



The journal of
**THE ORDER OF BARDS,
OVATES & DRUIDS**

February 2025 | Issue 330

This Issue

- ✿ A Tribute to Mary Spain by Susan Jones
- ✿ Cogitosus' *Life of Saint Brigit* by Mary Tidbury.
- ✿ In the Bag by Rose Wildwood.
- ✿ Plus lots more!



COVER: "Imbolc" by Beth Amos

Editorial

Welcome to February's edition of *Touchstone*! The light may be returning but the winds still have that keen edge to them, so grab a cup of tea and settle down with this issue, which is bursting with all good things.

At the heart of this issue is a beautiful tribute to Mary Spain, who was the mentor for everyone in the Druid grade - an extraordinary task that required the skills of an extraordinary individual. Written by Susan Jones, the article simply fizzles with love and inspiration and is a joy to read. As Susan says "The earth is poorer without Mary. But what an asset for the Summerlands she will be."

If you're feeling the need to connect to nature after months indoors, there are two wonderful articles about fostering connection. If you also need to lose a few pounds after some winter over-indulgence, then Gulliver Grisbrooke-Campbell's article will be perfect for you.

Brigid has been busy inspiring our Bards, with an article on Cogitosus' book *Life of Saint Brigit* and a host of Brigid themed poetry. I was very much inspired by a short article sent in by Rose Wildwood - so much so I have made it the heart of my *Bit at the Back*. Rose's theme of being "in the bag" is a really important idea which more of us need to embrace. Do take a look and be prepared to be inspired.

We also have two reviews, including our first album review by the wonderful Fiona Graham. Fiona has a real affinity for music so if any musicians out there fancy having their work reviewed in *Touchstone*, let me know! I know just the person for the job. Enjoy!



TOUCHSTONE (February '25 - Issue 330)

- 2 Chosen Chief's Bit.
- 3 Bard's Page.
- 5 A Tribute to Mary Spain - Susan Jones.
- 7 Cogitosus' *Life of Saint Brigit*, Part 1 - Mary Tidbury.
- 9 Running in Nature, Running into Druidry - Gulliver Grisbrooke-Campbell.
- 10 Seasonal Recipe - Sue Wilson.
- 11 Nature Connections - Jan Hornford.
- 12 Reviews.
- 14 In the Bag / Andrew's Bit at the Back - Rose Wildwood.
- 15 Events.

February Song by Vanessa Fielding

Gold
spilt through a frozen wood
as above so below
white bulbs silent in dark earth
Gaia's daughters dream and stir
galaxies

of snowdrops
growing



TOUCHSTONE is published by OBOD.

OBOD OFFICE ADDRESS: Unit 1, Highlands Farm, London Rd, Bolney. RH17 5PX

Email: office@druidry.org

Phone UK: +44 1273 470888

Phone US: +1 (857) 293-6468

MEMBERSHIP ENQUIRIES: Please contact Lena and Jo at the office address above.

TOUCHSTONE SUBMISSIONS:

To the editor: Andrew Anderson.

Email: touchstone@druidry.org

Opinions/statements by contributors are not necessarily those of the editor, Order or publishers. Submissions from members are welcomed, but it is not always possible to use everything offered for publication. Contributions must focus on Druidry or contributor's experience of Druidry and may be edited without consultation unless a request is made to the contrary. Poetry no more than 40 lines. Articles of 1,400 words or fewer. No AI generated content. Deadline for events inclusion is 5th of the month before publication. Submissions may be printed on the OBOD website unless requested otherwise.

CIRCLE FORUM BOARDS:

<https://hearth.druidry.org/circles/>

MENTORS: for all enquiries about mentors please email Mentors@druidry.org (members only)

LISTINGS OF SEED GROUPS & GROVES:

<https://hearth.druidry.org/seed-groups-groves>

FIND BOOKS, gifts and jewellery online at OBOD's marketplace: store.druidry.org

Chosen Chief's Bit

Bandia daoibh a chairde, greetings everyone!
Beannachtaí Imbolc daoibh uilig! Imbolc
blessings to you all!

"Sit safely Brigid, in triumph on Liffey's cheek to
the strand of the sea;
You are the princess with the ranked hosts above
the children of Cathair Mór.
Brigid in the land, I behold where each in turn
has lived, your fame has proved superior to them.
You have an everlasting principality with the
King of Heaven apart from the land where your
sanctuary is."

Translated by Kuno Meyer, from *A Golden Treasury
of Irish Poetry A.D 600-1200*

The first shoots, heralds of spring, have begun
to push their way up through the soil. The white
heads of the snowdrops, associated with Brigid,
which are now beginning to appear in my garden
always give me a sense of hope, anticipation, and
excitement for the year to come.

Here in Ireland, spring starts on February 1st at



Imbolc and traditionally was a day for weather
divination - a cold frosty February 1st is a good
omen for the weather to come because the
Cailleach is still asleep. However, if it is bright and
sunny, it does not bode well as the Cailleach is out
collecting more firewood for the bad weather to
come.

Since 2023 the first Monday in February is
dedicated to Brigid, Goddess and Saint.

"Today is the day of Bride. The serpent shall come
from the hole, I will not molest the serpent, nor
will the serpent molest me." (from the *Carmina
Gadelica*). The serpent, the symbol of regeneration
and transformation, was said to come out of the
depths and was referred to as 'the 'Noble Queen.'

According to the ancient stories, Brigid is the
self-generating mother, she is 'Neart an Domhain'
(Nywfre or Life-force of the Earth), 'broinn na



cruinne' (womb of the universe), the cauldron of
all life, the exalted one, 'an breo saighead' (the
fiery arrow). She is the intermediary between
winter and summer, the intermediary between
darkness and light. Brigid represents 'An Tribhís
Mhór (The Great Triple Spiral) as she maintains
the integrity of 'Beatha, Bás & Athbheireith', of
Life Death and Rebirth. Brigid is the Goddess of
Water, Healing and Peace; she is the Goddess of
Fire and Smiths. She is the forger of the sword but
she does not wield it. Instead, she inspires people
to forge their path from the strength of fire, water,
earth and air.

