

TOUCHSTONE

The journal of THE ORDER OF BARDS, OVATES & DRUIDS

November 2024 | Issue 327

This Issue

- ✿ Community of the Wild by Jack Wolf.
- ✿ It's Not Called Mabon by Matthew McCabe.
- ✿ Using Prayer Beads in Druidic Practice by Rosie Rondot
- ✿ Plus lots more!



COVER: "Bonfire Night" by Josh Warren

Editorial

Welcome to November's *Touchstone*, which is full of glittering articles and smouldering reflections on the season.

Firstly, let me thank Josh Warren for yet another gorgeous piece of cover art. I wanted to acknowledge Guy Fawkes and Bonfire Night in this edition (see my *Bit at the Back* for more on this very English festival) and asked Josh if he could provide me with a suitable cover. Well, he's more than met that particular challenge - you can almost feel yourself warming by the fire and gazing up in awe at the fireworks exploding in the sky. Thank you again, Josh, for your brilliant contributions to our magazine.

There are some absolute sparklers in this edition, so its worth settling down with a cup of tea and slab of parkin to take it all in. There's lots of poetry, much of which focuses on points of transition and change. There's articles about joining the community of the wild, about why we need to consider ageing and ancestors in the autumn and about making and using prayer beads. Our artists and photographers have provided us with some glorious visual content and there are also a final few flickers of the Samhain fires, just to keep us on our toes!

This edition also honours the contribution to the order by Brendan Howlin, a friend and mentor to many members, who sadly passed away in August. I met Brendan a few times after reading his wonderful books. He was the kind of person who instantly put you at ease; he was incredibly generous and had a smile that could light up a room. There are some beautiful reflections from his friends on page 5, alongside a poem Brendan submitted to *Touchstone* back in 2001, which feels particularly appropriate and relevant.

Enjoy!



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Haiku by Darlene Margeta

Spinning autumn webs.
September spider seance
Catch a misty day.



TOUCHSTONE is published by OBOD.

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Chosen Chief's Bit

Bandia daoibh a chairde! As I write this, I can really feel that we are heading into the dark half of the year as the nights draw in.

As it's Samhain, I'd like to share some more traditions and folklore from Ireland. A number of years ago, I and some friends went to Inis Mór, one of the Aran Islands, to attend Féile na bPucaí (Halloween Festival). The tradition there is that people dress up in disguise in such a way that they cannot be recognised. They go to the pub; they do not speak to each other and drink using straws through their masks. They try to recognise each other and there is a prize for the person who remains undiscovered. There is even a silent Céilí – not like a silent disco where people wear headphones – but they dance to the music in silence. One reason given for this silence is that in ancient times, as people rambled about the island at Samhain mixing with their dead ancestors as they came through the veil, it was best not to know if one was walking amongst the living or the dead.

In Ireland and Scotland, there is a long tradition of having Jack O' Lanterns at Samhain time. People carved scary faces on turnips and placed a burning candle in them. When the people migrated to the USA, they brought their Samhain traditions with them. The turnips were replaced by pumpkins, which are much easier to carve. Pumpkins have since crossed the Atlantic and are what most people use today. A few years ago I started to carve turnips as I had done when I was a child. I'd like to share an origin story of the Jack O' Lantern with you:

One night, Seán Sprionlaithe, (in English - Stingy Jack), a man who was well known for his meanness and nastiness was drinking in a tavern when a mysterious man in dark clothes walked in. Jack invited the man to share a drink with him. Upon learning that the stranger was the Devil, Jack knew that he had come for him and he had to think fast as he wasn't yet ready to die and go to hell. So upon being presented with the bill for the drinks, Jack, being also a very clever and devious man, convinced the Devil to turn himself into a coin so that Jack could use it to pay his bill. The Devil agreed on the condition that he would get Jack's soul in exchange. A deal was struck and they shook hands on it.

But instead of using the coin to pay his bill, Jack, being the sly trickster that he was, took it with him and carved the shape of the cross on the coin so that the Devil couldn't change back. The Devil pleaded and pleaded with Jack to let him go and eventually Jack agreed, but only if the Devil promised to never collect the soul Jack owed him. The Devil

reluctantly agreed and so Jack scratched out the cross on the coin and freed the Devil from his pocket. But according to legend, this wasn't the only time that Jack and the Devil would meet.

