columba (*c* 521–597 AD), according to Adamnan's "Life of Saint Columba". Book I.v of this has Columbannus "in great danger in the rolling tides of the whirlpool of Brecan", off Rechru Island (cited from p 63 of W M Metcalfe's translation, *Ancient Lives of Scottish Saints, Part One*, published in facsimile of the 1895 edition by Llanerch Publishers, 1998). Rathlin Island is still known locally as "Raghery", while John Speede's early 17th century maps refer to it as "Raghlyn" or "Raghlyns", so there is little question regarding its location. Later, in Book II.xiii, Columba himself is caught at sea in a storm "in the Brecain whirlpool" (*op cit*, 107–108). In both cases, Adamnan's "Life" has those in peril rescued, and in the latter case, the sea calmed, by the prayers of monks and their saintly abbots (Columba in the first instance) on the Irish mainland.

Rathlin Island had an early medieval monastic community on it, as its rugged, windswept appearance today might suggest, of which the remains of a stone sweathouse are visible modernly. The monks were driven off in 795 AD, when the Island gained the dubious distinction of being the first place in Ireland to be raided by Vikings.

Columba's noted travels between Ireland and Scotland make it surprising he has no association with the more famous Brecain whirlpool, especially as he had a retreat on Jura. Perhaps some of the tales attached to him have been transposed in location. Regarding his travels, and on the abilities of sailors of the period, there are some interesting comments in Elizabeth Rees' *Celtic Saints, Passionate Wanderers* (Thames & Hudson, 2000), pp 31–32. These include notes on the modern (1970s) successful attempts to recreate such journeys in period-style craft.

Elizabeth Rees' work (pp 49–53, including Map 5) also has some interesting thoughts on Brychan (*c* 490-550 AD), an Irish-born adventurer important in the early Christianization of south Wales. He supposedly passed his name on to Brecon there, though he was probably not the same as the Corrievreckan Brecain, who was said to be a merchant (the name-spellings are not always this distinctive). However Brychan's children can be found in dedications scattered across south-east Ireland, south Wales (in a distribution there not dissimilar to the places mapped in regard to the hunting of Twrch Trwyth in Chris Lovegrove's article in *Pendragon XXXI* No 2, 20–26), Cornwall / west Devon, and Brittany. Did his children carry with them tales of Arthur, perhaps? And if so, in which direction(s)?

Alastair McBeath, Morpeth, Northumberland

Note On elements of Rathlin's history mentioned here, and as still recounted modernly, *cf* the Michelin Green Guide *Ireland*, p 168 (1992 edition); Cadogan Guides' *Ireland* pp 421–422 and Map 7 (5th edition, 2002, by C Day updated by A Corzine); *The Rough Guide to Ireland*, pp 669 and 671 (7th edition, 2003, by M Greenwood, G Wallis, M Connolly and H Hawkins); and J MacKillop's *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford UP, 1998, p 95 "Corrievreckan"). *AM*

• *In Richard Sharpe's notes to his 1995 translation of* Adomnán of Iona: Life of Columba *(Penguin Classics), he suggests (265) that Corrievreckan I is off the west, not the south, end of Rathlin Island. As for Corrievreckan II, "by the fifteenth century, when the Scottish chronicler Fordun described the Hebrides, the name had been transferred to the now famous 'whirlpool', the Gulf of Corryvreckan, between the islands of Jura and Scarba."*
www.ukdiving.co.uk/ukdiving/sept/corry1.htm *emphasises Corryvreckan Whirlpool's real dangers, and includes a simplified chart and graphic of the pinnacle.*
http://www.scotlandthemovie.com/movies/corry.html *has stills from the film* I Know Where I'm Going*: the Corryvreckan scenes for the movie were reputed to have taken place between Scarba and Lunga – the Grey Dogs or Little Corryvreckan – "as the Corryvreckan itself was deemed far too risky to film in".*

... GLASTONBURY, PERSIA

Ian Brown gives a detailed account of the BBC2 programme, *The Terraces of Avalon* (*31.2*: 41–44). It is clear that Aubrey Manning gave his usual impeccable performance as presenter. But, apart from the title of the programme, which begs the whole question, I am surprised that nobody reported Geoffrey Ashe's extremely convincing reasons for concluding that these are not terraces (*eg* strip-lynchets) but a genuine maze.[8]

In *Old News* (*31.2*: 33–4) we are told that Mario Moiraghi suggests that Arthur is of Persian origin. He 'asks us to consider that *Art-* is a prefix for many Persian kings (*eg* Artaxerxes)'. There is no doubt that there are Persian influences on European folklore,[9] and Ian Brown has noted some very exact parallels in Arthurian literature with a tale from the *Thousand Nights and One Night*.[10] But to derive Arthur himself from Persia does seem to me far-fetched. *Artaxerxes* is of course the Greek mis-pronunciation of the Persian *Artakhshassa*. Moiraghi might point out that *Art-* still begins the Persian name. But to my knowledge this is the *only* Achaemenid king-name beginning with *Art-*, though there are some Parthian king-names of this kind. That *arta* means "just" in Persian I can only regard as a happy linguistic coincidence!

W M S Russell

A BED OF NETTLES REVISITED

Michael Bayley (*Pendragon XXXI* No 2, 9) continues to display a surprising degree of confusion and unfamiliarity with matters astronomical, considering the importance he placed on such topics in his original article (*Pendragon XXX*, No 1-2, 31-34). He now seems to be assuming that a lack of meteors ("shooting stars") from a given shower is because the meteors are too faint to be seen in modern light-polluted skies. This is quite wrong.

Shower meteors generally are somewhat brighter than the drizzle of random non-shower meteors present all the time. (This background rate averages roughly 4-12 meteors an hour, although the actual numbers vary diurnally and annually.) Moreoever, meteor activity is judged by what experienced naked-eye observers report seeing from the clearest, darkest skies available. Careful analysis of such data shows some 35-40 night-time meteor showers are visible from Earth at present each year. Eight of these regularly provide more than one meteor every five minutes at their best (usually on one night), with just three yielding reliable rates of one or more meteors a minute for part of a night or two annually. These activity levels apply under ideal circumstances, so only the strongest three showers are likely to produce nights when someone other than a dedicated meteor observer might realize significantly more meteors were happening than normal.

Defining a meteor shower's radiant more accurately than to a vague direction in the sky, is very difficult. Narrowing it down to a specific, small area of the heavens needs painstaking individual meteor recordings, and later careful analysis. Attempting this under the sky without such a rigorous approach, shows enormous errors in radiant positions between observers (anything up to

[8] Ashe, G (1984) *Avalonian Quest* (London: Fontana) *passim*
[9] Russell, W M S (2001–2) "Fishes and Water Babies" *Pendragon 29* No 4, 4
[10] Brown, I (2001) "The Arabian Knights of the Round Table?" *Pendragon 29* No 3, 33–34

70 degrees for even a strong shower). For "shepherds and countrymen" tending animals by night to have achieved this, but not to have passed even a scrap of that information down to anyone else over several millennia, which seems to be what Michael is suggesting, is hugely implausible.

There are so many ancient pre-Christian festival days, and later Christian saints' days, it is inevitable some will coincide with some meteor shower maxima, by chance. However, meteor showers change over time. The three best major showers modernly show peaks on January 3 or 4 (Quadrantids), August 12 or 13 (Perseids) and December 13 or 14 (Geminids). In the 1850s, these respective peaks occurred on January 1 or 2, August 10 or 11 and December 11 or 12, though the Geminids had peak rates only about 10% of their present strength, while neither the Quadrantids nor Geminids were detected before the 19th century. The first recorded probable Perseid return, in 36 AD from Chinese texts, provided strong activity, but on July 17. As no ancient festivals or more recent saints' days show a comparable shift with time, there is no reason to assume any long-lasting association with specific meteor showers exists, or existed, despite Michael's contrary desire. Further details on meteors, meteor showers and their behaviour over time, is in the *Handbook for Visual Meteor Observers*, edited by J Rendtel, R Arlt and A McBeath (International Meteor Organization, Potsdam, 1995).

As for stars being visible in daytime from deep holes (including wells, or chimneys), this was disproven by experiment long ago. See most recently "On Seeing Stars (especially up chimneys)" by D. W. Hughes, in *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society*, Vol 24, No 3 (1983), pp 246-257.

Alastair McBeath

CONUNDRUM

My thanks to *Pendragon* readers for seeing the Glastonbury Cross conundrum as fascinating as I did [letters, last issue]. As Charles Evans-Günther so rightly stated, it may indeed be nothing more than just pure 'speculation', in fact that is what I seriously considered it to be at the beginning. But then I decided to see what other notable institutions would make of it.

First I wrote to the custodians of Glastonbury Abbey – the place of origin – who were delighted at the prospect of something new emerging that may have gone unnoticed. They then sent me a list of authors and archaeologists included James P Carley, P Rahtz and the celebrated [late] C A R Radford.

I then approached the church to ask them the religious significance of the geometry. There was a moment of sheer excitement, after which I was questioned about my knowledge of the Greek language and any thoughts I might have had on ancient cross symbolism; of both of these I had to confess I knew nothing. I was then directed to read some literature that gave fascinating information concerning early Christian Greek symbols to confirm the geometry.

Then I was advised to make contact with a religious society called the Knights of St Columba, who I discovered took a very deep interest in this kind of religious material, and they were eager to pursue any enquiries on my behalf. But at a regular council meeting they were unable to report anything that would prove useful. They left me however with further contacts to other Knights in the Glastonbury area – should I ever need to reach them – but insisted I should continue the quest.

To get an academic viewpoint, and with much trepidation, I sent the hypothesis to Birkbeck College, University of London. Here of all places I expected to be derided and politely told what a vivid imagination I possessed. But I was pleasantly surprised when, instead of wincing, a professor declared that the hypothesis was very intriguing and there may indeed be something in it. He also warned me to prepare myself a defence against any objections prior to going public. At this point I began to feel a little bit more optimistic and perhaps glad I did not bin it all as speculation at the very beginning.

Then, purely because my wife had a relative working with them, I took the unusual step to get a secular viewpoint from a senior detective in the Metropolitan Police. I asked him, as a detective, what he made of the cross and its design. This sparked a great interest among his other colleagues.

He laughingly said it was a shame we could not bring people in for questioning, but that's history for you. The cross design was contradictory. The space under the word *REX* was suspicious. Why was it made of lead and not gold? The monks may have been involved in a scam. Would they have conned Edward I? Would the monks, as devout Christians, have lied anyway? Would it be conceivable that the monks may have hidden something very valuable before Henry's men arrived to pillage the abbey?

I would like to thank Ian Brown for his very constructive comments. Yes, if the outlying points of the seal could be justified as important locations then it would add value to the hypothesis. But at the outset it seemed to me that the main purpose of the geometry was an endorsement for the symbols to pinpoint the *X* placed at the centre. Ian, did you notice how the tilt to the right allowed just the left half of the geometry from the vertical centre line to be constructed?

The other *A* letters in the text do not play (nor were needed to play) an integral part in the construction of the geometry, but the two used are very significant. The top right *A* did become very important when it became clear its tilted position constructed a decisive angle line. The letter *A* in the left cross arm is extremely large by comparison to all the others, with its left leg thrust hard into the corner; to run a line through it seemed to me to be very logical, as it lead to an important convergence point for the design. Can you explain why the letter *A* would need to have been chosen? Is there an Arthur link?

The North and South Transepts were often used as burial places for many early abbots and other notables: apparently hardly a place remains where someone has not been buried. To examine the *X* location as you have suggested is not permitted due to it being a sacred heritage site – a bit like Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland. But I am in no doubt that the discovery should remain as an interesting hypothesis. As my friend in the police was very quick to point out to me, history quite often suffers from a severe lack of evidence.

Terence F Dick, Worthing, West Sussex

Ian Brown

the board

SMALL SCREEN

Further to previous mentions of episodes in the sci-fi TV series **Babylon 5** *with Arthurian content, Alastair McBeath writes:*

The first overtly Arthurian story is ***Grail***, featuring David Warner (an interesting choice, as he is much more noted for playing villains). He plays a man searching for the Holy Grail, the last of a small religious order on Earth, who have given up hope of finding the Grail on Earth, and have carried their search to the stars instead. He comes to the space station to ask all the ambassadors if any of their records give any clues as to its whereabouts.

During his fruitless wait for information, he gets involved with a construction worker who has fallen in with criminals, and takes him under his charge. Eventually, a fight ensues with the construction worker's former criminal employer's henchmen, in which David Warner's character is fatally injured.

The story ends with the construction worker, now using his real name of Thomas, taking on the mantle of the last Grail-seeker, and heading off into the universe to carry on the search. Sounds ghastly written down like this, but the plot works quite well if you can suspend disbelief sufficiently not to be too worried about an off-world Grail.

The episode ***A Late Delivery from Avalon*** features the Arthur story, where a man in medieval armour (played by Michael York) steps off an arriving spacecraft at the station, claiming to be Arthur, King of the Britons, returning to aid Earth in its hour of need. After a time, a few fight scenes and a chance to show his noble character, the station's doctor discovers "Arthur" is really the weapons officer from an Earth spacecraft which had mistakenly started a war with one of the other races, the Minbari, by firing on one of their craft. The meeting of spacecraft was intended to establish friendly relations. The subsequent war had almost led to Earth's destruction, so there are obvious parallels with Arthuriana – error at a parley leading to a deadly destructive war. The stresses of this knowledge have pushed the weapons officer into an imaginary belief that he is Arthur.

"Cured" before the end of the episode, he goes off to help organise the resistance movement on another planet fighting for freedom. Overall a disappointing tale, since following through on the idea that he really was Arthur returning would probably have made for a far more interesting series!

TREADING THE BOARDS

Described as "one of the all-time pinnacles of preposterousness", Rick Wakeman's 1975 Wembley shows of ***The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*** made it onto a recent shortlist of "lavish, over-the-top rock-folly extravaganzas" (along with specified tours by Pink Floyd, Madonna, Alice Cooper, David Bowie and others).

Scores of ice skaters re-enacted Wakeman's famous concept album because, as he revealed in BBC tv's *Have I Got News For You*, the Wembley management insisted that another show's ice-rink couldn't be dismantled, and so a memorable idea was born. One night a skater was indisposed, with the result that a choreographed sequence of battling knights finished with a lone horseman lacking an adversary to kill him. He did the noble thing and committed hara-kiri.

Ernest Chausson's opera ***Le Roi Artus*** was given another outing on BBC Radio 3 (November 29 2003). Broadcast from La Monnaie Opera House, Brussells, it marked the centenary of the opera's premiere there in 1903, a wait of 18 years after its completion.

• Chris Roberts "Spectacle cases" *The Guardian The Guide* Saturday February 7 2004

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Lost consonants bedevilled Prof Russell's "Arthur and Merlin in *Wild Wales*" last issue – *eg* "ravel books" should have been "travel books" (page 27) and there was a missing *t* in "his indefatiguable hiker" – and "amazing" somehow became "amusing" (page 28). The title of Charles Evans-Günther's "The Real King Arthur" lacked a final question mark. In "The Hunt for the Cambrian Boar", Geoffrey Ashe's *Guidebook to Arthurian Britain* (1983 Aquarian Press) was not referenced.

In *Old News* references to J Ormo (page 34) in Alastair McBeath's piece should have been to J Örmo, and so-called weaving swords ("The Sword in the Loom" page 34) measure (for any confused readers) between 40 and 80 cm.

PERIODICALS

A new A4 journal called ***The Raven***, "dedicated to the Once and Future King", is being published by the City of London chapter of the Fellowship of the Knights of the Round Table. Issues, like *Pendragon*, will have a specific theme: the first was centred on 'the animal kingdom', the second is planned to be on 'mystery and magic'. In the slimline first issue Roly Rotherham wrote on mythical and legendary beasts, Stuart Notholt contributed "Thorfinn the Raven Feeder", while editor Andy Smith discussed royal beasts – the lion and the unicorn, the dragon and the falcon – and reported on a talk given by Chris Gidlow on "Henry Tudor and Merlin's Prophecies". No cover price was provided, but further details are

available from the editor at Cygnet House, 2 West Street, Epsom, Surrey KT18 7RG.