The world continues to face many challenges,
such as Climate Change and wars. These
challenges seem to be relentless. I wonder how we
as Druids can work with the spirit of Imbolc and
look to Brigid – Goddess of Peace - to forge swords
of peace, to inspire peace, to model peace, to be
intermediaries between darkness and light.

May Imbolc, with each new shoot, bring the
growing light of Peace to us all and the Earth and
her beings!

Eimear



Image by Rebecca Bayley



Imbolc by Audrey Graham

The Greylag Geese, they have returned
I hear their honks at dawn,
They settle on their island home
Where Goslings will be born.

On trees the swollen buds are plump
White Cherry Blossom blooms,
Orion, watch him travel west
Beyond a hazy moon.

The Seven Sisters out of sight
Midwinter come and gone,
The Sun reborn gives birth to light
Sweet Blackbird sings his song.

Birch broom it sweeps the cobwebs clear
Old shutters opened wide,
Through diamond-lead windowpanes
Let sunlight flood inside.

Far above the crashing waves
A maiden stands alone,
The icy wind whips through her hair
It chills her to the bone.

She aims her silver arrow from
This frozen Imbolc night,
Its silver blessed with dreams to come
She shoots toward the light ...



Image: Candle by Kaz Leroux

An Imbolc Carol by Cheryl Anne Maris

Let not the snows deceive you,
there is a stealthy greening;
creeping, creeping,
Spring is drawing near!

Though some may not believe you,
there in the dark earth sleeping;
seedlings, seedlings,
small and without fear!

And soon from Nature's nimble spark,
a fragile egg becomes a lark;
singing, singing,
Spring is drawing near!

Let not the trials deceive you,
there is a stealthy growing;
showing, showing,
Wholeness drawing near!

Though memories may grieve you,
there deep within a knowing;
glowing, glowing,
a flame within a tear!

And soon from Places Wild and Bright,
the blessed day is birthed from night;
shining, shining,
golden, warm, and clear!

The High One by Lee Daniels

Goddess Brigit, the High One, is her name.
Divine flame of dazzling sun,
Imbolc is here, Spring begun.

Coming from her fire mind, a hot spark,
Which split darkness and defined,
The elements, four in kind.

These are fire, water, air, and the earth.
These she birthed forth to prepare,
Nature, noble, pure and fair.

Goddess of the sacred spring, holy well.
When she dwells in bards they bring,
Their poems, their songs, to sing.

Life Circle by Cheryl Partridge

Sun - when you rise you remind me of the
beginning of life,
You warm the earth to give us food,
While the water feeds your thirst

Yet the light fades - night approaches-
as our lives do as the end of our time here
approaches.

We open our arms and hearts to you
- mother of life.

Yet we can see that our twilight of life approaches.

For many this time is long and clear,
For others the time is too short to bear.

The wind can carry our wishes, thoughts, loves
and sorrow -
Our hearts may break come the next morrow.

Camelia Song by Jessica McGee

Camellia's face
the sharpening wind's assault
Defying the dark



In Bride's Wood by Vanessa Fielding

This hazel wand
once scattered gold
follow her trod

The deer have passed before you
through the holy wood
rising at dawn from hollow beds, to browse
the secret sacrament of bark and bud

gentle mystics sipping the soft wind
dipping in silence to the greening earth

Kneel then
before the twisted alder rood
black against crimson light, amongst
the frail stemmed snowdrop flowers
opening pale wings of green and white
to scent the morning woods
with fragile life

Brigid Passed Through by Cheryl Anne Maris

In the still-dark inbreath,
before dawn's release,
small, shimmering glints of grace
gather to chase night's heaviness away.

Be they trails of Faery flight,
or particles of silent prayer;
these heralds of promised light
sweep room and mind of cobweb and care.

This Day, Spring's Smile
begins to form~
no matter how cold,
no matter how warm!

The Bright Dream of Renewal
will indeed come true!
For while we were sleeping,
Holy Brigid passed through.

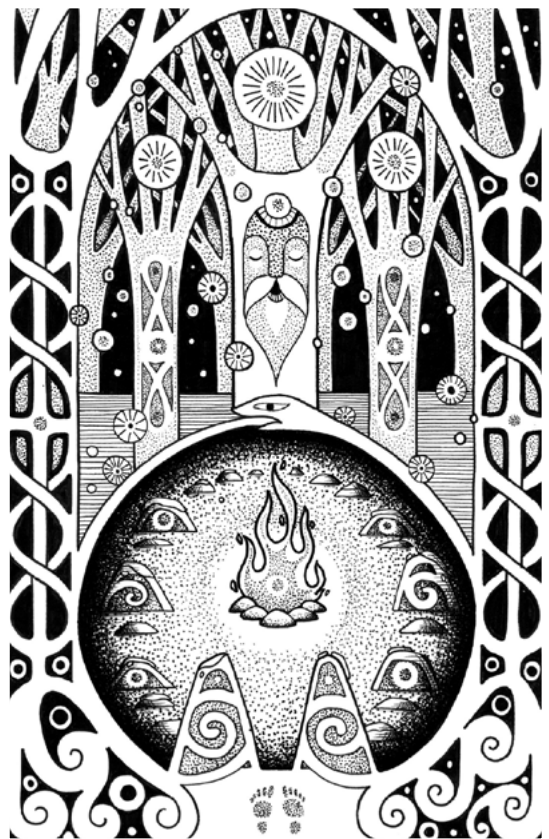


Image: Into the Grove
by Brad Loafer

In Memoriam

A tribute to Mary Spain, OBOD Druid grade Mentor, 1935-2024

by Susan Jones, OBOD Mentor Co-ordinator 2000-2017.



Image: Mary and Chloe, August 20, 2018 from Mary's Blog

Mary Spain was the first and only Druid grade Mentor of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, from the 1990s until October 2024 when she retired, age 88. Holding this role for over 30 years is itself a testimony to her and the work she did. "She was one of the most singular individuals I've known, a person so thoroughly and impeccably herself that she truly was 'sui generis'" writes OBOD's first Bardic Mentor and then Mentor Co-ordinator Lilian Fredericks (who some of us may have known as Susan Henssler). As an introduction to other OBOD mentors, Mary's was a poem:

"I'm medium-sized
And medium height,
I'd never stand out in a crowd.
I'm medium aged
And media-trained,
And, when asked, read my poems aloud.
I write and I teach,
Try hard not to preach,
And am ruled by a fair-minded cat.
If through chance or by Fate,
You're at Notting Hill Gate,
Do drop in for a meal and a chat."