A few years later, the same Stingy Jack was sitting in an orchard when he ran into the Devil once again. Jack, being the clever trickster that he was, convinced the Devil to climb into an apple tree and pick Jack some apples. The Devil agreed, once again on the condition that Jack would pay for the apples with his soul. But once the Devil was in the tree, Jack, being a sly one carved a cross into the trunk, trapping the Devil. Jack and the Devil reached an agreement that Jack would let him go if he agreed to never take Jack into Hell. Unfortunately for Jack, this deal didn't work out the way he planned.



When Jack finally died, his soul went to Heaven. However, God refused to let him in because of his meanness and bad deeds. Jack then went to Hell, seeking a place for his soul to rest. But the Devil, true to his word, refused Jack as well. Trapped between Heaven and Hell, Jack's spirit was forced to wander around the world of the living. The devil, however, felt sorry for Jack and offered him a burning coal to light his way. As it was too hot to hold in his

hand Jack carved out a turnip and placed the burning coal inside. Thus, whenever people saw the lights floating out of the bogs, they attributed them to Jack and his lantern as he wandered across the world seeking somewhere to rest. They are known in Irish as Seán na Gealaí or Tine Ghealáin, in English Will O' the Wisps. Today at Oíche Shamhna we carve out turnips and place candles in them to help light the way for those souls who are wandering the world trying to find the doorway into the Otherworld.

Sin é mo scéalsla!

May you find the light of love and peace to guide you as you walk your path at this time.

Beannachtaí na Shamhna daoibhse go léir! Blessings of Samhain to you all!

Eimear

Come Back to Me by Darlene Margeta

"Come back to me with the spring"
I whisper to my flowers as they dance with Autumn to the Underworld.
Spiders watch and sigh.





Metamorphosis

by Rhyannon Brightwater

Within the caterpillar beats
the heart of the flutterbee
and the pollywog swims
with the soul of the frog.
They are not alone---
all nature is in constant flux,
transition and metamorphosis.

I often pondered what it feels like
to exchange one body for another so different.
In the case of humans change is mostly
inward, slow and pain-filled,
a shedding of layer after layer
like a dragon skinned,
its scaly hide ripped and peeled away
by the tender and terrible claws
of the Lion bent on seeing who we truly are
beneath our fearful guises.

How difficult it is to change even one thing about
ourselves,
to become so real in a world
that prefers the disguises we have been compelled
to wear by Chance or majority vote.

How hard it is to change!
But I am part of nature, a wonder, a prodigy,
a mere slip of a thing--though eternal--
and how I long for the freedom
that only comes through the rending
of Truth from Lies oh so reluctantly lived—or
died.

The Wheel Turns

by Heidi Hanley Smith

Celebrate the last bright color of autumn.
The last leaf.
The last warm, sunny day.
Reflect on the year past;
Growth, abundance and harvest.
Now, as the sun sinks and the light fades,
Summer and autumn slip into the West.
And the dark half of the year,
Reigned over by the Winter Queen,
Rises in the North.
Prepare for the quiet time;
Resting, dreaming and planning for spring.

A Sonnet for the Druid in Autumn

by Jennifer Miller

The ancient oaks are beckoning me home—
I hear their whispers in the northern wind
and feel the peaceful silence of the grove
descending like the mists upon the glen.

The last of summer's bounty gleaned once more
and captured in sweet jam and honey wine,
I pause to ponder long-forgotten lore
and hear the bards relay their tales in rhyme.

As twilight fades, I gather 'round the fire,
wrapped in my cloak against the autumn chill.
Enchanted by the sounds of drum and lyre,
I feel the Old Ones standing with us still.

I honor what has been and what shall be—
a blessing on the land, the sky, and sea.



Image by Anna M

Beneath the Silver Birch

by Daniel Rayleigh

Beneath the tree
Was a place for me.
In a world full of noise,
A place just to be.

For a child who was lost,
It was safe and warm.
The keeper of secrets.
My shelter from the storm.

Through the maze of my youth,
The passing of years.
The tree heard my thoughts,
My hopes and my fears.

Where life has felt dark,
Its strength holds me tight.
Sat safely beneath it,
My beacon of light.

The tree is my constant
Its warmth without end.
The tree is my home,
The tree is my friend.

Beneath that tree,
Always will be
My haven, my space.
A place just for me.



The Dove by Jessica McGee

A visiting Dove
Nested in a flower pot
Gracing my haven.