Medieval History Magazine (£3.60 or £40.00 *pa*) claims it is the UK's first glossy monthly magazine dedicated to the medieval era. Produced in conjunction with Royal Armouries, Leeds, it is published and printed by Hamois France (harnoiscorp.com or *contact@harnois.fr*). The November 2003 issue included articles on Anglo-Saxon physicians, Dark Age board games, a review of *The Raven* and appreciation of *Excalibur!*

A deliberately provocative cover with screaming banner headlines did the trick for me in February's ***BBC History Magazine***: "REVEALED: THE SECRET OF THE HOLY GRAIL – the legend that gripped medieval Europe and fuelled a modern cult of mystery". This was a chance for respected author Richard Barber to promote his new book *The Holy Grail: imagination and belief* (Allen Lane 2004 £25.00). His wide-ranging and well-illustrated article "On the trail of the Holy Grail" promises good things from the book, as did the same author's "Looking for the Holy Grail" in March's ***History Today 54(3)***.

Issue 26 (spring 2004) of ***The Dragon Chronicle*** features Steve Sneyd's analysis of the three places in Wolfram's work which introduce significant dragon material, "Dragon from womb to grail: tracing the motif in *Parzival*", plus the editor's impressive survey, "Dragons of Britain". Supporters of the theory that Black Horse pubs represent folk memories of Arthur's cavalry campaigns may be interested in issue 97 of ***Northern Earth*** (spring 2004). David Raven's "The Black Horse of the Howgill Hills" investigates reports of an elusive hill figure in the fells near Sedbergh, claimed to be mentioned in a Welsh Triad but, from the photographic evidence, shape-shifting due to weathering of the scree. The redoubtable *Northern Earth* is itself celebrating its 25th anniversary with a moot in Skipton Town Hall, North Yorkshire, on May 29 2004. Further details from Northern Earth Moot, 10 Jubilee Street, Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge, W Yorkshire HX7 5NP or moot@northernearth.co.uk or visit www.northernearth.co.uk

Compiled by C Lovegrove and S Sneyd

JOURNALS AND SOCIETIES

Arthurian Association of Australia Enquiries: 19 Carcoola Road, Cromer, NSW 2099, Australia www.arthurian.asn.au

The Cauldron Paganism, folklore, earth mysteries. Sample: £3.00, annual subs: £12.00, cheques M A Howard, BM Cauldron, London WC1N 3XX
www.the-cauldron.fsnet.co.uk

Celtic Connections Journal of Celtic and related subjects. Sample: £1.25, UK annual subs: £10.00 / £18.00, cheques: Celtic Connections Magazine. Editor: David Barton, 97 Rosehill Drive, Bransgore, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 8NX editorceltconn@aol.com
www.Celtic-connections-magazine.co.uk

Hallowquest Caitlin and John Matthews' publishing and teaching programmes. Four issues $8.00 / £16.00 World, cheques: Caitlin Matthews, BCM Hallowquest, London WC1N 3XX www.hallowquest.org.uk

Meyn Mamvro Cornish ancient stones and sacred sites. Sample: £2.20, annual subs: £6.50, cheques Cheryl Straffon, 51 Carn Bosavern, St Just, Penzance, Cornwall TR19 7QX www.meynmamvro.co.uk
cheryl.straffon@meynmamvro.freeserve.co.uk

Northern Earth Journal of the Northern Earth Mysteries Group. Sample: £1.70, four issues £6.50, cheques: Northern Earth Mysteries Group, subs@northernearth.co.uk Editor: John Billingsley, 10 Jubilee Street, Mytholmroyd, Hebden Bridge, W Yorks HX7 5NP editor@northern.co.uk
www.northernearth.co.uk

The Dragon Chronicle The International Journal of Dragons and Dragonlore. Sample: £2.50, annual subs: £8.00, cheques: Dragonslair. Editor: Dragon, c/o 106 Oakridge Road, High Wycombe, Bucks HP11 2PL drakan@ntlworld.com

The Round Table Occasional Arthurian poetry and fiction. Editors: Alan Lupack, Barbara Tepa Lupack. Enquiries: The Round Table, Box 18673, Rochester, New York NY 14618, USA (enclose IRC)
lib.rochester.edu/camelot/arthmenu.htm

Widowinde Anglo-Saxon literature, history and culture. Editor: Karl Wittwer. Sample: £3.50, enquiries: BM Box 4336, London WC1N 3XX
www.tha-engliscan-gesithas.org.uk

Henry Kuttner and an unusual Merlin

W M S Russell

In an earlier contribution to this journal, I discussed Henry Kuttner's story "Wet Magic".[1] In that story Merlin, though given comic treatment, was the kind of familiar Merlin we can all recognise. But in Kuttner's novel *The Dark World*,[2] there is a very different and quite unexpected Merlin. Like any fiction with the by-line of Kuttner, his wife C L Moore, both of them, or one of their numerous pseudonyms, we cannot now tell how much each contributed, but for convenience I shall treat Kuttner as the sole author of this novel.

The Dark World is not exactly an original work. In 1932, Abraham Merritt first published his marvellous novel *Dwellers in the Mirage*.[3] The plot was so superb that it was an irresistible temptation for later writers to steal it, make some alterations in the setting, omit many details, and produce thinly disguised versions of their own. There are at least two of these: Kuttner's *The Dark World* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Falcons of Narabedla*.[4] I had assumed both these imitations were derived directly from Merritt, but Brian Stableford has told me that, whereas Kuttner was imitating Merritt, Bradley was imitating Kuttner, and therefore Merritt at second hand. *Dwellers in the Mirage* is Merritt's masterpiece, and one of the greatest stories in the whole of world literature, and neither the Kuttner nor the Bradley novel can compare with it for a moment, but apart from being derivative both are excellent stories, well worth reading.

Before introducing the Merlin of *The Dark World*, I will give a simplified version of the plot of the novel. The hero, an American airman called Edward Bond, is spirited out of our world to one of alternate probability, the Dark World. There his body is taken over by a villainous character called Ganelon, presumably after the traitor in the *Chanson de Roland*, though they have nothing in common but villainy. Ganelon is quite bad enough in himself, but in addition he is somehow enslaved to a demon-god called Llyr, from whom he has certain supernormal powers. He is a member of the evil oligarchy that rules the Dark World, frightfully oppressing its inhabitants and offering them periodically as human sacrifices to Llyr. Ganelon's colleagues in this oligarchy are a werewolf, a vampire, a gorgon, and a magician so aged and decrepit that he is near to death. There is a Resistance movement, led by a beautiful heroine and a white witch, but they have only had limited success so far, and live as outlaws in the woods.

Ganelon discovers that the three monsters are planning treacherously to offer him to Llyr as a human sacrifice. Furious, he determines to make himself sole dictator of the world, eliminating the monsters and freeing himself from the demon-god. He makes a deal with the Resistance, fully intending, of course, to double-cross them as soon as he no longer needs them. With help from the white witch and instructions from the aged magician, he manages indeed to destroy the monsters and even the demon-god. But just as he is about to dispose of the Resistance and take over the world, the white witch intervenes. Ganelon and Bond cannot coexist in one world, but they can in limbo, where the white witch brings them together, so that Bond can kill his wicked opposite number. She then returns him to the Dark World, evidently to marry the heroine and co-operate with the Resistance in establishing a democratic civilisation.

Now after his last effort of giving Ganelon his magical instructions, the aged magician dies. But before dying he announces his identity. He is Merlin! Apparently Viviane (Nimue) did not confine him in a tree or an

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[1] Russell, W M S (1998) "Henry Kuttner and Morgan le Fay" *Pendragon* 27 No 1, 4–10

[2] First published in *Startling Stories* (Summer 1946); book version, New York: Ace Books (1965)

[3] First published in *Argosy* (January–March 1932); book version, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation (1932)

[4] First published in *Other Worlds* (May 1957); book version, New York: Ace Books (1964)

invisible castle, but sent him to the Dark World. He can never return to our world, and can only dream nostalgically of Vortigem, Uther, Arthur, the crags of Wales, and a breeze from Ireland.

Whether he is embittered by this fate, or finally expressing the genes of his demon father, Merlin in the Dark World has certainly become a bad bad man, quite unlike any other Merlin in legend or literature, for he becomes the grey eminence of the evil oligarchy. But Kuttner seems to hold out a suggestion of his final redemption. Not only does he help Ganelon to destroy all the other evil beings, but, as a great prophet, he may well foresee the eventual success of Edward Bond. He tells Ganelon that he will live, and that he will die too, surely a forecast of the final episode in limbo. So after all his wickedness, he dies making all necessary preparations of the happy ending.[5]

Poems

Lady of the Lake

Are you waiting
below dimpled water

to bring Excalibur
to the surface once more?

Arthur's people are ready.

Wipe off the rust,
Sharpen the trusty blade

Let the sword
Carve out a new future.

Arthur's people are ready.

Les Merton

Barbarians

Kings and chieftains
ruled the tribal lands
with pagan swords
and iron hands

In the village
craftsmen worked in wood and stone
shaping spears and shields
and golden bows

... While the battle-axe dried
in the blood-red sun

The mighty force of a warrior breed
with a courage forged
in battle's heat
where man and horse and blade were one
and dark sheets of arrows
scourged the skies
beneath Attila's brutal shadow

Worshipping their
grim-faced Gods
the talisman, and mystic runes
unsettled nomadic wanderers
shrouded in time's distant hues

Abiding by unwritten laws
and traditions fading in the mist
with Destiny watching from the wings –
of a gap in history's eternal script

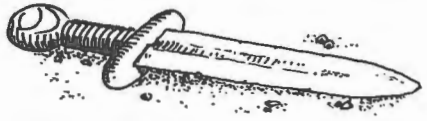
The tribes spread out in their growing clans
and would not bow to any rule
as the Goths sacked a dying Rome ...
her Empire crumbling like Hadrian's Wall

And now we wonder, looking back
as our own Dark Ages fall

in this forever changing tide of life

did civilisation ever, really dawn?

Steven Gunning



[5] I am most grateful to Brian Stableford for help with the publishing history of the three books

Peter Vansittart

Time to cease shunning the scrivener?

Mark Valentine

Described as "Britain's most under-rated novelist" and as having "almost single-handedly redeemed the historical novel from its middlebrow reputation", Peter Vansittart is characteristically modest about his literary achievements of over fifty years. Sir Angus Wilson called him "one of our most ingenious, daring and brilliant novelists". Yet he still expresses gentle surprise that publishers are willing to persevere with novels that have won wide critical acclaim while never quite gaining the public's affection. "My novels have been appreciated, if not always enjoyed, more by critics than the reading public, which shows no signs of enjoying them at all," he comments ruefully in a guide to historical writers.

Peter Vansittart's novels are notable for their poetic conciseness and depth of meaning, their determination to portray historical periods with all the agonies of the time left in – plague, famine, persecution, brutal wars – and their author's conviction that history has a profound continuing resonance for our own time.

While he has also written contemporary novels, he remains mostly known for his innovative and unique approach to historical fiction. Fifteen of his novels are set, or mostly set, in the past, and Vansittart frequently describes places and periods which are refreshingly unfamiliar to the reader: 16th century Germany at the time of the Anabaptist movement; late medieval France just when the age of chivalry is giving away to the first onset of modernity; the Dark Ages. He has also shown the imaginative strength to bring a dramatically new perspective to the two greatest British myth cycles, those of King Arthur and Robin Hood. And he was one of the first to experiment with continuities in time in the novel by portraying characters from different epochs connected by common motifs and undercurrents.

I asked Peter Vansittart what had drawn him to historical fiction. He said he thought it was the form which still offered most scope for new approaches. He had never acquired a taste for comparable genres such as SF or Fantasy, which to him often seemed at heart unconvincing. Writing of our past offers the possibility of working with the half-understood, sometimes only half-perceived images and experiences which still have so much influence over us today.

In a brief essay written over forty years ago, Vansittart correctly identified that "the historical novel too often lacks prestige", perhaps because many of its exponents have been apt to depict our ancestors as "only ourselves in fancy dress". He seeks instead to restore the sense, the essence of a historical period. He has been especially concerned to draw upon a sustained consciousness of the prevailing inner life which would govern characters' responses to their world: the certainties, bewilderments, speculations, prejudices they would carry with them: and to ensure too that the "grosser realities" of that world are not glossed over.

He is temperamentally and intellectually inclined to reject the "black and white" view of history, which sees our past in terms of clear-cut conflicts between opposing forces, for example of tradition or progress, or heroism and antiheroism. He sees history as most often formed by muddle, chance, fickleness, fraud, failure of understanding. His perspective is mostly pessimistic yet leavened by a fascination with the sheer sprawling denseness of life and by a delicate handling of that desperate refuge, irony.

The immediate inspiration for one of his novels may be no more than a single line or phrase read somewhere, or overheard, which provokes his curiosity, and whole chapters may stem from a single image. He is a devoted literary craftsman who pieces together his work mosaic-like and redrafts repeatedly. A characteristic device is the sequence of sentences cataloguing with sudden, startling swiftness the tumult of bizarre myths and wondrous rumours which are swirling around in the time and domain he is depicting, as in this passage from the opening page of *A Safe Conduct* (1995):

"Blessed Thomas Aquinas is invoked against thunder and sudden death, you can rout a demon by uttering his secret name,

never easy to discover; a mistletoe twig, if carried into the underworld, assures your safe return ... Midwinter yule fires have again revived the dying sun. To swallow dragon's blood is more effective than gulping Farmer Hegeber's over-priced beer, for it enables you to understand birds' speech; the difficulty is not in killing a dragon but in finding one. Astrologers value cocks' eggs for cock-eyed tricks of changing mud to silver. If you bend the sunlight you can overcome God himself, some whispering that King Siegfried did this so strenuously that light has never wholly recovered, thus explaining the lengthening winters, regular murrain, Turkish victories, collapsing morals, devil-worship."

Vansittart acknowledges that this highly personal style has sometimes taken precedence over storytelling qualities, and thus deterred readers, but he adds, "Today I take narrative more seriously, though still relying, perhaps over-relying, on descriptive colour, unexpected imagery, the bizarre and curious – no formula for popular success."

Beginning

First readers of his work might do best to start with one of his acknowledged classics, *The Tournament* (1958). Set in a fictional 15th century Duchy, a version of Burgundy, Vansittart depicts in brilliant detail the ceremonies, rituals, pomp and protocol of the court, exemplified by the empty charade of a challenge to mortal combat between the Duke and another noble, which everyone knows will never take place. The ravages of the Plague recall the Duke to the real business of a ruler, and the grim necessities necessary to defend a way of life in dire peril.

Perhaps a more daunting beginning might be his tragically compelling novel, *The Friends of God* (1963: in the USA entitled *The Siege*), a humane and searing account of the suppression of the Anabaptists, that communitarian, freethinking, primitive Christian movement which swept across Germany and the Low Countries in the 16th century. One critic acclaimed the novel as a literary equivalent of "the phantasmagoria of sixteenth-century woodcuts, the writhing bodies, the strange and bestial physiognomies ... the stench, the filth, the callousness towards suffering, the demonic excesses of the age."

A Safe Conduct fuses both these early successes by re-evoking a similar figure to the Duke of *The Tournament*, in a similar dilemma, while a peasant insurrection rages outside his gates. Unlike Prince Prospero in Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death', Vansittart's aristocrat, weary, harried, recovers enough of his humanity to understand and accept the hardships and hard decisions he must endure with his people.

Arthurian myth

Readers with a taste for a similarly bold and clear-eyed view of the Arthurian myths would do well to read his *Lancelot* (1978), in which the mythically fallible hero stands as an archetype for the time as a whole, with its doomed Romano-British culture. While admiring the storytelling qualities of past Arthurian writers such as John Masefield and Rosemary Sutcliff, Vansittart regards their work as still imbued with the heavily romanticised Arthur of Tennyson's poems. His approach is confessedly the antithesis of this: ripely realistic, his novel was an early attempt to sweep away the later, anachronistic accretions of chivalry and mysticism and show us uncompromisingly the dilemmas of men and women struggling in a dark time.