She was a great deal else. She taught spoken English for the English Speaking Union, a charity supporting young people through international friendship to develop speaking and listening skills. She was a keen photographer, though seldom the subject. From 2008 to 2021 she published an anonymous blog, Letters from London, to support and encourage a busy friend

<https://lettersfromlondon19.blogspot.com> . With her cat Chloe, she worked for the charity 'Pets as Therapy', visiting a nursing home and assisting at a phobia clinic. She was a governor of Holland Park School, where she ran a reading scheme and a sixth form lunch club, inviting speakers from many walks of life, including former Soviet President Gorbachev, who accepted. She was a Director of the Institute for Complementary and Natural Medicine, and emerged from major surgery needing only the homeopathic remedy Arnica for pain relief.

Mary Spain was among the first OBOD members. Lilian remembers "Mary started out as a Bardic tutor, the first one whom I brought on when the workload exceeded my capacity. In the early days, Philip Carr-Gomm, former Chosen Chief, was the only Druid grade tutor, because there were very few students in the Druid grade. When the workload exceeded his capacity, he asked me who I thought was the best person to take on that role, and I suggested Mary. She was, after me, the most experienced tutor on the team, and had shown herself to be exceptionally skilful, perceptive and true to the spirit of the Order."

Receiving letters from Druid grade members was a joy to Mary. She held each letter and member in admiration. Her replies were understanding, wise, supportive, encouraging and welcomed. She would say that she learnt more from the students she had mentored than they learnt from her. Of the OBOD course she would often advise "you go this way only once. It's too good a journey to rush." Mary's student letters were written on a typewriter, long after she used computers and emails for everything else. This recognised the value of time and distance of the correspondence. It was the same respect for time and distance that explained why Mary never attended OBOD events. She felt the one-to-one relationship was the more precious.



Image: Mary and Chloe
by Susan Jones

Mary Spain was born in Kent, England, moving to the southwest, where she had worked for the naturalist Peter Scott. She came to London to pursue a career in media, including working for a theatrical agency and being continuity manager for the hit TV series *The Avengers*. Her first collection of poetry, *An Ever Fixed Mark*, was published in 1973 and in 1988 she won The American Golden Poet Award. Her poems have been broadcast, published and used in the syllabus for the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

Animals played a huge part throughout her life. As a child she had owned a pony and later part-owned the legendary racehorse, Dancing Brave ("Only a hair of the mane", she would say.) Philip remembers: "The one thing that stands out for me is her account of her own Bardic journey in which she recounted the synchronicities related to her elemental journey. When she got to Air, she looked out of her window and saw a parakeet in a cage on the pavement. When it was still there some time later, she realised it had been abandoned and it became her pet."

Her cats were more than pets, they were partners in everything she did. The 'fair-minded cat' to whom Mary referred in the poem above was an enormous Burmese called Rupert, who would accompany visitors on walks around Holland Park before tea in their flat nearby. Sandwiches and cake would be served with a glass of ginger wine. Conversation included what Mary called 'ponderings' on the themes of spirit, faith, nature, wildlife, the environment, people and animals and, of course, OBOD. The only interruptions would be for Mary to answer the phone, announcing herself 1940s-style with the final three digits of the 11-digit number. In recent years, she would meet for a pub lunch in Notting Hill. By this time the cat was Chloe, who sat on a bench until, with a loud miaow, she indicated that it was time to go. No meeting ended without Mary taking a photograph of her visitor as a record of the special occasion it always felt it was.

Mary was convinced of one divine source, and wished for unity. She sought out the numinous, and demonstrated this vividly through the exploration of photographic orbs – shadowy blue balls of light that are visible in photographs but invisible to the naked eye. She had a knack of finding orbs in churches, synagogues, public buildings, in the sky, even on the ceiling of the Ritz Hotel. Some theorists say that orbs are caused by dust or water droplets illuminated by the camera lens. Some believe that orbs are supernatural. Mary believed that orbs were attracted to the spirit of music and human emotion. She convinced me of this one snowy evening in December 2009. Mary accompanied me to the Olympia Horse Show in London, to watch Edward Gal and the wonder-horse Totilas



Image: Mary's pictures from Olympia, published in *Letters from London*, 30 December 2009

in a major competition. Mary thought it would be a fertile ground for orbs. Olympia was packed, and we were lucky to have front row seats. We discovered that, strangely, we had identical simple, inexpensive, digital snapshot cameras. The first of the evening's events attracted a few shadowy orbs in the background of Mary's photographs. There were no orbs in any of my photographs then, or all evening. When Totilas' class started, the competition was keen, but not, seemingly, conducive to orbs. Until the arrival of Totilas himself. Mary wrote in *Letters from London* "look what came with him! Look carefully... there's nothing shadowy about these orbs, they're large... and substantial... and brilliant. Orbs that truly reflect the status of the incredible super-star. ... Knowledge of what they are resides in the numinous, beyond the realms of mere understanding. All I know is that when orbs appear there is often music... always joy... and always love. One further thing is certain. If we could only make our world more conducive to orbs there's no doubt that we'd be creating a far better place for ourselves."

The earth is poorer without Mary. But what an asset for the Summerlands she will be.

Mary Spain, born 19 November 1935, died 17 November 2024, age 88. A memorial service at St George's Notting Hill was held on 30 January 2025 at 11:30. A book of condolences for OBOD members is on The Druid Hearth.

Druid grade members who would like a new Druid grade mentor, please write to mentors@druidry.org where the Mentor Co-ordinator will reallocate you.

On Cogitosus' *Life of Saint Brigit*: Meeting Brigit across a Millennium and a half, Part 1 - by Mary Tidbury

Cogitosus' stories of Brigit seduce, not because of their complexity, but because of their beautiful simplicity, with a message that flies like an arrow, straight and true. The author's task, in just 32 short tales, is to sing the praises of the woman 'radiant with good virtues' (1) and to inspire others to admire her as much as he does. He could not make plainer the virtues of compassion, hospitality and wisdom he loves her for. She is holy in the way that the old Celtic saints are holy.