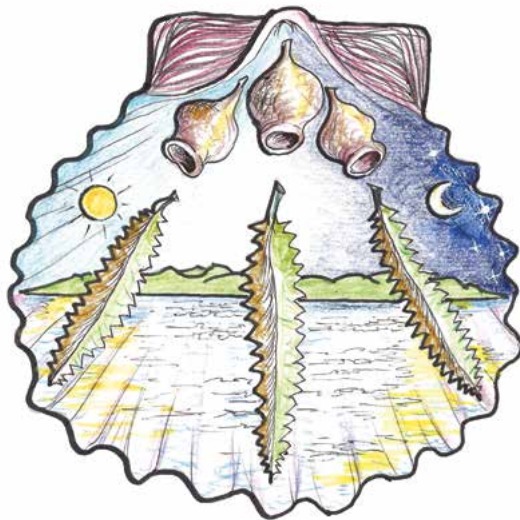


Image: Awen by John Jordan

The Trees of Elven Wood

by Iain Marshall

There was always an overwhelming air of peace in Elven Wood.

It was a place of sanctuary, and great beauty, where the rain had painted the trees with lichen and the stones with moss. Where all creatures lived in bliss and harmony.

The trees, of course, were always there; long before the humans came.

When the land was under the custodianship of the Elves, and the woodland hummed with a vibrant breath.

What an enchanting tale the trees could tell; for they had seen many things, and remembered when the humans came to cut, and carry off their kin. For each was a small part of the whole; an assembly of trees that was the Elven Wood. The Oak, the Elder, the Rowan, the Thorns; an endless list; no one, more important than another, and all lovingly cared for by each other.

In truth: there were none wiser than the trees of Elven Wood.

Sadly, they grieved the day when humans cut a Faery tree, and carried it away. Henceforth: the Elves retreated to the woodland's heart: embraced by the trees, who clad them in their woodland green, and created a portal to another world: a world where Elves and Faeries could remain unseen.



The Woods Within

by Bobbie Pell

Her mind was like a forest --
full of private places to hide,
covered with lace-veined layers,
dense in its simplicity,
a home for things both wild and unfettered,
a place where secret terrors
roam freely at night,
a space where gentle rains
quickly turn into angry storms,
branching out towards new horizons,
blooming constantly with
renewed life.

Her mind was like a forest --
Unknown.



Through the Gateway

by Jennifer Miller

September paints me gold and vermillion inside
as I gather the falling leaves
into the pockets of my wistful heart.

The bustle of summer fades like a cotton dress,
and I listen to the music of distant stars
in the quiet hours when the eye of the world
sleeps.

I step through the gateway once again,
letting the darkness of this time enfold me,
learning from the queen bumblebee
as she burrows deeply, conserving her energy.

I, too, will find my place among the roots and
seeds.

I, too, will give myself to visions and dreams.