Vansittart returned to the Arthurian myth cycle with *Parsifal* (1988), in which the character type of "the Holy Fool" is explored and exposed as wanting, as a reckless abdication of the full burden of being human: his Parsifal is redeemed not by his miracles of sanctity but by an act of selfless love.

Three Six Seven (1983) takes us to the period immediately before Arthur, as the barbarians first challenge Roman rule. Peter Vansittart told me how the impetus for the novel came from a single glimpse of the number 367 somewhere while on a journey: it nagged away at the back of the author's mind until he reached his destination and feverishly riffled through his host's books to find the reference he was looking for: 367 was the year of successful attacks on Britain by Scots, Picts and Saxons. Set in *Calleva Atrebatum* (now Silchester), the novel depicts this crucial year through the eyes of a successful Roman trader, Drusus, brooding in exile on what the incursions will mean for his society, his culture. The novel inspired one reviewer to demand, "When will this writer of

extraordinary talent receive his due?", while another, acknowledging the book was "the very opposite of the easy, idle read", stressed that "it demands full attention, sends one scurrying back to re-read ... leaves me eager to read it again."

Similarly, in *The Death of Robin Hood* (1981), Vansittart is not content simply to retell the greenwood legends, but instead seeks to show how the outlaw is still an abiding presence through later centuries: he is evoked in episodes focusing on the Luddite agitations of the early 19th century and the depression of the Nineteen Thirties. This technique is used in other novels, including *Parsifal*: since both figures are eternal archetypes, Vansittart sees them as "totally independent of actual time and history ... big enough for one to want to see how they would affect different ages".

Shunned?

Now in his eighties, Peter Vansittart has more recently devoted his writing to memoirs and anthologies. This is historical fiction's loss. While his harder-eyed approach to the past has now become more accepted among fellow writers in the field, few of them can match the brittle beauty of his language, the rich fecundity of his imaginative identity with the eras he depicts and the profundity of his historical insight.

2000, however, brought a welcome return to the historical novel form with *Hermes in Paris*. This depicts the Hellenic god of magic, messages, thieves and trickery as a jaded dandy in the fakely gorgeous city of the Second Empire, adorned with a scarlet cravat, and a serpent-entwined cane, slyly ubiquitous, amusing himself at mortal antics, tipping a peacock's feather into the great scales of events to unbalance them just sufficiently to stimulate disorder and change, his preferred state. He pervades the opulent and operatic city like a mood, a caprice, a fleet-footed rumour. He observes, and guides, not always to their advantage, a radical columnist who frequents the old, unboulevarded underworld of the city, and a young schoolboy, a roamer and a loner, a reader of strange signs in the dark streets, who understands symbols that adults do not.

Hermes is depicted as both *flaneur* in human form and as shape-shifting deity, a subtle and swift spirit that achieves its ends by the most delicate and unassuming of interventions. There is a hint of a much lighter, much more allusive version of Woland, the incarnation of Satan in the Moscow of the Thirties, in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, who transforms that city by a series of more surreal and shocking escapades. There is also much, in Vansittart's novel, of the world of café conspiracies, backstreet freak-shows, slum sorcery and revolutionary broadsides which characterised the underside of the baroque cosmopolis that was Paris just before it was brought down by the disastrous war with Prussia, helped along, it seems by a delicate touch from the hand of Hermes, god of chance, god of change. The quicksilver virtuosity of this late-vintage novel proves him once again to be a fine votary of that immortal who was also the patron-god of high arcane literature.

In *A Safe Conduct*, both the Castle authorities and the villagers shun a strange vagabond scrivener since for them "writing is another manifestation of magic ... a handful of words, nevertheless arranged in particular positions, could somehow unite the ends of the world in a brilliant growth of suggestion and discovery. *A threefold dome, an isle of reeds, the wings of the dawn.*" Lacking the excuses of illiteracy or superstition, it is surely time we ceased shunning the scrivener's art of Peter Vansittart.

Peter Vansittart's historical fiction

Enemies (Chapman & Hall, 1947)
The Overseer (Chapman & Hall, 1949)
The Tournament (The Bodley Head, 1958)
The Friends of God (Macmillan, 1963)
The Lost Lands (Macmillan, 1964)
The Story Teller (Peter Owen, 1968)
Pastimes of a Red Summer (Peter Owen, 1969)
Lancelot (Peter Owen, 1978)
The Death of Robin Hood (Peter Owen, 1981)
Three Six Seven (Peter Owen, 1983)
Parsifal (Peter Owen, 1988)
The Wall (Peter Owen, 1990)
A Choice of Murder (Peter Owen, 1992)
A Safe Conduct (Peter Owen, 1995)
Hermes in Paris (Peter Owen, 2000)

• *This article first appeared in 2001*

'There's a feeling I get, when I look to the West...'

or, How The Once And Future King Helped Shape The World's Biggest Band

Simon Rouse

Jan Brown

'It was a marriage of electric bombast and Celtic mythology; of bone-shaking riffs and ethereal thoughts. The riffs came from guitarist Jimmy Page via the honky-tonks and shotgun shacks of the Mississippi delta, the legends from vocalist Robert Plant via the swirling mists, border wars and mountain spirits of Wales.'

Led Zeppelin. During the 1970s that name became the byword for success on an epic scale in the music world. They outsold everybody, breaking attendance records held by the Beatles and The Rolling Stones, and had a string of gold records, although to the general public they were relative unknowns. It wasn't that their achievements weren't reported; it's just that the Stones had a bigger PR machine. Zeppelin was formed in 1968 and by 1970, through an aggressive battle plan of relentless touring, had conquered the world. They had released two acclaimed albums that amply demonstrated their capabilities, the second of which had been written and recorded on the road, in and out of studios when time between concerts allowed. On their first album, the majority of the lyrics had been provided by Jimmy Page, although by *Led Zeppelin II* singer Robert Plant had begun to blossom as the band's lyricist. Lyrically the songs began to reflect his burgeoning interests and worldviews; a growing interest in history and love of the countryside, accumulated through the band's constant travelling. 'Ramble On ' is a prime example, with its references to Mordor and Gollum, and part of the opening verse to 'What Is And What Should Never Be': *'... it's to a castle I will take you'*, evidence of his developing interest in the myths and legends of Britain. Bassist John Paul Jones: *"(Robert) was a huge Celt in those days! He'd rented a place on the Hereford border and was into that whole Welsh mythology."* And Robert himself: *"After reading Tolkien, I just had to have a place in the country."*

After these two intense years, the band were understandably suffering from a sense

of burn-out. Zeppelin were an explosive live act, touring with no support groups and frequently playing for three hours or more. Robert Plant was *'the interstellar vocalist singing of love ... and misty Celtic kingdoms.'* They needed to take a break from their rigorous schedule and Robert suggested to Jimmy Page that they visit a small cottage in Snowdonia that he'd been to as a child with his parents, to recuperate and work on new material. It was here at the cottage Bron y Aur, secluded in the hills overlooking the River Dovey near Machynlleth on the Gwynedd / Powys border, that they could take stock and relax in beautiful countryside, reflecting on their achievements. New songs started to take shape that would make up the bulk of their next album, *Led Zeppelin III*. The whole environment was conducive to creativity, as Robert noted recently: *"So we went to Wales and lived on the side of a hill and wrote those songs and walked and talked and thought and went off to the abbey where they hid the Grail"*, a reference to Strata Florida Abbey, a few miles down the road near Aberystwyth. The lyrics reflected this country idyll and Zeppelin biographer Richie Yorke noted this: *"The variations could instantly be heard on first playing - acoustic and semi-acoustic material; a mix of Celtic mysticism; intricate lacy songs to parallel the straightforward pounding riff numbers."* *Music Now* magazine described one of the songs, 'Tangerine', as *"having a chord sequence that conjures up thoughts of brave knights and Camelot"*.

Led Zeppelin III provided the groundwork for what was to become their highly regarded, untitled, fourth album. Again it was a mixture of electric and acoustic numbers that showed how diverse they could be, with two tracks in particular showing the influence of Robert's reading at the time: Tolkien remained in evidence, although not excessively so, along with Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and *The Magic Arts In Celtic Britain* by Lewis Spence. Robert said of one of these two songs, 'The Battle Of Evermore': *"I'd been reading a book on the Scottish wars ... [T]he number is really more of a playlet than a song. While I sang about the events in the song, Sandy* [guest vocalist Sandy Denny] *answered back as if she was the pulse of the people on the battlements"*. It's a song about good versus evil, the need to fight for a just cause and *'... waiting for the angels of Avalon'*. The following song on the album has become the band's magnum opus, 'Stairway To Heaven', with its nature imagery and reference to the May-Queen and a Lady who shines white light. Richie Yorke comments that *"Plant has since cited the book by Lewis Spence as one of his inspirations in writing the wonderful 'Stairway' lyrics."* Although today the song is derided in some quarters as an example of the overblown excesses of the 70s, not least by Robert Plant himself, it remains a beautiful piece of work, full of grace and power, and is one of the few songs that seems so completely to occupy its own space.

Over the next two years Zeppelin consolidated their already huge success while Robert *'was poring through dusty old books on Celtic history and ancient civilisations. He was totally fascinated by his exploration of the centuries-old conflict between the Celts and Saxons along the Welsh border, not far from his home town.'* In 1973 he bought a farm in the Llyfnant Valley, on the Powys / Ceredigion border. While living there *'he immersed himself in the life of rural Wales; taking Welsh lessons ... and pursuing his fascination with the legends of the Dark Ages through the manuscripts kept at the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.'* Said Robert himself; *"You don't have to have too much of an imagination or a library full of books if you live there. It's still there. On a murky October evening, with the watery sun looking down on those hills over some old castle."*

During 1973 they began work on a concert film, recorded at Madison Square Garden in New York. Interspersed between the music were five fantasy sequences, one for each member of the band and their manager. Robert Plant's was a further confirmation of his interests. Co-director of the film Joe Massot said that *"Robert decided to do a Welsh legend with a character perhaps similar to King Arthur"*; while another Zeppelin biographer, Howard Mylett, noted that *'Robert had been filmed riding around green glades dressed as King Arthur, a subject and period in which he is particularly interested'*. The sequence leaves the viewer in little doubt that, indeed, Arthur

was the portrayed character. Robert is first seen heading towards the shore in a boat, Welsh flag streaming in the wind, where, upon landing, he finds, or re-claims, a horse. Next we see him striding back into the water to receive a sword with potentially magical properties from a lady on horseback. Excalibur and the Lady of the Lake, perhaps? Then we are back into some woodland and that important connection with nature again, before Robert is off to a castle (Raglan Castle, between Monmouth and Abergavenny, was used) to rescue the damsel and slay the bad guys. Sounds a bit lame when written down like this, doesn't it? But bear in mind it was the early seventies and, to be fair, the sequence does hold up quite well on celluloid. And it was supposed to be a fantasy sequence, after all. Later on, along with contemporaries Pink Floyd, Zeppelin were to help finance another Arthurian project, the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

In the midst of all this, a second child had been born to Robert and Maureen, a son who was appropriately named Karac Pendra, shortened versions of two Welsh names; Caractacus and, of course, Pendragon. Little Karac, though, had barely a chance to fulfil his potential because, just five years later, tragedy struck when he died suddenly of a respiratory illness while his father was away on tour in America. Karac's grandfather summed up their loss so succinctly: *"All this success and fame ... what is it worth? It doesn't mean very much when you compare it to the love of a family."*

It took the best part of two years for the band to become active again while Robert tried to console himself and his family and questioned whether he could carry on. When they eventually did reconvene, the venue was Clearwell Castle, once again within the environs of Monmouthshire, an area that has a particular pull on Robert Plant's emotions. Earlier he had been quoted as saying that he believed Wales would figure strongly in his destiny. The band managed to find its feet again but another tragedy befell in 1980 with the accidental death of drummer John Bonham. With the loss of their dear friend, the remaining three members and their manager had no will to continue as they were and decided to call it a day.

After another period of soul-searching, Robert started what has become a successful solo career. He returned again to Wales, this time to Rockfield Studios, near Monmouth, for the recording of his first three solo albums during the early 1980s. On the track 'Too Loud' on his third album *Shaken n' Stirred*, a peculiar mention of Arthur occurs. As the song closes, a gentleman with a distinctly European accent begins a rap: *"Okay, as much consideration for the Arthurian legends has been given to this whole project that can be imaged by the entire record buying public ..."* The rap disintegrates as our European friend completely loses the plot and the track ends. What does it all mean? I really don't know and, to my knowledge, Robert has never enlightened us in print as to its meaning. Maybe it was just a recognition of an influence, or a nod to other things on an already strange, for him, album. Even the musicians found the album's recording a difficult process.

His solo career progressed to its then highpoint with 1992's *Fate Of Nations*, a seminal work representing all the facets of his musical life. Old influences were again coming to the fore: *"By the time of* Fate Of Nations *... I'd started going to the Welsh mountains again and reading the old books about mythology and Celtic history"*. An invitation to play at the 1993 Glastonbury Festival elicited the response that he'd never been to the festival but had visited the Tor a few times, *"As you'd expect. Haha, wearing beads around my neck!"* and that some of his downtime was spent *"sitting on the Tor with my girlfriend and a bottle of whisky waiting for Arthur to return"*. His reunion with Jimmy Page for the *No Quarter* project, something of a 'second coming' in rock and roll terms, resulted in a timely revisiting of some Zeppelin classics but with a distinctly North African flavour. The pair returned to the Bron y Aur area of Wales to record the title track in the woods there, evidence of this Celtic country's eternal pull on the musicians' psyches. The Celtic presence was further reinforced on the ensuing world tour with the use of tapes of well known musician and storyteller Robin Williamson, regarded by some as a modern day Taliesin, to open some of the shows and to set the mood. Being able to introduce deserving

musicians to his large audience is something Robert has always relished: *"Robin Williamson has gone from strength to strength. He's the bard. He knows all those tales of Beowulf and the* Mabinogion *and the* Book of Taliesin*"*.

A follow-up album was released but the renewed partnership not so much ran its course as was halted in its tracks by Robert. He felt that his well of inspiration had run dry and he had nothing left to say, or prove, musically. After a couple of years, though, he duly re-emerged with his long-time friend Kevyn Gammond in a low-key outfit The Priory of Brion, playing pubs, clubs, small concert halls and even restaurants in the Welsh border area around his home near Kidderminster. The spirit of Owain Glyndwr, certainly an Arthur-figure in many ways, loomed large on these dates, with songs frequently dedicated to the Welsh hero. This practise continues with his current band, Strange Sensation. At Bangor, North Wales, in 2002 Robert dedicated an old Zeppelin number, 'Misty Mountain Hop' to Glyndwr, saying it had been written "in the misty mountains ... not 10 miles from here!", meaning, of course, Snowdonia. Tolkien too, it seems, also remains an inspiration. On the Austin City Limits radio show in the USA in August of the same year, he introduced 'Going To California', one of the songs conceived at Bron y Aur, as being *"written in the foothills of what remains of Arthur's Britain"*.

Robert Plant is an inveterate traveller, his life in music having afforded him the opportunity and means to be able to experience the world and its wonders. He still remains fascinated by things close to home, though, as he said last year: *"I've just been to the Isle of Lewis with my girlfriend. I did a little survey of Iron Age forts. I'm interested in what's loosely called the civilised Celtic world. So that's about 1000BC through to when Hengist arrived to help Vortigern in whatever year that was."* When it was proposed that a monument to Owain Glyndwr be erected at Machynlleth, to commemorate the holding of Glyndwr's Parliament there, Robert was one of the individuals who expressed interest in funding the project. The monument now stands in the grounds of Y Plas, outside the Celtica attraction, and is one of the finest pieces of Welsh slate you could wish to see.