I read the text as part of research for a discussion group. We were looking for threads in traditional texts from the 7th century onwards that might hint at the presence of Brigit as goddess before her appearance as a Christian saint. That incarnation alone covers another transition from early Celtic Christianity, (with its subtly different emphases in Ireland, Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and the islands) through to dependence on Rome as the seat of authority. So appropriately Brigit is not just one bridge, but a series of bridges, leading across a continuously changing spiritual landscape. Cogitosus gives us the opportunity to see in close-up how she navigates this, in one – or possibly two - of her incarnations.

The Life of Saint Brigit is a short text consisting of a preface, a table of chapters (sub-titled *The miracles of Saint Brigit*) and 32 chapters, followed by a little epilogue. The chapters themselves are very short, varying between the shortest of a single paragraph and the longest of 12. While a handful are five or more paragraphs, two-thirds of them are just two, three, or four paragraphs long. The paragraphs get longer as the life of the saint goes on and as the stories move away from the miracles worked in everyday life to the miracles performed in the setting of the court or after her death. This is the simple structure within which the monk will set the arc of her earthly journey - and inadvertently, across 15 centuries, open a window for us on Brigit's world in early Ireland.

The original text was written in Hiberno-Latin by an Irish monk. Fortunately the English

translation by Connolly and Picard is very readable. The original text is not dated, but in a work on St Patrick from between 680 and 700, Miurchú describes Cogitosus as his father. It is impossible to say whether this is a spiritual or genetic relationship but it puts the two authors - and presumably their work - at least one generation apart and on that basis, the date for the *Vitae Brigitae* at around 650.

This dating by reference to Saint Patrick in later 7th century writings tells a story by itself. Reading the stories about Brigit and Kildare, it is obvious in the way Cogitosus describes her ('most revered', 'holy and venerable', 'affable', 'cheerful', 'wise', 'capable') that he is doing his very best to celebrate and extend Brigit's fame. This very first hagiography of an Irish saint must have spurred on Patrick's supporters to go one better in favour of their man. And not one, but two stories of Patrick duly appeared a few years later as part of the battle for supremacy in the early Irish church. The third of the great Irish (now national) saints, Columba, got his own life written by Adomnán, but it was the hagiographies of Patrick by Tírechán and Miurchú that drew enough attention to Armagh to help make it the seat of ecclesiastical authority in Ireland, a title it retains in the Catholic church to this day. It is curious that the supremacy of Kildare was so unchallenged in Ireland before this that the name of the monastery does not appear – anywhere – in the *Vita Brigitae*. It is the definition of fame. Brigit's monastery 'is the head of almost all the Irish churches with supremacy over all the monasteries of the Irish and its paruchia extends over the whole land of Ireland, reaching from sea to sea.' (2) The term 'paruchia' indicates the monasteries over which a particular saint, abbot or abbess had jurisdiction. In 650 there were nearly a hundred monastic foundations on the island, and Irish foundations were a magnet for scholars from Britain and mainland Europe.

But that claim, with its tentative 'almost all the Irish churches', hints at an existing tension between Kildare and Armagh. Cogitosus would not need to



defend Kildare if its primacy were secure. With time, a strong alliance between the secular – the powerful Uí Néill dynasty – and the religious – the monastic hagiographers of Patrick – would help Armagh win out in the struggle for authority. These authors gave Patrick the credit for the Christianisation of the Irish and claimed that for this reason the saint would come back and be responsible for judging them. God had given the Irish to Patrick as his paruchia and there's no topping that.

By comparison Cogitosus' light and affectionate praise of Brigit and Kildare seems almost childish in its lack of political savoir-faire. But that is where its charm lies, as an engaging invitation into the world of the Irish when they were on the cusp of huge changes. Its words both mask and reveal the nature of life in early Ireland, so many things obvious to the people of the time needed no mention and remain hidden to us. In a world already full of dispute and division, the coming of a new creed, and the ebbing and flowing of political power it entailed must have left people feeling vulnerable and beleaguered.

Cogitosus' task, which he takes up under obedience to his superiors, is to write down 'the miracles and the deeds of the virgin Brigit of holy and blessed memory'. These are stories he has heard from 'well-informed elders' (3) and their telling is straightforward and unembellished. He chose the stories he thought said the most about her. The first thing that strikes you is that most of the stories are to do with nature and Brigit's effortless interaction with the natural world, where she can enter into an alliance with a fox to save a man's life, persuade wolves to shepherd pigs, and hang her cloak on a sunbeam.

It's a glimpse into the world of the early Celtic Christian church and indeed of the druid world it had succeeded, one that recognized and celebrated the rhythms of the natural year and the magic in the processes of life. Brigit can divert rivers, make the rain hold off her fields at harvest, milk her cows several times a day, find extra salt, bacon, butter and honey when she needs them. She has this power because of the purity of her intentions, seeking never to enrich herself but always to share wealth with the poor, and to alleviate suffering. She is solicitous to guests, cares for the blind and the dumb, shows compassion to prisoners, she makes peace between warring parties and generates

an abortion for a sister whose monastic career will be over if she has to carry the pregnancy to term. Her presence is felt in these stories, she is eternal like the elements, we perceive her in this world but with her eyes turned to another place, she holds the liminal spaces. Cogitosus makes an enormous claim for her: 'The whole of nature was subject to her power' (4), a claim to endear him to all Brigit's supporters.

Part 2 of this article will be published in March's Touchstone

Thanks to Marion Brigantia, priestess trainer and co-organizer of the Glastonbury Goddess conference, and to everyone in the discussion group for encouraging me to finally read Cogitosus!

Notes to quotations

- 1 Preface to the *Life of Saint Brigit, The Virgin*
- 2 Preface
- 3 Preface
- 4 *Of the bird blessed and later caught with the hand* story 21

The online translated text of Cogitosus' *Vita Brigidae* is short, easy to read, and can be found at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25508920>



Image: Offering by Cathy Johnson

Running in Nature, Running into Druidry

by Gulliver Grisbrooke-Campbell

As a neophyte druid, it felt sometimes like everyone else grew up foraging and going to sacred sites and dancing at folk festivals. I rarely did any of that. Nature was something sticky and messy and dusty. I didn't dance. I didn't forage. I barely noticed any of it.