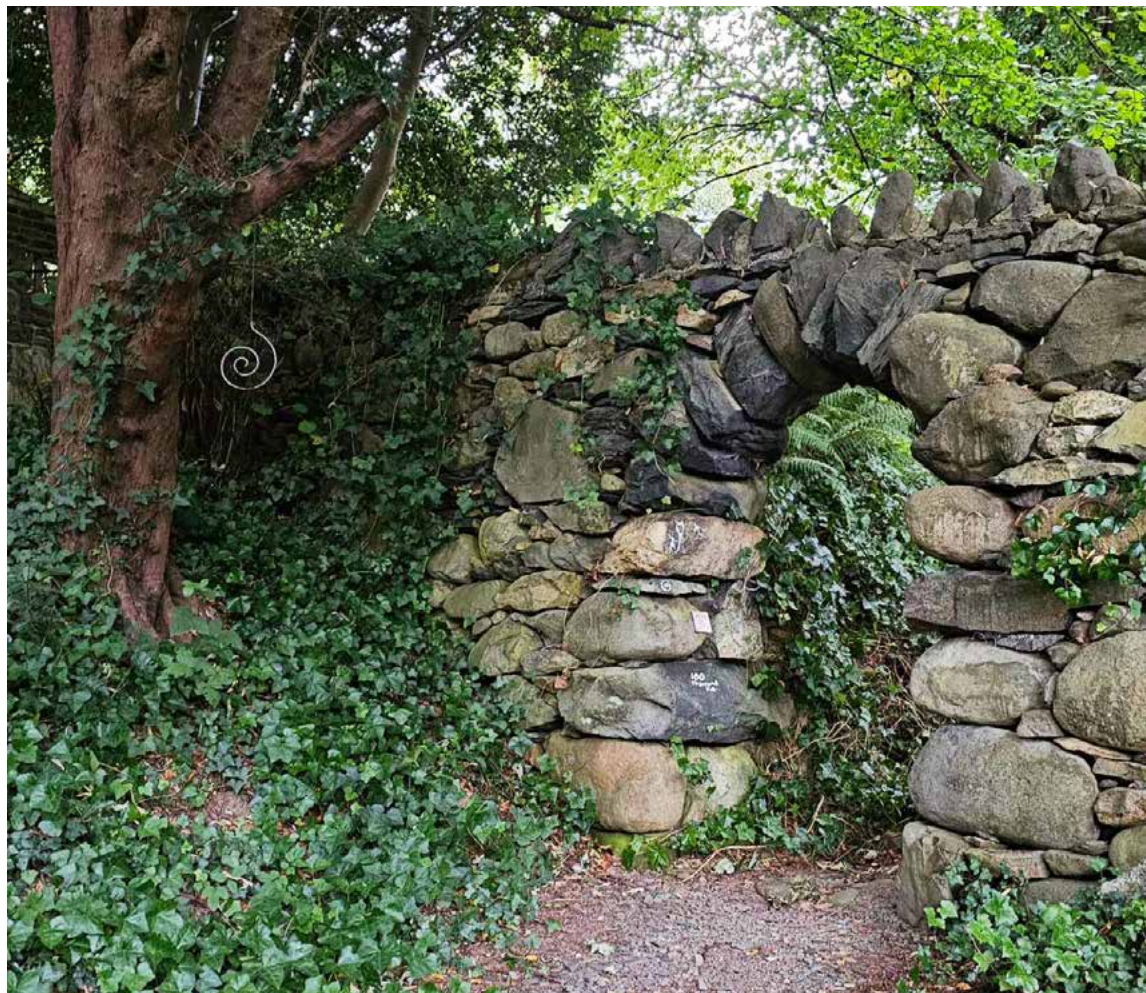


Image: Portal by Abi Ainley

In Memoriam

Brendan Howlin



Brendan was a familiar sight at the Order's Gatherings, and known to many as the author of *Urban Druidry* and *The Urban Ovate*. I was fortunate to sit next to him at my first Summer Gathering, over twenty years ago now, and have appreciated his companionship ever since. I always looked forward to catching up with him at OBOD events.

His 'day job' was at the University of Surrey, lecturing in Chemistry, and teaching and researching Computing. I was once astonished to come across him, many years ago, typing on a tiny wristwatch-come-computer, with a microscopic stylus! Brendan very much enjoyed the challenge of linking science with Druidry, his two great passions, and often contributed articles to *Touchstone* on this topic.

Brendan lived in the heart of a town, with his wife Gillian, to whom he was devoted. He connected with nature regularly, and they enjoyed walking on the North Downs and tending an organic allotment, where they grew herbs and vegetables (as he said, slugs permitting!) His calm and quiet manner was deceptive, as he had a mischievous streak and was lots of fun. He had a most wonderful presence in ritual and was always my first choice when organising ceremony.

He was also a long serving and well respected Mentor, who was highly thought of both by his colleagues and mentees, many of the latter remaining firm friends, long after their mentoring relationship was over. He always said that he loved interacting with his students, and was very generous with his time and attention. Typically, despite his illness, he continued mentoring for as long as he could. Brendan lived his druidry, and has been a positive influence on many thousands of people. Through his friendship, and teaching, mentoring and writing, we were all blessed to have known him.

Fi Ware

I am one of so many who have fond memories of Brendan - a respected Druid colleague who served the tenets of the Order faithfully. And what an impish sense of fun: like the Cheshire Cat's smile, Brendan's twinkle stays in the mind. As a trusted mentor and author his influence continues: his books, *The Handbook of Urban Druidry – Modern Druidry for all* and *The Urban Ovate: the handbook of psychological Druidry*, are readily available and quality works. Brendan was the unofficial science correspondent for *Touchstone* for some years, and with his enquiring mind was always up for supporting new initiatives or challenges: and if they were a bit madcap, all the better. Here's his response to a poetry invitation; to produce a villanelle - a wickedly twisty poetic form to master - on a Druidic subject.