Over a 30 year period Arthur has exerted an impressive hold on Robert Plant's imagination, and while he may never record an Arthurian concept album like Rick Wakeman's 1970s epic (and thank the Gods for that), the Once and Future King will undoubtedly continue to inform his musical statements in some regard, however much they are these days blended with the rhythms of Egypt and Morocco.

GT

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A gift in passing

Pamela Constantine

Jan Brown

"I have felt," Kingsley said, as we sat in his neat, lamp-lit study, "aware lately of an incompleteness. It is time I moved on. And I know, Morris, when I am to leave this world."

I knew, of course, about his terminal illness, and made commiserate noises.

"You misunderstand," Kingsley smiled. "I mean the precise day and hour – minute, even."

I felt suddenly cold. How could he know, unless it was to be by his own hand?

"And," he went on, "I want to ask a favour of you, as a friend."

My mouth was dry, but I managed, "What is it?"

"I would like you to be present." He laughed gently at my expression."Do not worry. No one is going to accuse you of anything!"

Kingsley was a strange character, not easy to get close to, his outer friendliness hiding, I sometimes thought, unfathomable depths. I had tried for years to analyse what drew me to the solitary recluse, and concluded I would never really know ... A conclusion which remained unbroken up to the very point of his death.

"Rather than placing you in a difficult situation, I hope to bestow a gift."

I hardly knew what to say. I did not want to be there.

Kingsley gave me one of his penetrating stares.

"Humour my request, Morris, It will be to our mutual advantage."

I tried, as on past occasions, to plumb that deep gaze; but, as ever, learnt nothing.

"If that is your wish," I found myself replying. "When is it to be?" It sounded embarrassingly facetious: Kingsley appeared not to mind.

"Friday. If you could be here by ten p.m.?"

I experienced an inner shudder. He had spoken with the cheer of someone anticipating a pleasurable event instead of his own demise. That was somehow characteristic of Kingsley.

Again, I found myself agreeing to his wish. But I looked ahead to Friday with a sense of irritation and deep unease as I pushed my way homeward through the cold night.

Kingsley's extraordinary news and his uncomfortable request had come at the worst possible time for me, following as it did directly upon an invitation from Videotown Studios, inviting me to write a script based on the exploits of Sir Galahad of Camelot. I had not even had a chance to tell my friend of the major problem this had created in my career. Personal talk was rare between us. This would have been an important exception.

I had built a considerable reputation as a writer on the people and places of Arthurian times; but my need to know without doubt that they had actually existed had been growing more acute for months. It had reached the stage where I could not go forward without unequivocal proof. Satisfying myself – that was the root need.

For if King Arthur's realm had existed, then he had ruled at a time very like recent history – and the High Prince Galahad had appeared immediately before a new era of darkness engulfed the human world. Yet it was also Galahad who, according to Malory and others, had found the Grail and bequeathed to mankind an understanding of it. Had he indeed been real, he would need to return, if not in person then in spirit, to prove that beyond the darkness there was still hope for humanity; that the light briefly symbolised by Camelot still, somewhere, survived.

Others might seek confirmation in the existence of the Christ. I, for whom reality represented the high romance of life, sought for the existence of the Knight named Galahad, which in the old Welsh means "Promise of summer" and therefore, ultimately, fulfilment. My beliefs portrayed on screen would reach a world audience. I could not be a purveyor of false hope.

I had not discussed this growing concern for authenticity with anyone, even Kingsley, who was a fellow-author. Once, it had mattered less because my reputation mattered more. But instinct insisted that the light of Camelot had been an actuality and the need for irrefutable proof had brought me to crisis-point.

In recent weeks, my conviction that the creative artist has a duty to honour truth as he reckons it had been gnawing at my conscience more and more. I couldn't tell when the conviction had awoken, but I knew it had grown in importance alongside my friendship with Kingsley. Perhaps, subconsciously, I had hoped some casual remark of his would clarify things. It had happened time before.

That wasn't likely now. But my state of crisis meant I could not accept the film company's offer without the proof conscience now demanded.

This crisis of conscience was causing a major turning-point in my life and was the reason why poor Kingsley's request had come at the worst possible moment. Videotown wanted my decision by Saturday and I needed time. All too late, I wished I *had* spoken of this during the evening. I had lost my chance, for it was hardly something I would be able to broach during my friend's last evening on earth.

I shuddered again over the thought as I entered my warm, untidy flat, wondering why Kingsley was so definite regarding the exact time of his imminent departure; and felt self-centred to have given my own problem pre-eminence all the way home. It was not going to be the best week of my life.

By the time I arrived back on his doorstep on Friday, I was no nearer to resolving my problem than when we had met five days before. And the heavy cold I had developed in the meantime was proving decidedly unhelpful.

As for Kingsley, I had expected him to show at least a few signs of deterioration, but there were none. He looked more himself than ever, despite his illness: clean-cut, spare, steady-

eyed – and self-sufficient, as always. That, of course, was why one did not usually discuss one's own affairs with him ... Although sometimes, as now, a glance from those penetrating eyes gave the impression he could see into the deepest personal cavern.

"Thank you for coming," he said, with old-world courtesy, gesturing me to my usual seat. "Can I get you a hot lemon and honey for that cold?"

That was dear old Kingsley – dignified but solicitous – even if shortly expecting death.

Not that he seemed old. Even tonight, there was nothing about him one could describe as elderly. I let him get me the hot drink. He didn't keep the other kind in the house.

We took up our accustomed positions either side the old-fashioned grate in which blazed an old-fashioned coal-fire, and talked awhile on current affairs, books, the Arts. It was all very civilised and impartial.

Thirty minutes slipped by. The warm room and hot drink after the frosty walk, combined with the effects of my cold, were beginning to make me drowsy.

I forced my eyelids open. I felt we should get down to essentials, if this really was the great night – and Kingsley was not the man to joke about such a matter.

Yet, as I eyed him somewhat sleepily across the firelit space between us, it did seem wildly improbable that he was about to slake off the mortal coil.

Wishing I did not feel so heavy-headed, I made an effort to voice the topic.

"Kingsley – you did say this evening?"

He nodded calmly. He was enjoying his herbal tea.

"Yes, I did."

"When?" I asked, somewhat hoarsely.

"At the eleventh hour," he replied, setting down his empty cup. "There is nothing you will have to do, my good friend, except notify the usual agencies and then await their arrival. If you don't mind?"

"No, of course. But how can you be so sure?"

"I am sure," he said simply.

He rose and, crossing to his writing-desk, seated himself under the standard lamp.

Many things had struck me as old-fashioned about Kingsley, but my recently stimulated conscience was now asking if it was not rather that he adhered to values and expressions of the same which only seemed out-of-date because the great big world had left them behind. Having come some way to knowing Kingsley, that seemed a pity – for the world.

Even what I had first taken to be his eccentricity – his preference for living at a slight distance from general humanity, his penchant for a vegan diet and herbal beverages, his scrupulous good taste and courtly manners – I now began to see as a form of purity.

Distantly, I was aware that Kingsley was writing. The room was so quiet that I could hear the silken movements of his pen upon the paper. Surely not his will? That would require two witnesses. Besides, being the soul of efficiency, he would doubtless already have dealt with that.

"There is," Kingsley said a little later, indicating the page on which he had been writing, "a final word to be added. This short manuscript will be completed before I go. It is not for my publishers. It is specifically for you."

I was very moved. So this was the gift!

"Part of it," he said, smiling, as he read my thought.

I managed a surreptitious if hazy glance at my wristwatch. It lacked only a second or two to eleven. Why not midnight, I wondered, as in all the best mystery tales? I was soon to have the answer.

Despite my natural apprehension as to what might soon follow, I was having real difficulty in keeping properly awake. I struggled harder. It would be the worst of discourtesies to be slumbering at the very moment of Kingsley's departure!

As I struggled to surface, the atmosphere in the room seemed to alter. I felt something new had been added: new, and electric.

My eyes came open. My intuition had been right: Kingsley and I were no longer alone.

The newcomer had neither entered nor appeared. It seemed that in the condition between sleeping and waking, my focus had deepened. The small, quiet room now contained an added dimension.

And there he stood, at home in what must have been for him a very alien environment, as if the ancient town of Camelot were a mere wink away – as I now suppose it is. The room was filled with a sweet fragrance that I could not define.

In the lamp-lit realm of Kingsley's study, the Knight from Camelot was undeniably real, and I could do no other than accept him completely, recognising him in some mysterious way even without the deep red armour. He seemed rather to be robed in a white radiance. He carried high achievement like a bright aureole upon his head and moved easily towards Kingsley without disturbing the familiar setting of the room. Kingsley himself was still bent over the manuscript as if in suspended animation.

Our visitor stepped close to Kingsley's right shoulder and looked down, studying the page of writing. Then, with shining fingers, he clasped Kingsley's own right hand and, together, they wrote the missing word. The manuscript was finished. Kingsley's hand dropped the pen and slid, nerveless, into his lap.

In a silence so deep it was like a mighty thudding heartbeat, I gazed on as the shining one embraced my old friend. I knew Kingsley was no longer of this world. A fraction of time seemed to pass before, like some bright cloud, Kingsley stepped sideways from his bent inert frame to be absorbed into the radiance of the Knight.

This galvanised my senses and released me from my dream-like state, so that I jerked back into normal focus. The familiar room seemed suddenly dark and hollow, the glow of the lamp tawdry after the pure light which, briefly, had breathed within those walls. I became then sharply aware of the motionless, reclining figure at the desk.

Steadying my quaking equilibrium and fully awake at last, I crossed the worn carpet to check Kingsley's pulse. It was merely a matter of form. I knew he had gone.

My glance fell then on the completed manuscript.

It began:

I, the last remaining facet of he who signs this script, hereon write from memory the undying truth conceming Camelot.

At the foot of the page was the single word, signed jointly: *Galahad*. It was still glowing faintly in the lamplight. The entire episode must have occurred in a tiny fraction of time.

I consulted my watch. It was exactly eleven p.m. The light of Camelot had come, in the best tradition of spiritual intervention, at the world's eleventh hour ... And my old friend had departed as he had predicted and with his usual tidy precision.

I felt loss suddenly, like a tremendous eruption in my heart, as if the better part of it had left with him. Only with his going did I appreciate the true value of our friendship and why I had been drawn back again and again: to be guided by his principles, which I knew now spoke for the integrity I was seeking with ever greater urgency in my own life.

I secreted the precious one-page manuscript in my coat pocket before fulfilling Kingsley's request that I inform the necessary agencies.

I did not say goodbye to my friend who had found his honourable completion and entered into his own continuum, but my entire being offered him my thanks. It is said one might spend many hours under the same roof as a master and not realise it. I realised it now.

The manuscript with its proof was only half the gift, just as Kingsley had said. The other half was that the man called Galahad continued to live, here and now, somehow coexistent in the darkness of modern times. How could I doubt it after all I had just witnessed?

I had not after all been wrong all these years in trusting my instinct, in believing someday the essential Camelot would live again – the realm of King Arthur, the Land of Logres, the time and place of mature humanity, exulting in its spirituality and understanding its own worldliness. I had a grip on my integrity and I did not walk alone.

I knew what I would say to Videotown tomorrow.

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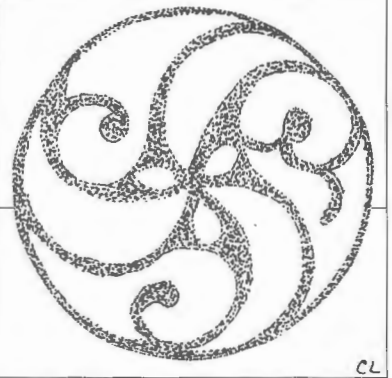
Arthurian timeline

in parallel to chronological British history

Anita Loughrey

• *The author is working on a novel based on Arthur's childhood, and would be interested in any information or sources that would help clarify events, plus any comments on her timeline.* CL

Year AD	King Arthur's Timeline	Chronological British History
465	Arthur was conceived at Tintagel Castle. His father was Uther Pendragon and his mother was Dame Igraine of Cornwall (wife to Duke Gorlois of Cornwall). Arthur was born and taken by elves that enchanted him with good magic.	Britons defeated the Saxons at the Battle of Wippedsfleet (Richborough); Saxons confined to Isle of Thanet.
466	Arthur was secreted away by Merlin to Sir Ector's manor.	Refortification of hill forts; Construction of the Wansdyke.
469	Uther dies when falls ill after the Battle of St. Alban's; Civil war breaks out; The missing child Arthur is pronounced heir.	Ambrosius defeats Vitalinus at Battle of Wallop in Hampshire; Ambrosius assumes High-kingship of Britain.
476	Arthur is eleven; Childhood at Dunster with Sir Ector and his family including his elder stepbrother, Kay.	
477		Aelle, a Saxon chieftain, and his three sons Cymen, Wlencing and Cyssa land three ships on the Sussex coast at a place called Cymensora, and drive the Britons into Weald Forest.
480	Arthur is fifteen. Arthur draws the sword from the stone during New Year's Celebrations (1st Nov – Feast of Samhain) and has to repeat the act four more times as the lords would not believe he was the true king.	King Erbin of Dumnonia (Devon and Cornwall) abdicates in favour of his son, King Gerren Llygesoc; Death of King Glywys of Glysysing Divides kingdom.
481	Arthur is sixteen. Arthur is knighted and crowned King of Britain by the Archbishop of Canterbury during Pentecost celebrations (Whitsun); Appoints first royal officers; Battle of Carlion and Bedegraine; Arranges to meet with Lyzianor and has an illegitimate son called Borre; Battle of Carohaise; Arthur meets Guinevere for the first time.	

482	Arranges to meet his aunt Lady Margawse and has an illegitimate son called Mordred born on May Day; Raid against Angles.	Abbot Benedict becomes a saint according to Gregory's book 'Dialogues'.
483	Igraine visits court; Arthur banishes Balin for killing a lady in the presence of his court; Arthur encounters King Pellinore; The Lady of the Lake (Nimue) gives Arthur Excalibur and the healing scabbard; Arthur kills May Babies by sending them out to sea in a barge.	 CL
484	Battle of Castle Terrabil led by King Lot of Orkney; Morgan le Fay tries to kill Arthur; King Lot killed by King Pellinore (Hunter of the Questing Beast); Arthur buries King Lot and eleven others.	
485	Arthur weds Guinevere; Adventure of the White Hart; Arthur receives Round Table at Carlion-on-Usk, as a wedding present from Guinevere's father King Leodegrance of Cameliard. Uther, Arthur's father, originally gave the table to Leodegrance.	Aelle fights Britons on the bank near Merecredesburna.
486	Arthur's penance for killing the May Babies.	Aelle's army and the Britons declare a truce after the Battle of Mercredesburne.
487	Battle of Humber; Arthur finds Abbey of La Beale; Siege of Eburacum.	Birth of St. David.
488	Battles of Lincoln and Caledonian Woods;	Aesc becomes King of Kent for 34 years.
489	Construction of palace at Camelot (Winchester); Arthur moves Round Table to Camelot; Battle of Fort Guinnon; Morgan la Fay steals Excalibur leaving an imitation in its place.	
490	Arthur is kidnapped by Morgan la Fay; Arthur fights Accolon and recovers Excalibur; Morgan and Ywaine banished; Morgan steals Excalibur's scabbard and throws it in the lake.	
491	Morgan tries to kill Arthur with a cloak of flames;	Aelle and Cyssa besiege Anderida, near Pevensey and slaughter all the Britons.