What I did do, though, was run. I have always ran.

Always is a bit of a lie, as I'm very much a fair-weather runner, but I've been a fair-weather for most of my life.

So, humour me for a second. Put your shoes on. Follow me. I'll show you how I found my path.

Let's start with a little warm-up.

As a child, I ran. I was tall in my year at school (having an Autumn birthday), so my legs were long and they took me far.

On Sports Day, I was a reliable choice. As a teen, I remember someone shouting "Go on, Gully!" as I outpaced my peers in a PE lesson. I did not enjoy PE, but I did enjoy running. There's a simplicity in pointing myself forwards and just going.

Okay, we're going to speed up now.

In my twenties, living in cities I'd smoke on the way to the gym (a terrible idea) and then run on the treadmill for forty-five minutes (a terrible idea) and then smoke on my way home and then drink far too much wine (a terrible idea). Youth is not wasted on the young, but as a youth I was often wasted. Some plants grow better on poor soil, but I'm not a herb. I needed to change my relationship with my body and my environment.

Actually, let's slow down a little; it's not a race.

When I moved out to the country, running became more meaningful. There were plants and trees and water. There were mushrooms and birds and berries. I did not notice it at first, but I did notice how it changed. There were different plants and berries and mushrooms and sometimes I could see them and sometimes I couldn't. There was life. This was the nature people kept talking about. We just hadn't been introduced.

I should join the running club, I was told. Absolutely not; running was time alone in nature. I run this route again and again. It's my sacred circle. It's the rings of my trunk. It's my prayer

wheel. I'll keep going round and round and round and sometimes I'll add a little bit on and sometimes I'll run somewhere else, but I always return to it like a mantra.

Head over heart, heart over hips.

I leave my house and turn left. I pass a lake within an old park that is variously filled with sheep and dog walkers, oaks and horse chestnuts, brambles and nettles, fairy rings and nesting birds. They are Holm Oaks, I've been told by someone who knows such things. I heard 'Home Oaks', and that they are to me. I've watched them grow older and offer shelter to countless sheep and picnickers. They're not native to England, but they support plenty of wildlife. A synergistic addition.

The lake is not a native either; it was built by men and women and donkeys with strong backs and strong shovels as part of a landscape for the local stately home. Canada geese, ducks, swans, moorhens and birds I could never hope to name all enjoy it.

Remember to breathe.

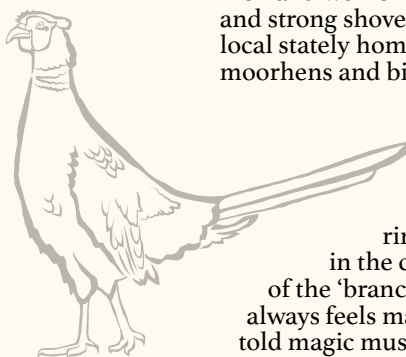
Along the path, when the weather has been just-so, grow rings of mushrooms. The root is in the centre, and we only see the tips of the 'branches' that grow up and out, but it always feels magical when I see one. I've been told magic mushrooms grow nearby, but I'm happy to leave them for the more adventurous foragers.

Beyond the lake is a large field, home to sheep and grasshoppers. In the centre is a little cluster of trees, where I once found a circle of feathers that I imagine was set out by an unseen witch but was just as likely set out by unseen teenagers thriving on creativity and mischief.

There is then the dry arch. It is a bridge over no river, no stream and no gaping maw, merely a shallow ditch. You can't see it until you're practically on top of it. Its presence is always something of a mystery, as surely it was more effort to build a bridge than fill a hole, but the bridge is there and the ditch is unfilled. Nature passes below, runners and walkers (on two legs and four) pass above.

Unclench your fists, relax your shoulders and give your arms a little shake.

Through another field, under an oak and behind another tree to a hidden gate and round country lanes, frequented by farmers and short-cutters and past an old stone gate (a remnant of a road no longer travelled) and then I'm surrounded



by brambles (not yet, but soon!) and nettles and cleavers and hawthorn and squirrels doing very athletic hoppity-hops to get from the road the hedgerow and litter – so much litter! I sometimes take some home with me – and spiders webs covering trees like a white veil and the smell of cows and wild garlic. I've been running this path for over a decade. We watch each other age and change.

How are you doing? We're nearly home. You can do this.

As I return to town I often pass through a graveyard. One contains graves of commonwealth soldiers, says the sign. A resting place far from their place of birth, but hopefully never too far from home. There's a chapel with boarded up windows.

I run back into the park with the lake and follow the sheep paths back round to the gate. There used to be an oak tree at the top but it had to be cut down. It was dying and was a risk to others. Its absence is felt.

Slow it down and warm down with a gentle walk.

Without running, I probably would never have connected to nature as I have, and I probably would not have found druidry. I run this path like a prayer wheel. Could you develop a prayer wheel of your own?

You don't have to like running. Maybe you like swimming (I hate swimming in lanes, but drop me in a pond and I'm delighted). Maybe you like walking. Maybe you like painting. Maybe you like doing fire poi on the beach. Maybe you like hiking up a mountain to watch the sunrise. Maybe you like drinking a cup of coffee by the window, surrounded by potted plants. We all follow different paths.

Nature is always there, sometimes you just have to run at it full-pelt.

Jazz Hands by Shilah

A Tree gave me "Jazz" hands today,
As the clouds giggled with
Vibrant rays of the sun glowing through
them //\.

A tree gave me "Jazz" hands today,
As birds fluttered, swirled, & swooped by.

A tree gave me "Jazz" hands today,
While the earth slept, awaiting spring.
A tree gave me "Jazz" hands today

Seasonal Recipe

Imbolc by Sue Wilson

Imbolc sees the wheel turning towards spring. Leeks and spring cabbages are among the few hardy vegetables in season.

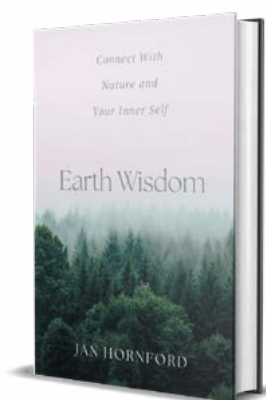
Colcannon

Colcannon is a traditional Irish dish. A cabbage and potato dish, but different in nature to bubble and squeak. This dish will feed four hungry people.