Go well Brendan, to your long home, with our love.

Penny Billington

The Druid Path by Brendan Howlin

The Druids work by day and night
An eightfold path, the Gwersu bade
To make their souls rise to the light.

With horns and drums, a sound of might
In sacred site and tree-lit glade
The Druids work by day and night.

With augers, dreams, and second sight
Within a circle they have made
To make their souls rise to the light.

In deepest trance within their site
With guides and helpers from the shade
The Druids work by day and night.

So joined in this, this happy fight
They try to cause their fears to fade
Make their souls rise to the light.

In robes of white, so clearly bright
To save the world from doom we've laid
The Druids work by day and night
To make their souls rise to the light.

Community of the Wild by Jack Wolf

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of watching a tree crack, and fall. Not felled: fall, naturally, as a result of high winds. I heard the noise of shattering wood, saw the top of the tree shaking – walking, almost – and then stared in shock as it toppled into the nearby woodland. I was lucky – had the tree fallen a couple of minutes later, I'd have been under it, as it fell right over the footpath. When I'd got over the shock, I went to pay my respects. The fallen tree was a Beech, massive, at least a hundred years old, but not old enough to have fallen without something having caused it. I looked closer. The lower trunk of the tree, still standing, had about a quarter of its diameter burned black by people lighting fires in the shelter provided by a cleft between its roots. The fires hadn't, by themselves, been enough to kill it, but they'd weakened the trunk to the point where it was unable to resist the wind. It had fallen because of the thoughtlessness of people – people who, most likely, just wanted to enjoy a few beers of an evening 'out in nature'.

I told the tree how sorry I was for its fall. There was nothing else I could do for it. It was mid-February, and the woodland was barely even waking up – there were no beech nuts to gather, either for myself or to plant and ensure that something of the tree lived on, and I've never been successful taking cuttings from Beech – unlike Willow, it doesn't root at the drop of a hat.

The deeper reason that the tree fell was to do with our culture's default relationship to land, to the wild, to the natural world. At least since the late 18thC, when we haven't simply seen 'the natural world' as something to exploit, we have tended to see it as a backdrop to human experience – perhaps a nice place to visit, or a psychological landscape: somewhere we can project our own feelings and ideas onto in ways that are often harmful by mistake. Seeing the Wild as untouchably 'other' – something that humans are not, (and perhaps should not be) inherently part of – allows us to think of the many Beings that make up the Community of the Wild as things, rather than as Persons in their own right, and makes it hard for us to see or care when our behaviour is having a negative impact. Who would want to admit that their pleasant evening in the woods ultimately resulted in the destruction of the very tree they sat beneath?

As Druids, we work hard to overcome this cultural disassociation, and mentally place ourselves back in right relation with the Wild. We learn about the traditional meanings of trees, study

the value of Story in our understanding of Land, and try to re-make lost connections between ourselves and every other living thing. But to do this effectively, we need both respect for other Beings, and knowledge. Did the fire-lighters have any understanding of why and how what they were doing would damage the land? Do we, who have the advantage over the average Westerner of actually caring about the Wild, unwittingly do things that will negatively impact its inhabitants even as we try to 'plug ourselves in'? We might know enough not to light fires in the roots of trees – but do we know enough to understand why we must avoid pouring certain substances into watercourses, or stop tying plastic ribbons onto the branches of trees? Moving into a closer relationship with the other Beings who share our world requires more than feeling that we want this closeness. We need to actively learn about them as subjective Others – how they grow, what they need to live, who they are – and grow into relationship with them in ways that acknowledge their existences as Persons, not things, and their roles within the Community of the Wild.



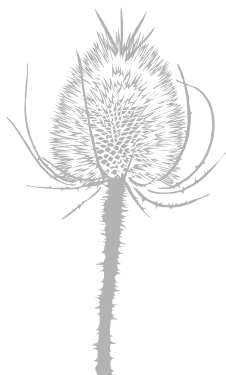
Take the example of the Beech. I knew, when the tree fell, who it was that was dying, because I knew that tree quite well; I also knew something of what the likely impact of its fall would be on the local ecosystem. First of

all, I knew that the Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Nuthatches would have to find somewhere else to nest that year (thankfully the tree fell before they had started!), and that a city's worth of invertebrates had been displaced; but also that because the tree was so large, the light in that place would now change radically, along with the flow of wind along that side of the valley. This has been the case. In the year and a half since the Beech's death, the area previously shaded by its canopy has begun to regenerate with a matrix of different species – a crowd of young Hawthorns, Ashes, Roses, and the inevitable Brambles have grown over the footpath, all racing for the light and revelling in the chance to grow. I know what is going on because I have taken the time to learn enough about the ecology of a British woodland to begin to understand what the relationships between Beings actually are, and how they work together to create an ever-changing society.