492	Return of the May Babies (age 9); Arthur assigns Sir Griflet to lead his armies against the rebel Duke of Silchester; Merlin falls in love and is imprisoned in a hollow tree by Nimue (Vyvian) and disappears.	
493	Arthur defies embassy from Rome;	Death of St. Patrick in Glastonbury.
494	War in France; Arthur kills the giant at Mont St. Michel; Battle of Autun; Roman ambush; Battle of Saussy; Arthur invites continental scholars to return to Logres to establish colleges at Cambridge	
495	Battles of Milan; Arthur and his army enters Rome and is anointed Roman Emperor by Pope; Arthur and his army return to Britain; Arthur acts as mediator between Gwynllwg and Brycheiniog.	King Gwynllyw of Gwynllwg abducts Princess Gwladys of Brycheiniog, which nearly causes a war. King Gwynllyw and Princess Gwladys marry. Cerdic and his son Cynric arrives at Cerdicesora with five ships and fight the Britons.
497	Arthur digs up Bran's Head; Besieges Duke Galeholt of the Long Isles at Surluse.	Death of King Erbin of Dumnonia.
500		King Cadwallon Lawhir expels the Irish from Anglesey.
501	Battle of Tara; Castle of Bones.	Battle of Llongborth (Portsmouth) where King Geraint of Dumnonia is killed by Port and his two sons, Bieda and Maegla.
505	Arthur is captured by Lady Camille of Anglia (Morgan la Fay in disguise); Arthur is saved from Lady Camille's clutches after siege of her fortress at La Roche.	
508	War in Cambria, which lasts two years.	Battle of Netley where King Cerdic of Wessex defeats British king Nudd-Lludd (Natanleod).
509		St Benedict dies.
510	War against France.	Prince Rivod of Brittany murders his brother, King Maeliaw and claims his throne; Breton Royal family flee to Britain; Prince Budic of Breton seeks refuge at King Aircol Lawhir's court in Dyfed.
514		The West-Saxons, Stuf and Wihtgar land at Cerdicesora with three ships and the Britons retreat.
515	Reconquer Ganis.	Death of Aelle;

		His son Cissa becomes King of Sussex.
516	Battle of Badon where Arthur carried the 'cross of Jesus' for three days and nights on his shoulders; Saxons defeated.	Monk Gildas was born; Britons under command of Ambrosius defeat Saxons under King Esla and Cerdic of Wessex at Siege of Mount Badon.
517	Pursuit and capture of Twrch Trwyth, a king, which had been turned into a boar by sorcery and hid a magical comb and pair of scissors in it's mane	Death of King Cadwallon Lawhir of Gwynedd; His son, Maelgwn takes throne and murders his uncle King Owain Danwyn of Rhos, and re-unites two kingdoms; King Maelgwn invades Dyfed and tries to assert himself as high-king of Britain.
519	Battles of Alclud and Loch Lomond. Tristram saves Arthur from enchantment by Annowre in the Perilous Forest;	Kingdom of Wessex founded by Cerdic and Cynric. They fought the Britons at Cerdiceford.
520	Arthur provides a permanent income for King's Hall college in Cambridge.	King Pabo Post Prydain of the Pennines abdicates and divides kingdom between his two sons; He retires as a hermit to Anglesey; King Budic II of Brittany returns to claim Breton throne.
521	Castle of Hard Rock Tournament.	
522	Friendship Tournament for King Mark.	
523	Tournament at Joyous Isle.	Death of King Gwynllyw; St. Cadog unites Gwnllywg and Penychen.
524	Surluse Tournament.	
525	Lonazep Tournament.	
526	Sir Galahad arrives at King Arthur's court; The beginning of the Quest for the Holy Grail.	
527	Arthur finds Morgan le Fay still alive and living in Cambria, Wales. She shows him Lancelot's mural to prove his love for Guinevere but Arthur believes it is a forgery.	Cerdic and Cynric fought the Britons at Cerdiceslea.
528		King and Saint Cadog of Glywysing abdicate in favour of King Meurig of Gwent, who is joined in marriage to Cadog's aunt.
529	End of quest to find Holy Grail as reported to Arthur by Bors.	
530		King Cerdic of Wessex defeats British on the Isle of Wight at the Battle of Carisbrooke.
534	Christmas Tournament.	Death of Cerdic; Cynric becomes King of Wessex for twenty-six years; Death of Cadwallon Lawhir (longhand) of Gwynedd.

		Stuf and Wihtgar are given the Isle of Wight.
535	Mordred and Aggravaine assault Guinevere's chambers; Lancelot kills Aggravaine and is banished; Arthur finally condemns Guinevere of adultery on the proof of Mordred; Civil war breaks out.	
536	War against Lancelot; Sieges of Joyous Garde and Benwick; Attacked by Romans in France where Sir Kay dies.	
537	Arthur is 72; Battles of Dover, Baram Down and Camlann; Arthur is mortally wounded by Mordred; Bedivere throws Excalibur back into the lake on Arthur's orders; Arthur taken to the Isle of Avalon on a barge steered by three Queens.	
538		Eclipse of the sun on February 16th from dawn until 9am.
540		Eclipse of the sun on June 20th until 9:30am.

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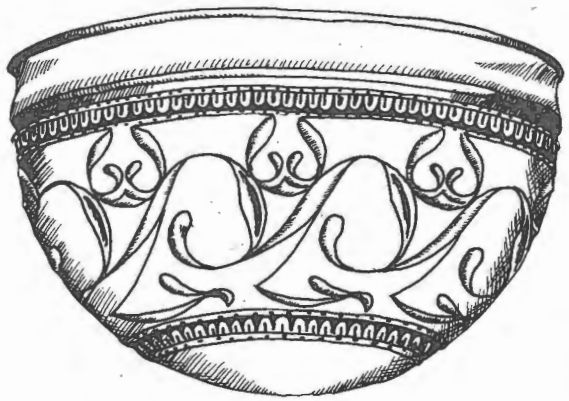

C. Bristow

old news

CAMLANN FOUND?

Popular books on King Arthur still repeat the suggestion first made in the 1930s that King Arthur's final battle may have taken place at Birdoswald Roman fort on Hadrian's Wall (*eg* Ashe 2002, 242). The reasoning goes like this.

The 10th century *Welsh Annals* note that Arthur and Medraut both perished at **Camlann**. This appears to mean "crooked bank", and suggests a conflict by a banked river. One of the Hadrianic forts – perhaps an appropriate site for a skirmish – was called *Camboglanna*, and this was then identified as Birdoswald which, conveniently enough, was sited on a promontory above a bend in the River Irthing. As if to clinch the matter, 20th century excavation has demonstrated that a rectangular timber hall was built in the post-Roman period on the site of a ruined Roman granary (de la Bédoyère 1998, 174). What Tennyson described in *The Passing of Arthur* as "that last weird battle in the west" could thus be safely located in North Britain.

Unfortunately, things are never so simple.

For a start, is Birdoswald really *Camboglanna*? Probably not! The early 5th-century *Notitia Dignitatum* lists officials assigned to various parts of the Wall (Ireland 1996, 138–141), but omissions and mistakes caused early commentators problems when assigning Roman names to modern place-names. The order of British place-names given in the different versions of the late 7th-century *Ravenna Cosmography* also vary. However, a Roman bowl from the 2nd century, called The Rudge Cup, gives a pictorial representation of the western end of the Wall, conveniently labelled with contemporary names: *A Mais* ("from Maiae"), *Aballava*, *Uxelodum*, *Camboglans* and *Banna*. By cross-referencing, it is possible to assign these to identifiable sites with more certainty (Breeze and Dobson 1987, appendix 4).

From the table below it is evident that *Camboglanna* should really be the fort of Castlesteads. An 18th-century house has destroyed much of the site, aided by river erosion (hence, perhaps, "bank on the river bend"); between the fort and the Wall is a stream suggestively called Cam Beck, *cam* meaning "crooked" in Modern Welsh. The garbled version in the *Ravenna Cosmography* might suggest a reconstruction **Camboglanda*, "crooked enclosure" (*cf* Welsh *llan* "[sacred] enclosure") which could thus refer to Castlesteads fort, but this is a less secure interpretation.

This still does not clinch the Camlann connection. Other areas of Celtic Britain lay claim to the site of Camlann, such as Cornwall, Somerset, Scotland and various parts of Wales.

The weakest contenders are the West Country sites. In Cornwall the River Camel, in the guise of *Cambula*, was identified as the site of Arthur's last battle by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century, while another river, the Cam in Somerset, is favoured by Geoffrey Ashe (1983, 66). Neither place-name however seems to include the essential second element of *Camlann* which is found in Wales.

Philology maintains that in Brythonic, the precursor of Modern Welsh, the accent fell on the penultimate syllable of a compound name, just where the principal term was found. Thus *glanna* "bank", a landscape feature qualified by *cambo-* "crooked", would have been pronounced *Camboglánna* in Roman times (Lias 1994, 52). Around the early 6th century final syllables tended to disappear leaving the accent on what was now the ultimate syllable, giving something like **Camboglánn* initially and later, with consonant-group changes, *Camlánn*. This is the form the place-name takes in *The Welsh Annals*.

About 1100 the accent then shifted to the new penultimate syllable which, in spite of giving undue importance to the qualifying element, transformed the place-name into *Cámlan*. And it is in this form and in this pronunciation that the word survives in present-day Wales at several sites near Dolgellau (*eg* Blake and Lloyd 2003, 190): a river (Afon Gamlan), a mountain pass (Camlan) and a farm (Maes-y-Camlan). There is however no justification for amending Camlan to Cadlan, as some writers do to transfer Arthur to the Lleyn

peninsula, or to Cwmllan, as in the place-name in Snowdonia.

Whatever the merits or otherwise of the Welsh sites (and of Camelon in Scotland, sited near Arthur's O'on, a former Roman temple), it is worth briefly exploring the Arthurian claims of the North. Carlisle's Arthurian associations in medieval romances and ballads is well known (*eg Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*), and recent excavations have reinforced our understanding of post-Roman occupation there (Selkirk 2002, 137). Further east, folklore of various dates also locates Arthur along the Wall. The site of Sewingshields Castle near Housesteads has Arthur asleep in a cave, nearby crags were the thrones of the gigantic Arthur and his queen (Ashe 1983, 183-6) and nearby Broomlee Lough has recently been identified as the lake in which Excalibur now rests (Anon 2001). Other sites in the vicinity – wells, seats and the like – have even slighter claims for antiquity or authenticity, however.

A site which doesn't appear to have had much attention is the Roman fort at Burgh-by-Sands. If, as seems likely, it really was called *Aballava*, *Aballaba* or *Avalana*, then it doesn't take much rocket science to spot a possible link with **Avalon**, Arthur's legendary place of healing (Lovegrove 2002). Whatever the form of the place-name, Aballava's Romano-Celtic meaning is "apple orchard", pretty much as Avalon's is. Though the fort, overlooking the Solway, is overlain by the modern village (St Michael's church re-uses Roman stones) it is worth considering that here we might have an ideal setting for a hero's legendary end: an apple-orchard in Cumbria – Dark Age "land of the Cymry" – on the shores of a great river, west of Camlann.

The discovery in 2003 of an object, variously called **The Staffordshire Pan** or The Staffordshire Moorlands Patera, may well add to the debate (de la Bédoyère 2003, 324–325; Pitts and Worrell 2003, 22–27). This 2nd-century bronze bowl, missing a handle and base, was found on a former lead-mining site along with other finds dating from 80 BC, the 4th century AD and Anglo-Saxon and later medieval periods. This is the third such *patera* to be found, after the previously-mentioned Rudge Cup from Wiltshire (1725) and a vessel from Amiens in northern France (1949). Despite claims that because of its uniqueness it may be a forgery, there are reasons for accepting that it is genuine (Smith and de la Bédoyère 2004).

Paterae appear as bronze mess-tins for the army from the 1st century AD, but have been found in conditions that suggest a ritual (*eg* Roman Bath springs) or souvenir function. Unlike the Rudge and Amiens pans (which depict the Wall symbolically) the Staffordshire example has eight Celtic-style roundels with "whirligig" patterns, inlaid with blue, red, turquoise, yellow and purple enamel. Running above the roundels is an engraved (instead of embossed) inscription:
MAIS COGGABATA UXELODVNVM CAMMOGLANNA RIGORE VALI AELI DRACONIS

Apart from the fort names (Camlann included, Avalon omitted) the last four words have come in for the most discussion. Rigorevali is unknown as a place-name, but *rigore vali* could mean "from the course [*rigor*] of the frontier [*vallum*]". Aelius was the Emperor Hadrian's *nomen*, so fortuitously we could have a phrase meaning "from the course of Hadrian's Wall". Or Aelius could be the name of a Greek, Draco, who had adopted the 2nd century emperor's name – a common enough practice at the time – and had ordered or made the *patera* himself.

And Draco? This, of course, is Graeco-Roman for "dragon". Nothing to do with guardians of treasures. Or Pendragon.

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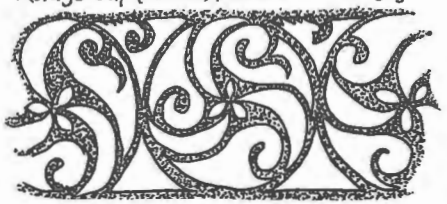
Chris Lovegrove

Staffordshire Pan	**Rudge Cup**	***Notitia Dignitatum***	***Ravenna Cosmography***	**Modern name**
Mais	**Maiae*	Missing	*Maia*	Bowness-on-Solway
Coggabata	missing	*Congavata*	missing	Drumburgh
missing	*Aballava*	*Aballaba*	*Avalana*	Burgh-by-Sands
Uxelodunum	*Uxelodum*	*[Axelodunum]*	*Uxelludamo*	Stanwix
Cammoglanna	*Camboglans*	*Amboglanna*	*Gabaglanda*	Castlesteads
missing	*Banna*	Missing	*Banna*	Birdoswald

Rudge Cup (above); Celtic whirligigs:



AVALON FOUND

In a recent issue of *Pendragon*,[1] there was much discussion of the location of Avalon. I am happy to report that Avalon has been *found*, by the distinguished Canadian travel journalist Cleo Paskal. She has actually been there, and returned safely without any time distortion to write an article about it.[2] It turns out that Avalon is on the South-Eastern coast of, rather appropriately, *Newfoundland*. It was founded in 1621 by Sir George Calvert.

George Calvert, born about 1580, began his career as Sir Robert Cecil's secretary. After holding several government posts he was knighted in 1617, and he was secretary of state in 1619–1625. In 1621 he founded the settlement of **Avalon**. That he chose this name for a settlement in this location suggests that John Dee's Northern Arthurian Empire[3] was still much in people's minds. In 1625 he became the first Baron Baltimore, and in 1632 he became the proprietor of the colony of Maryland, but died later that year.[4]

Cleo Paskal tells us that Avalon had a cobbled street, 'stone houses, a sea wall, a carefully sculpted harbour, even a self-cleaning septic system that worked with the tides'. Eventually, however, 'there were more permanent settlements up and down the coast. Avalon lost importance. It continued to exist, but new houses were built on top of old ones. Slowly the hamlet faded into the mists of time'. But since 1991 a team of archaeologists, led by Dr James A Tuck, have been excavating the settlement and even to some extent restoring it – 'the site itself is being brought back to life'. This is the story of Avalon Regained.

W M S Russell

[1] *Pendragon 29* No 4 (2001-2)
[2] C Paskal (2003) "No End of Surprises in Newfoundland" *National Post* Saturday 27 September, PT1, PT6
[3] F Stedman-Jones (2003) "The Arthurian Empire" *Pendragon 31* No 1, 29-32
[4] Sir Sidney Lee *ed* (1917) *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Oxford University Press and Humphrey Milford) 190, *sv* Calvert, George

The bards went *blerwm, blerwm*:

an examination of Taliesin's Deganwy encounter

Steve Sneyd

History is no more than a calculation of probabilities. Jan Vansina (1965)

Deganwy Castle in North Wales is a "windcatcher" place even on the stillest day. The stunted bushes, many growing almost flat to the ground on the two crags and high saddle between, which the castle occupies, show just how ferociously gales sweep its location high above the east side of the estuary of the River Conwy, just south of Llandudno. (The site, easily reached by footpaths, is, incidentally, freely accessible, although care should be taken on its steeper slopes and near the precipitous cliffs below the westernmost walls.)

So the Dark Age poet who here foxed his listeners with a verse riddle, could be fairly sure of quickly providing the answer with nature's own aid when that answer was "the wind".