8 medium potatoes
2 tablespoons sunflower spread
1 large savoy cabbage or a bunch of spring greens, or sprout tops
3 large leeks
4 cloves of garlic, crushed
2 tablespoons Sunflower oil
1 carton soya cream
Salt and black pepper
To serve - cherry tomatoes, button mushrooms and balsamic vinegar

1. Peel the potatoes. Cut them into chunks. Cook in boiling water until soft.
2. Drain the potatoes, then mash them with plenty of salt and pepper and a couple of tablespoons of sunflower spread.
3. While the potatoes are cooking, wash and shred the greens
4. Cook the greens in boiling water until soft.
5. Wash and slice the leeks. Heat the sunflower oil in a large frying pan and sauté the leeks and garlic. Add the soya cream, a good grinding of black pepper, and continue to cook gently until the leeks are soft.
6. Add the mashed potato and drained cabbage to the leeks and stir well.
7. Blast in a hot oven or under a hot grill for about ten minutes.
8. Serve with oven baked tomatoes and mushrooms, drizzled with pomegranate molasses.





*Jan recently contacted Touchstone about her book, **Earth Wisdom**, which aims to foster a deeper relationship between the reader and nature. She has kindly written a new exercise for us to show the kind of exercise her book contains. Enjoy!*

The Druid path shows you how to be in a relationship

with Nature and with the Spirit that underlies and informs all life. This sacred communion offers you many gifts and teachings. One of the most profound gifts is Nature's ability to awaken your inner wisdom and intuition. Connecting with your Inner-Self and your heart's truth enables you to transform your life and how you see the world.

It can be easy for your inner voice to be overshadowed by your roles and responsibilities, your beliefs and worries. Nature offers you a path home to your inner-guidance and deepest Self. It opens the door to your intuition and creativity. From this place of connection, you can respond to any challenge with awareness and stability.

Walking in the woods, sitting by a lake or stream, or lying on the grass on a sunny day are all paths to connecting with Nature and your inner wisdom. As a traveller on the Druid path, you know you can enter your inner or outer sacred grove to experience this sacred communion.

One does not have to be a Druid to long for this heartfelt connection with Nature. Many people seek the wisdom of the wild but may feel uncomfortable in Nature or believe that because they live in the city, they cannot access Nature. Mobility issues or other concerns may make it hard for people to connect with the natural world. So many believe they are separate from Nature and long to heal this divide. The truth is, we are never separate from Nature as we are a part of Nature. Nature is everywhere - the tree outside your window or the dandelion on the sidewalk. Anyone can rekindle their relationship with the Earth. All it takes is an open heart.

I want to offer a simple practice to help you connect with Nature and your Inner Self, no matter your circumstances or where you live.

This practice is accessible to all, regardless of location, background, or spiritual path.

Flower Connection Exercise

Choose a flower that you are drawn to. You may purchase a flower from a shop, pick one from your garden, or find a dandelion growing on the sidewalk. Ask the flower if it is willing to come with you. If you feel a lightness, an expansion, that is yes. A heaviness or contraction is a no. Ask another flower if you feel a no.

Begin

Take a few deep breaths and settle into your body. Observe the flower through your physical senses. Engaging your senses helps you be embodied,



connected with your body, rather than your thinking mind. The body can bring you into a place of presence and awareness. This place gives you greater access to your creativity and inner guidance. The body is a gateway to your inner wisdom and a deeper understanding of the life and Spirit around and within you.

Sight: What do you see? Notice the shape, colour, and pattern of the petals of your flower.

Sound: What do you hear? Notice the sounds that are all around you. Then, notice the sounds of your body, the sound of your breath.

Smell: How does the flower smell? Does the scent evoke a memory for you?

Touch: Reach out and touch the flower with love and a welcome in your heart. How does the flower feel?

Listen: Sit with the flower for a while and listen with your heart. How does the flower make you feel? How does the flower feel to you (happy, quiet, indifferent, energetic?)

Questions to Consider:

Can you feel the flower's connection with the sun, the bees, the soil, the water, and the wind?

What practical and spiritual gifts does the flower offer you (Hope, beauty, grace, healing medicine)?

What can the flower teach you about how to live your life?

Notice what feelings, thoughts, and impressions arise from being with this flower.

You can make a few notes in your journal, use coloured pencils to express your feelings or create a music playlist that encompasses the experience.

When you feel complete, thank the flower for offering this connection.

Give thanks to your body for its ability to feel and experience the life around you.

Going forward

Try sitting with the flower at different times of the day or evening.

Observe the flower over the next week and how it changes.

How do you feel as the life force energy of the flower begins to diminish?

Does the dying flower offer you any gifts or insights?

The wisdom you seek lies within you, and Nature can help you access this guidance. Nature can take you beyond your personal history and beliefs. Through this sacred communion with Nature, you can tap into your heart's wisdom and experience the joy and wonder of the world. When you are present and calm, connected with Nature, you can hear your deepest Self's guidance and receive the Earth's wisdom. This connection can infuse your life with purpose and meaning, inspiring you to live in harmony with the natural world.

I have adapted the flower connection practice from exercises in my book *Earth Wisdom: Connect with Nature and Your Inner Self*. If you enjoyed this practice or know someone seeking to connect with Nature, please visit www.janhornford.com to learn more or for book purchase links.

Earth Wisdom offers simple steps to connect with the power and wisdom of Nature to enhance your well-being and transform your life. Embark on a sacred journey through the seasons, the elements, and your senses to discover the Earth's teachings—experience how the natural world can be a path home to your Inner-Self and intuition. Find peace, guidance, and wonder from communion with the living heart of Nature.

Find the book in the OBOD store - <https://store.druidry.org/products/earth-wisdom>



Reviews

Wheel of the Year by Dean Carter

Dean Carter's latest album is an instrumental acoustic guitar journey through the seasons starting out with the tentative notes of *Standstill - Sol Invictus*, (unconquered Sun). The track, which is also the lead single, builds layer upon layer of the repeating acoustic guitar melody, evoking the imagery of sitting around a cosy fire listening to stories. The next track, *A Winter's Tale* has a sense of urgency about it, with the change in tempo. Perhaps it represents the struggle and anticipation for the return of the sun.