Sometimes it seems to me that in the Druid circles – and Paganism in general – there is a tendency to discount Scientific knowledge as invalid or irrelevant: a reversal of the scientific community's dismissal of other ways of knowing. This seems to me like throwing the baby out with the bathwater in a fit of pique – because, as inhabitants of the

21st Century (so called) civilised West, we don't have so many other ways of knowing we can afford to ignore this one. Yes, we can go and listen to the spirits of the trees (I strongly recommend we do!) but we don't have the traditional ecological knowledge that would have been able to tell us how to understand who and what each tree is, and what it is actually telling us. And this matters. Unless we know that Blackthorn evolved its fearsome spines to deter browsers that make modern cattle look like domestic cats, and that puncture wounds from those spines are extremely likely to go septic, we might not necessarily understand, or respect, the tree's polite request to leave it well alone. If we don't know that on flowering, the Nettle – one of the most nutritious plants and also one that is closely bound up with humanity – develops oxalic crystals in its leaves that can cause kidney stones when consumed, we may make ourselves seriously ill. Does Nettle warn us that its leaves have become toxic? Yes – but only if we have learned enough about the plant to be able to understand its language – which is expressed in its biology: the simple fact that it is busy flowering.

Becoming part of the Community of the Wild takes effort and dedication. We need to ask ourselves: is my desire for contact with this Being reciprocated? Am I offering communion, or demanding it? Am I defaulting to the norms that I grew up with, expecting 'nature' to act as a background for my enjoyment or spiritual development? It's when we begin to put this effort in that the Community of the Wild, from which we were never supposed to be separated in the first place, accepts us. When I sit in my (tiny, suburban) garden, I find myself increasingly able to watch the birds using the feeders not as a member of an audience, 'bird-watching', but a person noticing their neighbours. I watch them foraging, I listen to their calls, and I understand what is going on: who's here, whether the feeder's getting low on sunflower seeds, if there's a cat about, if the local magpies are fighting again, and so on. Over the winter and early spring I watch the trees (I have about 20, mostly self-seeded) come slowly into leaf and flower. When the time is right, I gather Hawthorn leaves, then berries, Wild Plums and Cherries – and, of course, Nettles. I am slowly coming to understand the Wild as a Community of real Beings, and in return the Community is gradually allowing me to become a real part of it.



Seasonal Recipe

Samhain by Sue Wilson

An ancient ritual, Samhain is Irish Gaelic for November and Scottish Gaelic for All Hallow's, and traditionally lasts from 31st October until 2nd November. It is a festival that marks the end of the harvest, a time of change and transition before winter sets in. The winter squashes, pumpkins and root vegetables are brought in. So now is the time to make dishes of roasted roots, maybe with couscous, and warming casseroles, bakes and soups with pumpkins, potatoes and roots. On All-Souls it was tradition to give Soul Cakes to children and the poor, who went "Souling" and this gave rise to the modern practice of Trick or Treat. Soul Cakes are round biscuits, often containing dried fruit, and cut with a cross. I make mine with a mixture of sunflower and pumpkin seeds to remind us that spring will return.

Seedy Soul Cakes

For the flax egg:-

1 tablespoon ground flax seeds mixed with 3 tablespoons boiling water

For the biscuits:-

75 g sunflower seeds

75g pumpkin seeds

125g vegan spread

150g dark brown sugar

100g wholemeal flour

100g porage oats

1. Make the flax egg and set aside.
2. Toast the seeds in a dry frying pan over a high heat until they start to pop.
3. Put the vegan spread and brown sugar into a bowl, and cream together with a wooden spoon until combined.
4. With a metal whisk, whisk in the flax egg.
5. Stir in the toasted seeds.
6. Stir in the flour and oats and mix well.
7. Shape into balls, a baker's dozen of 13 is a good number.
8. Place the biscuits on a lined baking tray and flatten each one with a fork.
9. Bake in a medium oven for 20 minutes.
10. Cool on a wire rack, dust with icing sugar.