The poet was Taliesin. The exploits ascribed to him at Deganwy come from a period long before that of most of the remains visible today, the ruins of a Norman structure built to threaten the Welsh heartland of Snowdonia, until in 1263 Llewelyn ap Gruffyd of Gwynedd took the castle and so thoroughly wrecked it that it was never rebuilt. It was permanently superseded not long after by Edward I's castle and walled town of Conwy, clearly visible across the estuary from Deganwy's heights.

But Deganwy already had a long history as a stronghold when Robert of Rhuddlan arrived in 1088. One stretch of the dry stone wall whose fragments remain among medieval work around the summit of the larger hill is possibly as early as the 2nd century AD. Roman coins found on the site with dates from 260 to 378 indicate it was occupied as one of a series of look-out posts that gave warning of Irish raiders. And shards of Tintagel ware wine amphorae confirm 5th and 6th century high-status occupation, and thus lend credence to the association with Maelgwn of Gwenydd, Gildas' dragon of the island, in effect High King of the Britons, Mailcunus / Maglocunus.

And so to Taliesin. Who was he? What was he doing at Deganwy?

Romance

The *Romance of Taliesin* gives him dramatic, folktale, near-mythological origins of little relevance here. What matters is that Taliesin's foster-father Elphin was imprisoned at Deganwy by his uncle Maelgwn. So Taliesin came to seek his release.

To achieve this, young Taliesin had to give the poetry performance of his life, and defeat the full array of Maelgwn's official bards, twenty-four of them including their chief, Heinin, in a battle of poems akin to a Scots flyting or the jazzmen's "cutting contest" to determine the best musician.

The *Romance* tells us that he first so bewildered the opposition bards that instead of being able to reply with verses of their own they could only go *blerwm blerwm* on their lips with their fingers, like children. He then further baffled them with a long poem of paradoxical identity, the *Hanes Taliesin*, which combines the mystical, the boastful – an "I've been everywhere, man" theme – and what are in effect claims to immortality and reincarnation. When Maelgwn's bards could neither understand, explain nor answer this, as his final stroke he uttered a riddling poem they could not solve. Nature, as already said, then gave the answer, in the form of a gale so violent it frightened King Maelgwn into fetching Elphin from the dungeon; Taliesin then unchained him with an incantation.

It is readily possible to dismiss this episode as one more fantastic element in a fantastic story – Taliesin has already stolen the essence of wisdom from the goddess Ceridwen, been swallowed as a grain of corn and, as a reborn infant, been thrown into the sea and survived, to be caught at a weir by Elphin during a day's fishing. Given this background of marvels, why should we give any credence to what the *Romance* says happened at Deganwy?

After all, even if Taliesin was a historical figure, is his use as a focus for mythical matter not of a piece with what happened on a much larger scale to another actual poet of the period, Merddin, accreting to produce the magician Merlin? Indeed, does not the Deganwy story itself have such obvious parallels with the humiliation of the bards of Vortigern at Dinas Emrys by Merlin / Ambrosius as to indicate an instance of a traditional image of innocent youth overcoming blinkered age, freely able to attach itself to any convenient figure?

It is also possible to dismiss the account more subtly, as Robert Graves does, by seeing it as wish-fulfilment on the part of a much later Welsh poet, his own path to poetic preferment and the emoluments of aristocratic patronage blocked by the monopoly of, in effect, a self-perpetuating medieval oligarchy of official bards unwilling to permit any innovation or individuality (including adapting Irish or Breton material, willingness to retell Welsh material in French to Norman audiences *etc*) into a fossilised, rote-based, totally tradition-bound approach, determined to use such archaic vocabulary that it has been doubted that even the princes to whom it was addressed could understand what they heard.

Graves, although conceding that there may be material of at least 9th century date embedded in late 16th century Peniardd MSS which preserves the *Romance of Taliesin*, nevertheless sees the Deganwy episode as essentially reflecting the 13th century contentions between the official bards and the *beirdd ysyddeid* or vulgar rhymesters, as their opponents called them, the descendants of the earlier *awenyddion*, the popular minstrels described by Giraldus Cambrensis in the 12th century, with their prophetic trances. [1]

However, it does not necessarily follow that the *Romance*'s ascription of fabulous origins to Taliesin of itself disproves the historicity of a later episode. Nor, indeed, does the unarguable propaganda value to a protagonist in a parallel dispute between poetic schools centuries later of the Deganwy situation of a young poetic genius overcoming the poetic Establishment of itself undermine the potential factuality of the original episode. It is, after all, commonplace for past events to be used and reinterpreted to serve the arguments of partisans in later controversies; such usage does not discredit original basis in reality.

A third dismissive view, Geoffrey Ashe's that the Deganwy episode "can be viewed as a satire on the pretensions of bards, who claimed superhuman knowledge and inspiration," again does not *per se* discredit the possibility of the episode having some basis in a real encounter – satire too prefers to hold up its cruel mirror to that which has a basis in reality, since without such basis, in general, it fails as satire.

Trance

Assuming, then, for the purposes of discussion, that the Deganwy episode did really occur in something like the form given by the *Romance of Taliesin*, what can it tell us?

It is tempting, firstly, to throw out the *blerwm, blerwm* incident, despite or indeed because of its picturesque memorability: as artistic licence generally on the part of the story's redactor, as vivid visual shorthand for the defeated state of the official bards, and possibly also as a kind of metaphoric foreshadowing of the appearance of the terrifying wind, the finger-lip noises a miniature echo of the gale roaring in over the Irish Sea, like the dead souls of the Wild Hunt, to shake the royal hall.[2]

But the *blerwm, blerwm*-ing could have another explanation: that the writer of the *Romance* account is reporting, but totally misinterpreting, the manifestations of the official bards' deliberate adoption of a prophetic-*cum*-creative trance – it was not that they had at that stage been defeated in

[1] Although, paradoxically, the official bard Philip Brydydd laid claim to be an inheritor of Taliesin's mantle when justifying his exclusionary stand, in his account of the controversy as to who should first present a Christmas poem to Prince Rhys Ieuanc.

[2] Not found by the 1961-66 excavations, but likely to have been at the highest point of the larger, westward, hill, where the later Norman hall-keep stood – the saddle between the two hills would have been somewhat more sheltered, but is likelier to have housed bondsmen serving the drystone-walled royal citadel above.

the poetic combat, but that they were gearing up, as it were, to riposte, simply or collectively, to Taliesin's opening verbal salvo.

In other words, may we not have here a garbled picture of the process preparatory to utterance which Gildas describes in such harshly contemptuous terms, when he berates Maelgwn for preferring over sacred church music "empty phrases, shouted by lying thieves", bards "shrieking in frenzy", *spumanti flegmate proximos quosque roscidurato*, or, in English, "bedewing all near with foaming phlegm" as they went into a Celtic parallel to the shaman's prophetic trance through which the spirits spoke, a trance which the adept could induce at will? The similarity of Gildas' brief hostile account with Giraldus Cambrensis' more extensive early 13th century report indicates a method of verse creation surviving unchanged over centuries from at least as early as Maelgwn's time.

Giraldus, speaking of "*awenyddion*[3] who behave as if they are possessed by devils" says they "immediately go into a trance and lose control of their senses, as if they are possessed... Words stream from their mouths, incoherently and apparently meaningless and without any sense at all, but all the same well expressed: and if you listen carefully to what they say you will receive the solution to your problem. When it is all over, they will recover from their trance, as if they were ordinary people waking from a heavy sleep and claiming such experiences as that "a sheet of paper with words written on it is pressed against their lips".

Context

What of the historical context? To take the most basic question first, could Taliesin and Maelgwn in fact have met at all? In other words, did their lives overlap?

Taliesin[4] is described in *Culhwch and Olwen* and elsewhere as chief bard to Arthur himself, but as with Merddin's association with Arthur this is clearly a case of a lodestone effect pulling other figures backwards through time to the court of the greatest hero of the Britons. The historical Taliesin is assigned by Nennius to the school of bards who served the court of Rheged, one of the Celtic kingdoms of Gogledd – the North – being that centred around Cumbria's Eden valley, and is the accepted author of praise poems for Urbgen / Urien, most successful of Rheged's monarchs, and the *Death Song of Owen*, Urien's son and successor.[5] In Morris' chronology, Urien rose to wide power in the early 570s, and was treacherously killed around 590. Since Taliesin also praised his successor's hospitality and heroism in war in *The Death Song*, the poet may well have lived to around 600.

Maelgwn ruled Gwynedd from approximately 520-551, until his death from the Yellow Plague (*The Welsh Annals* give his death as 547, but may well be slightly adrift). His son Rhun ap Maelgwn, ruling approximately 551-580, is yet another monarch with whom Taliesin's name is associated (indicating, incidentally, that Maelgwn's heir at least did not regard a past Taliesin "confrontation" with his own father, assuming one actually took place, as preventing a welcome at his court).

If we take it that the incident at Deganwy took place when, as Ashe puts it, Taliesin was an "impudent, precocious boy", an overlap is certainly possible – someone aged 20 in 545, for example, would be a by no means impossible 75 in 600.

What of the political situation the Deganwy episode presents – that of Maelgwn having imprisoned his nephew? Does this fit what we know of this king's behaviour? In fact, mere confinement seems mild compared to some of his dealings with male relatives, although they need to be seen within a context where constant instability within British royal families was the norm, since, instead of primogeniture being the rule, all male relatives had a claim if they

[3] The term is derived from *awen*, originally the oracular frenzy described by the *Armes Prydain* of around 930 as "the inspiration that foretells".

[4] The name is interpreted as meaning something like "radiant brow", which has the air of a bardic rather than birth name.

[5] Taliesin is also associated with royal patrons elsewhere, including, in Wales itself, Cynan of Powys: inevitably, as kingdoms waxed and waned, prestigious bards would move from court to court just as warriors did.

could make it good, and in particular, perhaps a result of influence via marriages to Pictish women, echoes of a Pict-like system of matrilineal inheritance show in the way nephews appear to have been especially strongly positioned as claimants.

Indeed, this was the basis of Maelgwn's own claim to the throne, according to the denunciatory Gildas – he had overcome the uncle who was his predecessor on the throne. After a period as a monk, presumably intended as a gesture of expatiation, Maelgwn had followed a return to power by murdering both his discarded first wife and his brother's son, subsequently marrying this nephew's wife (legally, since he was now a widower and she a widow!). So the imprisonment of another nephew, Elphin / Elffin, for whatever reason, fits the pattern of hostile family relationships.

Challenge

Do the two poem supposedly uttered at the confrontation shed any light? Although the first is usually thought not to be the work of the historical Taliesin, although it does stylistically resemble those poems accepted as his, of which Ashe said "Taliesin's language is fairly simple, but curt and disjointed. He conveys a series of sharp, evocative images rather than a sequence of thoughts". (This reflects a typical Dark Age approach in poems of praise, celebration, or lamentation: "The bards assume that the hearers know what they are singing about. They allude without explaining."

This poem, the *Hanes Taliesin*, has been described as a "long and baffling rigmarole"; Dr Ifor Williams in *Lectures on Early Welsh Poetry* saw it as the poet, be it Taliesin or a later adopter of his mantle, "simply showing off" – boastfully proclaiming credentials of far greater antiquity and universality than his rivals.[6]

[6] The *Hanes*' combination of the baffling and the contemptuous is reflected in similar confrontations in other cultures. R Finnegan, for example, quotes Luomala's remark that "in the poetic contests held by the Polynesian Tongans before their chiefs in the nineteenth century, much use was made of complicated and insulting metaphors laden with two or three layers of meaning."

On the other hand, Robert Graves applies vast learning and intense ingenuity to decode the poem, discovering within its claims of the poet's presence at great events of the Biblical, legendary and historical past a message of mystical knowledge being conveyed to others potentially capable of enlightenment under a sufficient veil of obscurity as to protect the poet from accusations of heresy, and believing the name of Taliesin used merely as a mask to conceal true authorship.

The situation, however, is strikingly different with the second poem ascribed to the same episode, a single answer riddle beginning with the straightforward challenge "Discover what it is". As Graves points out, the description that follows, including the lines (in Lady Charlotte Guest's 1848 translation)

The strong creature from before the Flood
Without flesh, without bone,
Without head, without feet (...)
As wide as the surface of the earth,
And it was not born,
Nor was it seen

drew closely on an earlier Latin model. This was cited in the *Flores* of Bede,[7] the answer there being *Ventus*, *ie* "wind". It also occurs in very similar form in early Irish literature, so influential on Welsh material. In other words, it was potentially solvable simply by prior familiarity, rather than presenting a challenge of dazzling novelty like the *Hanes*.

Hence, that in the episode as presented the answer is not guessed, but has to be given by the outside world of nature itself, in the form of the violent storm, seems extremely odd – common sense suggests that, among twenty-four court bards, some at least must have previously encountered this riddle and its answer, given the nature of Celtic bardism with its intense training and memorisation of relevant knowledge. As with Holmes' remark about the significance of the dog's failure to bark, this paradoxical failure to solve the riddle is, on the face of it, alone sufficient to suggest that the event is far less straightforward than at first appears.

[7] The Anglo-Saxons also being aficionados of the verse riddle, as the abundant *Exeter Book* collection shows.

The wind riddle's aftermath raises a further glaring paradox. A person of a nervous or gullible disposition would hardly have achieved and retained power in the way Maelgwn did. Granted, tales of his end describe him as peering through a keyhole in terror of an imagined monster, but this is in the last days, perhaps hours, of someone succumbing to a fatal plague, and gives little indication of how he would have behaved normally. He had chosen, after all, to occupy the exposed Deganwy site, presumably for its strategic dominance, so clear today as you look out from the summit over vast swathes of Snowdonia, on past Puffin Island across much of Anglesey – Ynys Mon – and westward to the Clwydian Hills, as well as far out over the sea from which, too, invasion could come. Even if, except in crisis times, the place was only a summer capital, winters being spent in the milder setting of the coastal palace of Aberffraw in west Anglesey, still it is impossible that he and his court had not endured violent windstorms previously in that hilltop hall. Yet we are asked to accept that a sudden storm, plus Taliesin's implied claim to have summoned it, is enough to frighten the king into producing his imprisoned nephew Elphin, and begin the process of releasing him.

Bardic system

At this point, having drawn attention to two clearly counter-intuitive points in the story, with their implication of a different subtext to the event, it is of relevance to look at how the system of court bards operated.

Clearly the number of bards would vary – few kings are likely to have had the resources to maintain so great a number as Maelgwn's twenty-four, assuming that number is an actual count and not merely a formulaic total seen as suitable to a high king's court.[8] Many kinglets or chieftains will have had far fewer. Taliesin himself, in the *Hanes*, calls himself chief bard to Elphin, but as he is not described as having companions at Deganwy, in that case chief probably also meant only.

The bardic system was regularised in Gwynedd under Gruffudd ap Cynan (1053–1137) but this was seen as a restoration and successor to the system of the Cynfeirrd – the "primitive poets" of the Northern Cycle – and hence is likely to reflect back at least in general outline to the Dark Age bardic hierarchy, and possibly further still, to the earliest Celtic invaders.

In the Gruffudd-era Gogynfeirdd system, the chief of the higher grade was the Pencerdd ("chief of song"), a high officer of the court whose task was to praise the king, his family and its great men, God and the saints: he was forbidden to sing of lesser topics like love and nature.

Uner him came the Bardd Teulu (bard of the king's guards). As the Pencerdd sang specifically of and for the royal family, the Teulu sang praises of the warriors of the household, but could also sing of love and nature to entertain the women.

Very much a lower grade, not allowed to use the metres and subjects of the higher bards, were the Cerddorion or musicians. They were allowed to use ribaldry and satire, and to tell *cyvarwyddyd* – tales like the *Mabinogion* – and could also be conjurors, court entertainers, and jesters.