On first listen through, I wasn't aware that the album was instrumental and I was waiting for some lyrics to arrive. However, by the time I got to track 5, Dean's guitar was purely singing through the hauntingly beautiful and melancholy *Bel's Fires*. There's some truly masterful guitar picking at play here, an absolute joy to listen to.

The way that the tracks flow into one another seems to mirror the cyclical nature of the seasons, experiencing the year unfold through music, with each track transitioning to the next like the turn of the wheel. This can be heard throughout the album but for me it really stood out quite beautifully in track 7 and 8.

Soporific is a dreamy, lazy, sunny melody, played using slide guitar which conjures visions of sitting by the sea in the sunshine watching the world go by. It transitions perfectly to *It Is What It Is* which is dedicated to Lughnasadh. I think this was actually my favourite track on the album. It has a very mysterious and hypnotic quality and was giving me a very bluesey Doors vibe.

The album is very trance-like, meditative and deeply immersive. While uplifting in places it becomes quite dark, moody and reflective, the perfect soundtrack to these winter months, guiding the listener through a reflective and contemplative journey. Again, the layering of the guitar is just dreamy, magical and atmospheric

Dean Carter, a songwriter and guitarist hailing from Glastonbury, has crafted an album that beautifully reflects the cyclical nature of the seasons. I'm sure to have this one on repeat.

Review by Fiona Graham

Reviews

CERRIDWEN BY DANU FOREST

You can always trust Danu Forest to produce a good book and her latest, *Cerridwen: Keeper of the Cauldron*, is no exception. Published by Moon Books, this relatively short book is perfect for newcomers to the Pagan path and those who have been on it for a while. There is such depth to the research that there is plenty here to inform and delight all readers.

The book sets out its stall early: "This small book is not meant to be a complete and conclusive study of Cerridwen – it could never be so as the subject is too vast and complex to fit into so few pages. Rather, it is intended as a grounded and researched introduction, one I write as a Celtic Studies academic but also as a practitioner and priestess of Cerridwen of many years, with research on one hand and my own gnosis on the other."

It is the strong, academic grounding of the book which you experience as you begin reading. Forest presents different sources and interpretations with clarity and skill, making the Celtic knot of stories behind Cerridwen easy for the reader to follow.

The book opens with a focus on Awen itself and takes a deep dive into its meaning, suggesting that "in modern terms we may consider it to be akin to the collective unconscious." Bards of the order will find much inspiration here, and later in the book too when Forest considers the historic Bardic initiation (although I for one am glad that we no longer practice ritual burial as part of the Bardic grade).

After a thorough exploration of the Awen, part 2 of the book guides us through the tale of Cerridwen, which is so well known to members of the order. After exploring the different textual versions and recounting the tale, Forest evaluates the role of each of the characters. Her approach is beautifully balanced, with academically rigorous explorations of each figure counterpointed with a range of visualisations to meet them. What is really pleasing is that Forest gives plenty of attention to some of the figures who do not usually get much consideration. The sections on Tegid Foel and Morfran Afagddu felt particularly special, and I loved Forest's suggestion that "it may be possible to see Creiwy as the Awen itself."

After a thorough exploration of each character, Forest turns to the landscape and, again, finds some fascinating links. For example, that Tegid Foel, which means "Fair bald one" could

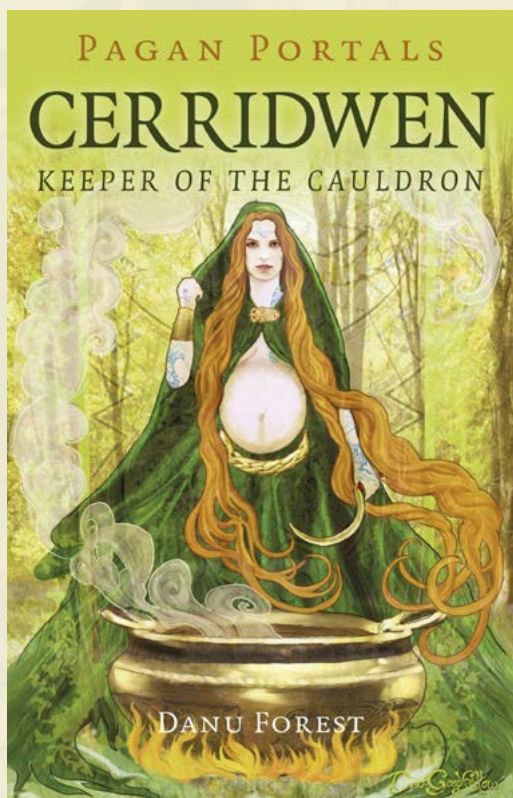
perhaps be "the mountain tops that can be seen on the westerly horizon, from the shores of Llyn Tegid, Bala Lake."

There then follows my favourite part of the book, an exploration of the animal transformations in the story. Again there is a balance between the information presented and visualisations which give a potent and personal understanding to the role and qualities of each creature. I will certainly be repeating these exercises in future. The final exercise, *Adrift on the Sea of Unbeing*, is incredibly potent.

For the penultimate part of the book, Forest explores the context surrounding Cerridwen, which includes an insightful exploration of cauldrons in their many forms. A final section on practical ways of working with Cerridwen rounds off the book nicely.

Reading this book feels like you are in such a safe pair of hands, as you are guided through the different elements of Cerridwen's tale. This book is packed full of Awen, inspiration which will thrill your soul and get you to look at the things you think you know in new ways. And with illustrations by Dan Goodfellow, this book is a truly inspiring piece of magic.

Find the book in the OBOD store - <https://store.druidry.org/products/pagan-portals-cerridwen>



Andrew's Bit At The Back

Imbolc is an interesting time. In terms of the wheel of the year, we tend to mark it as the first celebration of spring. However, it's important to acknowledge that it's also the final festival of winter. Some of the coldest and snowiest weather of the winter can happen around or even after Imbolc.

So, while there is a drive towards the vim and vigour of spring, there is also the continued need to rest in the darkness.

Our friends and family may be ready to pack away their winter woollies and welcome back the light, but what if we don't feel ready for spring?