It seems very clear that this, in effect, class system meant that the Pencerdd, the Chief Bard – Heinin in the case of Maelgwn's court – would feel, and might well behave, as very much the superior, and that the lesser bards need not necessarily feel any loyalty or team spirit towards him. Indeed, their interests might be completely opposed to his.

Power

What of the political function of the bards? The lesser bards were predominantly entertainers; the Bardd Teulu would have a morale-boosting and loyalty-strengthening role *vis-à-vis* the war-band. But the Pencerdd's role would clearly be political in a much more overarching way, affecting the kingdom as a whole.

As Gwyn A Williams has said of earlier Welsh society, "Welsh poets ... were the rib-cage of the Welsh body politic". Geoffrey

[8] There are also twenty-four bards with Arthur in *The Dream of Rhonabwy*.

Ashe pointed out the practical implications of this: "The king's position depended on his lineage and his own prowess" but "If his court bard failed to stress the former, or keep the warriors convinced of the latter, the whole system could become unstable and seek a new centre". Moreover, because the bards were also "custodians of genealogy, pedigrees, and law", they were a potential check on royal succession, and on royal power and its expression in action, through the possibility of withholding validation from an usurper, a judgement, a decree.

This situation can be paralleled in many societies, particularly those which are predominantly illiterate, either pre-literate or, as in Dark Age Britain outside the Church, in the main poast-literate. In such situations, poets, protected to at least some extent by the magical, almost sacred, aura of their knowledge and skill, can use even their ostensibly positive creations – what Jan Vansina called "propaganda poetry for exalting the power of the king" – in subtly directing, even admonitory, ways. As Jasper Griffin said, "Judicious praise – praise of the virtues of a ruler – can be a form of pressure on him to exhibit those virtues. Virgil was not the last poet to try such means".

R Finnegan, while agreeing that "one way in which subjects can exert sanctions against their ruler is through poetry" due to the fact it "gives the possibility of saying things which are normally unacceptable" because "The convention ... is as if expression in poetry takes the sting out of the communication and removes it from the 'real' social arena," nevertheless notes that such sanction may be operating within a limited social context "if ... these poems are delivered primarily by poets, themselves members of the establishment, to audiences largely made up of those permanently associated with the court" – just the situation of the Deganwy episode, a prince's bard confronting those of his king-uncle.

Finnegan also notes that "Control over poets and poetry has been a constant preoccupation of those in authority through the ages". One way that this can be achieved, inevitably, is to give poets a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, although this can be a double-edged sword from the ruler's viewpoint: "The existence of specialist or expert poets ... is part of the division of labour in that society, and when there is a distinct class of influential poets this provides on powerful group in society and perhaps a channel for mobility".

In societies where neither towns nor a centralised political system functioned – and this would have been the case to nearly as great a degree in Gwynedd as in the Dark Age Ireland Finnegan is discussing – it is going much too far to call poets the only national institution; but certainly they would be one of very few such institutions, alongside – and acting as an important prop for – a precarious monarchy, and forming an alternative, even rivalrous, focus of learning to that provided by a resource-limited Christianity.

In such situations, as Finnegan explains, "With a publicly recognised and specialised role, poets have often become a power in their own right. They help to uphold the authority of state or religion – which gives them their own position – and also sometimes keep a firm hold on their monopoly by conducting their own examinations, or other controls over the entrance of new recruits," in the process "sometimes forming a recognised and dominant grade within society." The prophetic technique plays a part in this, as Finnegan further says: "The claim to divine inspiration in the production of poetry is likely to assist such poets to retain their position of power or prestige". Put these elements together, and the result is likely to be "a self-perpetuating and powerful group", one which may well be able to demand a high price for its support of a ruler.

Humiliation

Considering the implications of such a situation, would Maelgwn necessarily have been particularly unhappy to see the prestige of his Chief Bard, Heinin, reduced by defeat in a bardic contest? Could, indeed, whatever loss of prestige resulted for himself, as the High King to whose court Heinin belonged, have been a price worth paying?

There could be a number of possible reasons why Maelgwn might indeed have felt inward satisfaction at seeing a young rival cut Heinin down to size. He might generally have found the bardic caste over-powerful, and wished to see that power

reduced. He could have felt they had too much influence over his court, or his people generally, that they were too popular, too independent, maybe even too demanding, too expensive to maintain in the style which they, individually or collectively, felt they deserved. After all, expectation of reward, presented as a sign of respect due to the art and calling of poetry, could easily turn to greed on the part of the praise poet. As Finnegan put it, the "court poet expected lavish ... generosity and an estate of land of the best kind", along with a fine abode near the chief's court, and cattle, horses and dogs of the finest. Taliesin himself spoke of how "his poetic inspiration, his *awen*, has served to win spoils for himself as a poet just as an ash-wood spear wins for a warrior the booties of war".

Earlier, mention was made of a third "national institution" in Gwynedd, the Church. The monk Gildas' scathing remarks about Maelgwn's bards indicate how little love need be lost between the two groups. Maelgwn had already made one monastic retreat, and might well feel the need of some further fence-mending gesture. Letting his bards be humiliated would be cheaper than endowing a monastery, while still perhaps offering a fence-mending gesture to the religious bodies.[9]

There could be other more specifically personal reasons why Maelgwn could have welcomed a humiliation for Heinin, or for his court bards as a group. A personal dislike could have developed – Heinin perhaps having too pointedly extolled the paths of virtue in his verses, in ways conveying criticism of Maelgwn's drastic solution to marital problems, for example, or inserted too many poetic references to other prior events the king would prefer not recalled, such as his usurpation of the throne, or his perhaps humiliating experience of the monastic life. The bardic version of historical events would be the accepted view – it might take the downfall of Heinin, and his replacement with a fresh Chief Bard, to provide a fresh-start accounting of the past, one more acceptable to Maelgwn. There could have been royal distrust of the loyalty of the bards concerned, or specifically Heinin, particularly if Maelgwn had inherited them from his overthrown predecessor as king, or if Heinin had achieved the Chief Bardship before Maelgwn usurped power. He could well, thus, have already wished to appoint fresh bardic personnel of his own choosing, but needed an excuse. Heinin's public defeat in a bardic contest would clearly provide an ideal opportunity to dismiss a discredited figure. This desire for a change of poetic mouthpiece would be particularly strong if, for instance, Maelgwn suspected involvement by the bards in plots against him by other family members, or enemies inside or outside the court more generally. In such a situation, he might have feared that oracular advice given might really be designed to lead him to actions liable to damage his own interests, or forward those of conspirators against him.[10]

There is a further possible reason, connected specifically to the cause of Taliesin's appearance at court, which could well have caused Maelgwn to be glad of bardic defeat for Heinin. Taliesin, after all, had come to court to seek the release of Maelgwn's nephew Elphin. It is possible to speculate that, having imprisoned this close relative, perhaps to serve as a hostage for the obedience of his home district (Elphin was the son of Gwyddno, ruler of the sub-principality of Ceredigion, according to the *Romance*) or perhaps from suspicion of a plot, Maelgwn now found that a change of political circumstances made his release desirable, and needed a face-saving excuse for doing so, one which would not leave him open to accusations of weakness or indecisiveness.

[9] One possible cause of the hostility, aside from a general rivalry, could lie in how the Dark Age poets, to judge from the way the early praise poems reflect more pagan stoicism than Christian hope of heaven, were if not irreligious, at least a-religious. There is an interesting contrast, in the Deganwy episode, in that the *Hanes Taliesin* is replete with Biblical references, which could reflect a sense in which the young challenger was, at least superficially, the Christian "champion" in the context.

[10] A situation parallel to that Herodotus described at the start of the Persian War, when the enemy bribed Greek oracles to give prophecies intended to lower Greek morale.

There could even be politcal advantages to the young Taliesin's accrual of prestige through victory in the bardic contest. As a result, he would be likely to be welcomed as chief bard at another court, as indeed he was in Rheged, and in the process could spread word of the power and prestige of Gwynedd, his homeland.[11]

Maelgwn could even have maybe hoped to find Taliesin useful in the future as a go-between, emissary, informant, at such other courts, particularly if reconciliation with Elphin could follow his release and thus in turn encourage goodwill on Taliesin's part. Maelgwn, then, could have had a range of reasons to welcome Taliesin's success in the bardic confrontation. Is it perhaps conceivable that he went further than passively waiting for the outcome? Traditionally, bards had a quasi-sacred immunity – he could not have physically harmed, imprisoned or killed Heinin without danger to his rule. But he could have connived in a humiliation.

But would the lesser bards have been ready to abandon their superior Heinin, to, by inaction at least, forward a conspiracy against their superior Heinin? He may well have often humiliated them, rubbed salt in the wound of their lesser status. Did they, in turn, when it came to the decisive confrontation, remain studiedly neutral, ready to welcome his defeat? Take the business of the "wind" riddle. Heinin as a Chief Bard, singer of lofty themes, could well have seen it as a point of professional pride to remain aloof from, disdain knowledge of, such crude popular verbal trickery. But, when, in this confrontation, he desperately needed the vulgar riddle's answer, did the under-bards studiedly ensure that he did not get it from them? Could this not explain the "blerwm blerwm" phenomenon? What better way to distance themselves from the conflict – and avoid assisting their superior – than to appear to go into an oracular trance, and carefully not emerge from it until all was over, ready-armed with their excuse for inaction.

Scenario

The wind's arrival on cue, hardly surprising, as said, in such a place, on this reading of the situation, saved Maelgwn's face in the carrying out of a preplanned course of action, commencing the process of Elphin's release. Had the gale failed to arise on cue, doubtless Taliesin could have been relied on to produce some further poetic cloak for the king's change of policy towards his nephew.

We cannot know if such a scenario did indeed underlie that confrontation of bards at Deganwy. It does, however, I believe, illuminate the way in which even ostensibly fantastical episodes can be used to get nearer to understanding the kind of uneasy power relationships and shifting loyalties that would have shaped the statecraft of a Dark Age court.

[11] When Taliesin, at the court of Rheged, became tutor to a second Elphin, a younger son of Urien, it does not seem too fanciful to imagine that stories of the glories of Gwynedd would be told to him, thus subtly implanting at that court ideas of the wisdom of alliance with the great power of North Wales and its mighty king.

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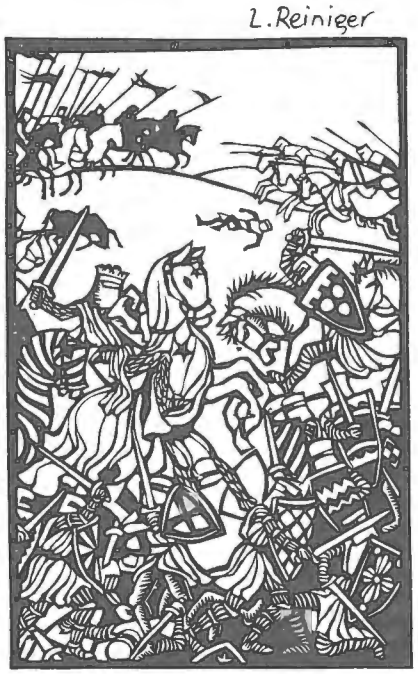
Reviews



Roger Lancelyn Green
King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table: Newly Retold
Puffin 1953 2/6 282pp illus

You may be forgiven for registering surprise at the publication date of this book. What?! Was this review written fifty years ago and has it only now found its way into the pages of *Pendragon*? Well, thankfully, no. Actually I had the good fortune to stumble across it a while ago in a second-hand bookshop in Welshpool and thought it worthwhile reviewing for other members to seek out.

Roger Lancelyn Green used Malory as his primary source for these re-tellings, along with parts of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon, *The Mabinogion* and the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, amongst others. From Book One's 'The Coming of Arthur' through to Book Four's 'The Departing of Arthur' we follow all the most famous exploits of the King and his Knights and Ladies; their adventures, romantic interludes, and the breaking of the Round Table fellowship with the search for the Grail. No radical re-workings, no strange departures from established tales, just storytelling at its best and although originally aimed at the children's market, Green's book is a marvellous read for adults too.

I tend, as I'm sure you all do, to pick up any book with the word Arthur on the cover, but what caught my eye with this one is the striking cover design. Leafing through the pages revealed the fantastic illustrations inside. They are the work of Lotte Reiniger and I initially thought the stunning black and white pictures were woodcuts but they are, in fact, shapes cut from black paper and then mounted onto transparent paper. The results are truly remarkable, giving the book a real medieval feel (as much as you can with a small paperback edition). Something like what William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones achieved with their Kelmscott masterpieces, although without the elegant typeface, of course. The illustrations make it worthwhile searching for alone and it has already become one of my favourites so I hope you find a copy too.

If other members have gems in their libraries that the rest of us may have missed, we'd welcome hearing about them.

Simon Rouse

Diana Wynne Jones
The Merlin Conspiracy
Collins 2004 £6.99
0 00 715140 3 pb 473pp

My previous acquaintance with this author was through her *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (Vista 1996), a thoroughly enjoyable tongue-in-cheek encyclopaedic tour of the conventions of post-Tolkien fantasy writing. This outing for the much-published children's writer includes much of that irreverent humour (we meet an elephant called Mini and a coffee-addicted SF-detective writer called Maxwell Hyde, for example) and it all starts with the title, which is about a conspiracy concerning The Merlin.

From this we gather that the main setting for the plot is not Earth as we know it but an alternative world in the Moorcockian multiverse. Nick Mallory (not his real name, by the way) is eventually propelled into this other Britain called Blest – a rather apt title not only for its Otherworldly echoes but also because many of its denizens are witches and others adept at natural magic, like the story's other protagonist, Arianrhod. The conspiracy involves the replacement of the chief wizard of the country of Logres with a false Merlin, and the repercussions this has on Blest and its world and on parallel worlds. Oh, and did I mention time-travel as well?

This is a very readable novel, which you may well get through in very few sittings, right up to its apocalyptic conclusion. It's a given that reviews of this type of fiction will include favourable comparisons with J K Rowling and Philip Pullman, but in truth Diana Wynne Jones has a well-warranted reputation which needs no such hype. For Pendragons a lot of the fun will also come from spotting both the overt and the subtler Arthurian references, plus overtones of William Blake (among others). Then it'll be time to search out those other titles of hers.

Chris Lovegrove

Tom Holt
The Portable Door
Orbit 2003 £6.99
1 84149 208 6 pb 404pp

Tom Holt is a respected comic fantasy writer, whose only other work I was aware of was *Who's Afraid of Beowulf*? So I was pleased to have this novel recommended to me by Bill Russell, if only to see if his inventiveness extends just to witty titles like *Faust Among Equals*, *Paint Your Dragon* and *Grailblazers*.

The answer is, it doesn't. This is a rich tapestry of a book, amusing and thoughtful at the same time. The hero, Paul Carpenter, goes for interview at a distinctly dodgy firm, where he meets the apparently mind-reading Sophie, and their world is turned on its head by what they uncover there. You know that something is not quite right when Paul goes home one night and can't help noticing "the very large block of stone resting halfway between the washbasin and the bed, and the very large, shiny double-handed sword that was stuck in it". There are other Arthurian echoes too in the very Tristan-and-Isolde love philtre – even if you find the Brangwain character a little outré – though Gilbert & Sullivan operetta, rather than Wagnerian music-drama, is the relevant influence here.

The door of the title is a neat conceit (as well as linguistic pun) though on occasion it seems to lead to logical non-sequiturs, even for a fantasy novel. Still, both plotting and characterisation are lively, and I for one am tempted now by the sequel *In Your Dreams*.

Chris Lovegrove

Gary Hughes
Once and Future King
Double CD, Frontiers Records, Italy 2003

A rock opera about King Arthur, but one that's not on ice, came out on two CDs last year. Gary Hughes (guitar, piano and King Arthur vocals) is from heavy rock band Ten, and the whole thing has a very 'eighties sound to it.

The first disc covers from Uther's death through Arthur's coronation and wedding to the exile of Guinevere and the birth of Mordred. The second disc starts with Saxons invading Britain and the ensorcement of Merlin and ends with the revolt of Mordred and the taking of Arthur to Avalon.