Just as I was mulling these ideas over, I recieved a beautiful little article by Rose Wildwood called *In the Bag*, which seemed to sum up many of these ideas very eloquently but from a slightly different perspective. Rose writes:

I am having surgery in a few days, from which it will take at least a couple of months to recover.

It's good, because I've been in pain for a long time, and this surgery will (hopefully) help.

But I've had many years of difficulties - health and financial issues do seem to go hand in hand, don't they? - and during those years of difficulty, have always found ways to turn struggle into beauty, always working hard, writing words or music, always "being productive."

Even while ill and in pain, creating and being productive have kept me steady.

Now, after this surgery, I will not be able to move my right arm and hand for a significant chunk of time.

No music.

No writing.

No art.

No work.

I have been feeling anxious and stressed about that, partly because I don't want to be evicted, but it's deeper than that. It's that I don't know of a time, ever in my life, that I haven't worked or created or produced anything for more than a couple days.

In truth, I don't know who I am without my work.

But then I was thinking about the story of

Taliesin. The long, long chase, running flat out, changing into this and that creature to avoid being killed, and then becoming a seed and from there, a baby.



Only to be closed into a bag and flung into the water.

We don't know what happened in the bag.

We only know that when the bag was opened Taliesin came out of it glowing with wisdom and beauty.

I'm about to go into the bag.

I won't be visible - I won't be productive - I will just be lying in bed recovering.

But I won't fight it, or make some big plan to turn my time of healing and rest into a productive project.

I will go, quiet and still, into the bag, and experience the interior darkness.

I will allow growth and transmutation to happen without trying to grip it, steer it or control it.

I know there will be moments of anxiety and even panic, as I adjust to life as a human being rather than a "human doing."

But I will adjust. I will allow the feelings to come and go.

I will rest in the bag.

Rose makes such an important point here. There are times when we just need to rest in the darkness, 'in the bag', and not push or strive or act. This can be such a difficult thing for us to grasp, particularly when the world around us seems to be waking up again.

Some of us need the return of the light to move us out of our winter torpor, but if this Imbolc finds you unable to move into 'spring' for whatever reason, do not feel bad. We can take valuable learning from the story of Taliesin. Take Rose's excellent advice and rest 'in the bag' until it is time for you to return to the world.

I wish Rose a blessed healing period and peace to all of you, whether inside or outside of the bag.

*Until
next time,*

Andrew iii



To find Events from OBOD members and friends throughout the year, check the events page on the Druid Hearth: <https://hearth.druidry.org/events>

OBOD Wheel Of The Year Online Rituals

Check the Tune In page on the Druid Hearth: <https://hearth.druidry.org/tune-in>

DATES FOR 2025:

Imbolc - February 8th | Alban Eilir - March 22nd | Bealtaine - May 3rd | Alban Hefin - June 21st
Lughnasadh - August 2nd | Alban Elfed - September 20th | Samhain - November 1st
Alban Arthan - December 20th

Upcoming Events

Bardic Gorsedd: 25-27 July 2025 at Penmaenmawr, Wales. For more information email bardicgorsedds@obod.org

Ovate Gorsedd: in Ireland. More information to follow.

Druid Gorsedd: 7-9 March, Bude, Cornwall. For more information email bomcbruce@gmail.com
11-13 April 2025, Malvern. For more information, email druidgorsedds@obod.org

Summer Gathering: 7 & 8 June 2025, Strode Theatre, Street.

Winter Gathering: 6 December 2025, Strode Theatre, Street.

I am Imbolc

I am the smell of sage carried on the cold air.

I am puffs of smoke and breath

I am deer prints in the snow

I am old stone walls in the bare forest

I am the crunch of snow underfoot.

I am a circle of friends

I am the cheerful chirp of the chickadees

I am snow dropping from branches

I am cold fingers and toes.

I am crisp, clear, refreshing air.

I am the sun poking through the trees.

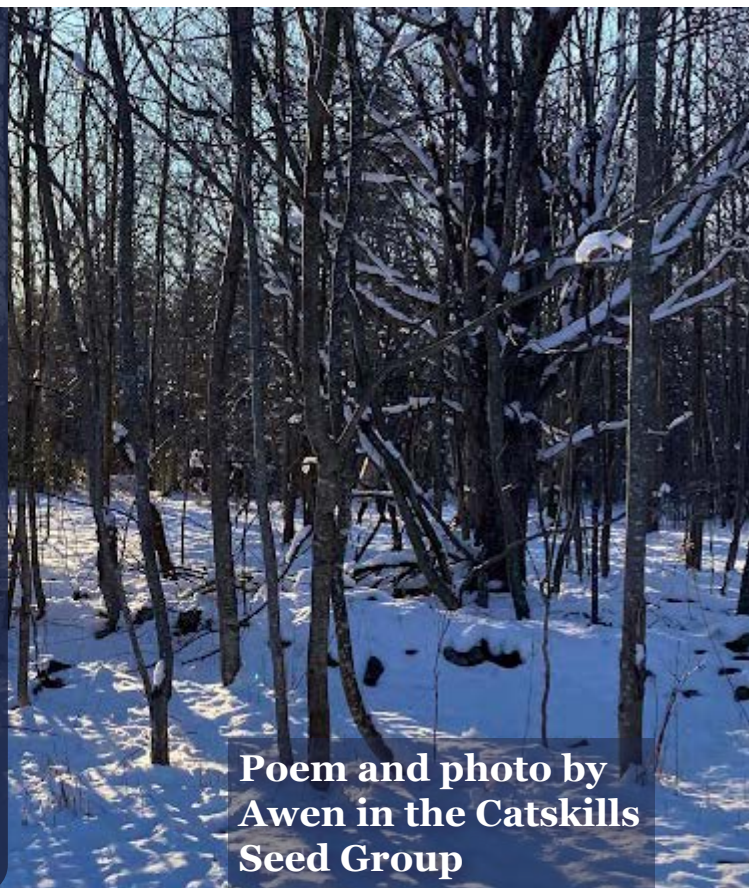
I am the continuing beauty of winter.

I am the contrast of bark on trees.

I am baby turkey sightings.

I am a blue sky and white clouds.

I am Imbolc.



Poem and photo by
Awen in the Catskills
Seed Group