What is interesting is that amongst the tales Gary has played around with the mythology. Nimue and Merlin are, initially, allies against the Christian forces in Arthur's court. Vivian becomes the Lady of the Lake, Arthur and Guinevere have a son, Gwydre. All of which is part of the fun of a set of legends so broad that every re-telling adds to the variety.

The cast for the recording includes eleven different singers and I have to shamefully admit, being so out of touch with a genre I once loved so much, that I recognised none of the names.

The packaging for the two CDs includes a booklet which both gives the lyrics (though on 'Sinner', when Galahad has the lines "You're the queen / it's obscene / how you lied and schemed / You're a fake / there's a snake / deep within ya" you do wonder) and a commentary for the story by Lee Brimilow. I must mention the gorgeous artwork by Chris Achilleos, proving again that he's one of the best at heroic imagery.

So, if you like your rock with a retro 'eighties hairband feel, these two could be vital additions to your CD collection.

Cardinal Cox

talking head : fred stedman-jones

THE VOYAGE TO ANNWN

'Three Shiploads of Prydwen sailed to Annwn, Save seven, none returned from Caer Sidi'. **(Taliesin)**

In this third and final article on the theme of voyages of exploration and conquest associated with the Celtic peoples of these islands I would like to concentrate largely on the imaginative contexts that might lead to the creation of such stories and their interpretation. We have already noted how the Elizabethan mindset led to the vision of an English/British all-conquering Arthur whose exploits gave validity to national territorial claims in the competitive world of the 16thc. In an earlier heroic age Arthur had even harrowed Hell itself, journeying to Annwn, the Celtic Underworld, also at great cost but with equal unflinching courage.

As a preparation I would ask you to read the poem printed on the back cover several times, sometimes aloud, and to return to it at intervals. Just let it wash over you and soak into your mind without worrying why it may not make much sense to you; disengage forward gear and put your mind in reverse, to hear the poet's voice and not your own - much as Theseus describes the act of poetic creation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*...*'as imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, the poet's pen turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name'.*

Mercator's map of the North Pole is an attempt to depict a remote and largely unexplored region of the earth, to give it a '*local habitation and a name.*' Similarly, an ideal communist state is represented in Thomas More's *Utopia* and the land promised to the saints in the Navigatio Brendani, *the fairest country eastward that any man might see... so clear and bright that it was an heavenly sight to behold* has its origins in early Irish seafaring experience, reflecting genuine knowledge of the Atlantic mixed with fantasy. In recounting the stories of the voyages of the saints the chroniclers were often making a Christianized version of the old Irish Imrama tales of mythological travel. St. Brendan's Isle was shown on medieval maps and the story that the Irish saint had found an unknown country far to the west influenced Columbus: *beyond Thule, the ultimate land of the ancients, were placed the realms of desire.*

In J.R.R. Tolkien's poem *Imram* (*The Death of St. Brendan*) intended to be a part of his unfinished tale of time-travel *The Lost Road,* the author adapts the story to fit his invented mythology, when the traveller Aelfwine was told the tale of the First Age. The poem mentions the Lost Road and a shoreless mountain (Meneltarma) which marks the foundered land (Númenor) and a mysterious island. At the end of his life the saint recalls the three things that he remembers from his voyage: A Cloud, a White Tree (Celeborn) and a Beautiful Star (Eärendil) marking the old road leading beyond the world,

O stay now, father! There is more to say
but two things you have told:
The Tree, the Cloud; but you spoke of three,
The Star in mind do you hold?
The Star? Why, I saw it high and far
at the parting of the ways,
A light on the edge of the Outer Night
beyond the Door of Days,
Where the round world plunges steeply
down, but on the old road goes;
As an unseen bridge that on arches runs
To coasts that no man knows.

Tolkien and his friend C.S.Lewis placed the highest value on the making of myth, or mythopoeia, in imaginative fiction and poetry. These writers saw that the value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity. Lewis wrote, *if you are tired of the real landscape look at it in a mirror...by putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more*

themselves. The treatment applies to good and evil, our perils, our anguish and our joys. By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.

The finest production I have ever seen of the medieval Miracle Plays - at Chester in 1973 - by James Roose Evans, cleared the cluttered stage of scenery and elaborate costumes and used the simple everyday props of jugs, candles, loaves of bread, stools and benches, whips and chains and invested these objects used within the action with the significance of symbols to create meaningful images of great power in a way that moved the audience profoundly. This is surely what Lewis is saying and what art is all about : what the Revolving Tower, the Silver Headed Beast, the White Hart, the Sword, the Cauldron, the Grail and the Table Round itself are all about?

The Prieddeu Annwn (The Spoils of Annwfn) is an adventure tale, describing a disastrous raid by Arthur on the pre-Christian Celtic Otherworld, which is also referred to as Caer Feddwid (Court of Intoxication) and Caer Siddi. Arthur and his warriors sail to Annwfn to seize the most important of its treasures, a magic cauldron- a symbol of kingship and authority in the Celtic world. They also release a prisoner kept there for long years, bound in chains. Taliesin, the narrator, boasts of his own role in the Expedition.

French landing in the Antarctic, 19thc - Penguins and Icebergs

The version of the poem I have printed is my own, cobbled together from D. W. Nash's 19thc. translation and six more recent ones. I do not intend in this article to pick the poem apart line by line, space is limited and I want to stay with my stated aim: to concentrate on the possible imaginative contexts of its creation. My hope is that you may wish to invest the obscure symbols of the poem with meanings of your own; to empower the Muse to work through you and perhaps encourage you to write a version of the events for yourself - possibly in verse - or paint a picture, create a sound poem in music for it or write a film scenario and become famous! Years ago I was intrigued to learn that the bards were never allowed to sing the *Song of Camlann* before the ladies. This bardic poem is not extant today so I read some heroic poems and some background and tried to fill the gap by writing a 'bardic poem' for Pendragon (it is printed in Pendragon XIX/4, Autumn 1989 and was later published in America in an anthology by Alan Lupack). Over to you friends!

Let us look now at several published interpretations of the poem.

1. *The Mysteries of Britain* by Lewis Spence (1928) saw Arthur as a parallel to the Egyptian god Osiris and proposed that Druidism is, *only the cult of Osiris in another form.* He reasoned, *it is plain that Arthur was the god of a mystical cult who must periodically take a journey through the Underworld for the purpose of subduing its evil inhabitants and of learning their secrets and magic. In British myth and literature there are evidences of the survival of a belief associated with rites which necessitated a real or allegorical passage through a lower plane from which mystical secrets might be reft. It is plain that a certain ritual must be gone through, a severe initiation, before its portals could be gained and there was a risk of failure and of 'imprisonment' even. That the cultus which guarded the secret was one of select initiates is obvious from the allusion to the multitude who "knew not" the ritual of its mysteries.* A view largely based on 19thc. ideas, where Arthur is seen as a kind of Master of the Freemasons. Spence's linkage to the pantheons of other civilisations is unnecessary, the Celtic myths, which include Arthur, can stand on their own strong feet.

I am not being facetious about the ritualistic approach, studies of Classical myth and ritual have seen the muthos as the spoken part of what once was a ritual enactment, the roots of drama itself. In line with the theme of this journal it would be good to think this age-old, resonant archetypal material could be enjoyed and brought alive

again through the arts, which includes enactment and ritual.

Years ago with students I dramatised the legend of Osiris and Isis, the Egyptian god and his sister-wife who brought civilisation to the people of Egypt according to the old myths. Slain by his jealous brother Set, Osiris was ritually embalmed and became Lord of the Underworld and Judge of Souls, Meanwhile, back on earth, his son, Horus the Hawk, now pharaoh of Egypt, fought his uncle, the evil Set - in a slow-motion battle with great axes (Horus in gold and red armour, Set in black with scorpion headdress. Horus prevailed and the land rejoiced. No dialogue, only narration of edited Egyptian texts: word and song, light and dark, Egyptian costumes and sound effects and music (specially composed and recorded by a very lively and creative student named Willy Russell). Enough said!

2. Messrs Blackett & Wilson's much more recent research tells us that Prince Madoc was the brother of King Arthur II (503-579) and there was no other of the name: he was in America circa 560 when his brother led a 700 ship expedition to America. They believe *The Spoils of Annwn* is a true description of an ocean voyage through the polar seas and they interpret the names of the Caers as natural features: Caer Wydr - Glass Castle - was a great iceberg and the heavy blue chain that bound the youth was the deep blue sea itself. The four-cornered Castle was the Great Bear constellation which turns around the North star. The 6000 silent ones who stood on the walls of the Glass Castle were penguins on an ice floe; the Nine Maidens were another constellation and the pearls around the rim of the cauldron were the Milky Way. A very literal interpretation, but they do not mention the very real distorting effects of the Arctic atmosphere which produces very dramatic mirages which have had a profound influence on the oral legends and histories of the native communities. These include coronas, fog bows, great sea walls and what appear to be castles and mountains floating in the air above the ocean. A similar mirage in the Strait of Messina, the Fata Morgana, was named by Italian poets after Arthur's half-sister who lived in a crystal palace below the water.

3. In 1833 Edgar Allan Poe won a prize for his story *Mss. Found in a Bottle,* which describes the descent of a lost ship resembling the *Flying Dutchman* into a whirlpool at the South Pole. Another detailed description in his other short story *A Descent into the Maelstrom* is even more vivid and thrilling, the writing is masterly.

Eileen Buchanan interprets the *Preiddeu Annwn* by seeing the Cauldron as the whirlpool itself; the four turrets as the twice daily ebb and flow of the tides; the nine maidens become a constellation again and the spume and surf of the whirlpool become the pearls around the rim of the Cauldron.

Website photographs showing the Corrievreckan capture its ominous and threatening appearance but the water does not actually suck down in a vortex as Poe describes and as it was depicted in the film *I Know Where I'm Going.* It is not a whirlpool in the strict sense, like the water going down a plughole in a bath - it creates huge surges and cross currents that overturn boats and casts them up later on surrounding shores. George Orwell nearly lost his life there in 1947 when his boat was overturned and stranded on a nearby island. Furthermore, the explanation of the survival of a barrel in the Maelstrom is not supported by scientific tests, it is a device of a master storyteller's art. Poe romanticised the Moskenstrom, again for artistic purposes.

The most interesting observation to me in Eileen's account is the suggestion that the poem is a description of an initiation ritual for a warrior - to sail the whirlpool in full spate, challenging death to show his bravery - and she adds information that suggests druidic practices in the surrounding area long ago. The coracle initiation was Taliesin's own, however, as an initiate, a poet and a seer-not Arthur's. It seems a very wasteful way to test your warriors, only seven returned!

4. After re-reading Caitlin Matthews's book *Mabon: The Mysteries of Britain, An Exploration of the Mabinogion* I have been visualising how I might set about dramatising this material. Who wants to design the costumes? And what about the *music* !

Caitlin unfolds the *Preiddeu Annwn* as part of the pattern of the Succession of the Pendragons - each rising from boy, hero and king to the role of Mabon. A book review reads, *according to prophecy, a liberator will come to bring truth, light and freedom to every generation. His titles are many, including King Arthur.*

If you are switched on by now, have a think and a read of the books listed and put together your own ideas about the significance and possible meanings of some of these ingredients of the *Preiddeu:*

FORM: Collection of awdlau (awdl: each line is a couplet: a/caesura/b; a and b rhyming. some lines are triplets: a /b/ c/, all rhymed.
STYLE: Obscure & allusive references; serious linguistic problems of translation ((Old Welsh) (see Refs 4).
NARRATOR: Taliesin, the Father of Inspiration, all-knowing, chief poet, riddler, wizard, initiate. - teases us; denigrates lesser minds (cowards, forsworn); identifies with the heroic, with Arthur. One of the seven survivors of the expedition.
TONE: Strange contrasts (bright place of feasting: lantern-lit Hell Gate - doom-laden battlements ; maidens and cauldron of healing - chained dolorous prisoner ; hero with flashing sword). Twilight & darkness, dangerous and attractive; Celts delighted in such contrasts .
STORY: Raid on Annwn, the Otherworld. Not known if diffused from one original Irish/Welsh source or constructed from free-floating familiar elements. There are at least 4 analogues (e.g. *Culhwch; Branwen*, with more successful outcomes. (See Ref.1.) This expedition is referred to as A High Campaign, A Lamentable Expedition and, finally, A Mournful Encounter.
SETTING: The Expedition moves through seven caers, gates, towers, circles of cosmology - we have no blueprint of Caer Sidi sometimes this is used as a general name in stories of the Otherworld, the others may be aspects, parts or levels of the Fortress of Glass. Most of the Refs. give translations of their names, some are very tentative, as shape-shifting as the poem itself. Robin Williamson queries whether they may be the rungs on a ladder/tree of a shamanistic initiation.
CAULDRON: One of the two goals of the expedition, both seem to have been achieved , but at a great cost of lives. The cauldrons in these stories have awesome properties: to restore the lives of dead warriors, to judge between cowards and heroes by refusing to cook food for the former, etc. They are obviously contributory to the development of the later Grail stories, the parallels are clear and are developed in the reference material listed.
NINE MAIDENS: Muses, priestesses. Their breath warms the Cauldron - imagine their kisses! Remember the 9 witches of Gloucester, 9 Queens headed by Morgan le Fay etc.
HERO WITH SWORD: *Llenlleawc* bears Caledfwlch in *Culhwch.* Bearer of the Sword of Light, King's Champion, he enables success.
THE PRISONER: Gwair, Gweir. One of the Three Exalted Prisoners of the Triads.
BEASTS: These references are mysterious but magical beasts occur regularly in Celtic myths. The Speckled Ox of another Triad?
THE SEVEN: What happened to the others? There is no mention of how they died, 6000 silent archers on the walls perhaps. The names of the seven survivors in Branwen are given.

References

These are selected to cover the varied perspectives of this topic arising in my article:

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PREIDDEU ANNWN

Praise to the Lord, Supreme Ruler of Highest Heaven
Who hath extended his dominion to the shores of the world.
Complete was the prison of Gwair in Caer Sidi;
Through the permission of Pwyll and Pryderi,
No one before him suffered such confinement.
A heavy blue chain firmly held the youth
And for the spoils of Annwn gloomily he sings,
Dolour his song till the day of doom.
Thrice the fullness of Prydwen we went into it,
Except seven none returned from Caer Sidi.

Am I not worthy of fame, to be heard in the song
In Caer Pedryfan four times revolving?
The first word from the cauldron, when was it spoken?
By the breath of nine damsels gently warmed,
What is its faculty, the cauldron of the Chief of Annwn?
With a ridge round its head, rimmed with pearls,
It will not boil the food of a coward nor of one forsworn.
A bright flashing sword to him will be brought
And placed in the right hand of Lleminawc.
Before hell's gate a lantern was burning
When we went with Arthur on that high campaign,
Except seven none returned from Caer Veddwit.

Am I not worthy of fame, my song fit recital for kings?
In Caer Pedryfan, the island of the Strong Door,
Twilight and darkness meet together.
Bright wine was the drink in their assembly.
Thrice the burden of Prydwen we went on the sea,
Except seven none returned from Caer Rigor.

I will not merit the Lord's little men of learning
Who beyond Caer Wydr have not beheld Arthur's valour.
Six thousand men were there arrayed upon the wall,
It was difficult to parley with their sentinel.
Thrice the burden of Prydwen we went with Arthur,
Except seven none returned from Caer Golur.

I sing no praise to the multitude of little valour
Who know not the day or he who caused it,
Nor when the glorious Cwy was born,
Nor who prevented his journey to the vales of Defwy.
They know not the brindled ox, nor its halter
With seven score links in its collar.
When we went with Arthur, lamentable the expedition,
Except seven none returned from Caer Fandwy.

I allow no merit to the men of no courage
Who know not on what day the Ruler was born,
Nor the hour of his kingship on that fine day,
Nor of the beast with a silver-head they guard for him.
When we went with Arthur, a mournful encounter,
Except seven, none returned from Caer Ochren.