It's Not Called Mabon by Matthew McCabe

Matt's wonderful article arrived at Touchstone towers just a bit too late for the September edition but, with its focus on ageing and ancestors, I wanted to share this thought-provoking piece with you as soon as I could!

"It's not called Mabon!" Such is the cry at this time of year from crusty old Druids, bleating into the autumn winds to a few raised eyebrows. But why?

In 1974, American academic and pagan, Aidan Kelly, decided to name the Autumn Equinox after the Welsh god Mabon, because the boring title 'Autumn Equinox' offended his sensibilities. This piece of cultural appropriation didn't gain much traction outside of the USA until Kelly's usage was referenced by the hugely influential writer Starhawk. Since then it has gained almost complete acceptance. These days, the Americanised 'Celtic' Wheel of the Year is exported back to us Celts as a massive exercise in cultural colonialism: "You will believe, because our marketing is better than yours!"

Kelly has been quite honest about his approach. He wanted 'pagan' names for the festivals. He raided European traditions for Ostara, and Anglo Saxon for Litha, and Britonic (Welsh) traditions for Mabon ap Modron. He referenced Greek tradition to justify his arguments, mistakenly setting his arguments in a temperate climate, not a Mediterranean one (Persephone's blooms all disappear in the extreme heat of summer, and return as the climate cools in autumn, as opposed to northern Europe climate where frost rules).

Within Druidry, (albeit the revivalist Druidry of Iolo Morganwg) Mabon ap Modron is associated with the Winter Solstice, the Divine Child of the Great Mother who returns to us every year as the reborn sun. Unfortunately, the Christians had their own divine child to be worshipped at winter solstice, and Mabon was nearly lost to us but for one reference hanging on in the tale of Culhwch and Olwen. Others have written very eloquently about Mabon ap Modron, such as our very own, Kristoffer Hughes. Instead, what I'd like to focus on is what has been lost. What has been lost by bringing the Divine Child back into the wheel of the year at the autumn Equinox? When the year is in its maturity, what are we throwing out to focus again on youth?

I would not be the first to point out that we have a youth obsessed culture, and a self-obsessed culture, which is maybe why the opportunity to once again gaze at our navels and consider the light and dark within is so appealing. It is compounded by the information age, where

Kelly's pagan constructs are just a scroll away.

So, what else is going on at this time of year? We are at a point of balance. Equal day and equal night. We talk about Male and Female being in balance as well, and we've been here before at the Spring Equinox, but that was when the solar year was in its youth. So, what does it mean to be in balance again in the maturing year?

We assign the Autumn Equinox to the West, symbolised in Druidry by the Salmon of Wisdom, 'who dwells within the sacred waters of the pool'. This is a very specific stage of Salmon's epic journey. Having struggled back to its spawning grounds, Salmon pauses in a pool, just short of its destination. A well oxygenated pool, where it enters a quiescent phase, awaiting the right moment to complete its task, the right water flow and the presence of other mature salmon.

The West and thus the Equinox is also symbolised by the setting sun. We think of the sun setting over the ocean, its light reflecting back to us. We call it Alban Elfed: the Light on (or of) the Water. Like Salmon, we can pause and reflect. We can reflect on our day, our year or our life, before the time is right and we pass through the Alban Gate, into the dark half of the year.

And what were our ancestors doing at this time? They were finishing the harvest and preparing food for storage; drying, smoking, salting, preserving. They were cleaning, mending and storing clothes, tools and fencing, and maybe bartering or trading surplus. All this knowledge and all these skills were passed down through the generations, elders passing their knowledge on and sharing their wisdom, for the good of their family and their community, to help them survive through the dark times ahead.

So really, what we should be doing at the autumn equinox is celebrating our elders, their experience, their wisdom and their knowledge, and thanking them for what they have passed on; practical demonstrations and quiet conversations over the course of the harvest, and gentle guidance as we make jams and pickles. These days it is easy to forget that this is how information was once gathered and shared. Oral traditions, shared family recipes, stories over cake making. This was what learning looked like. As elders we had a clear role to play. In the modern world this role has become somewhat obscured. But, as grandparents once again contributing to childcare, as we tire more easily and enjoy sitting and gazing towards the setting sun, perhaps we should reflect on the



contribution we are making and ask if we are working to be 'good ancestors'?

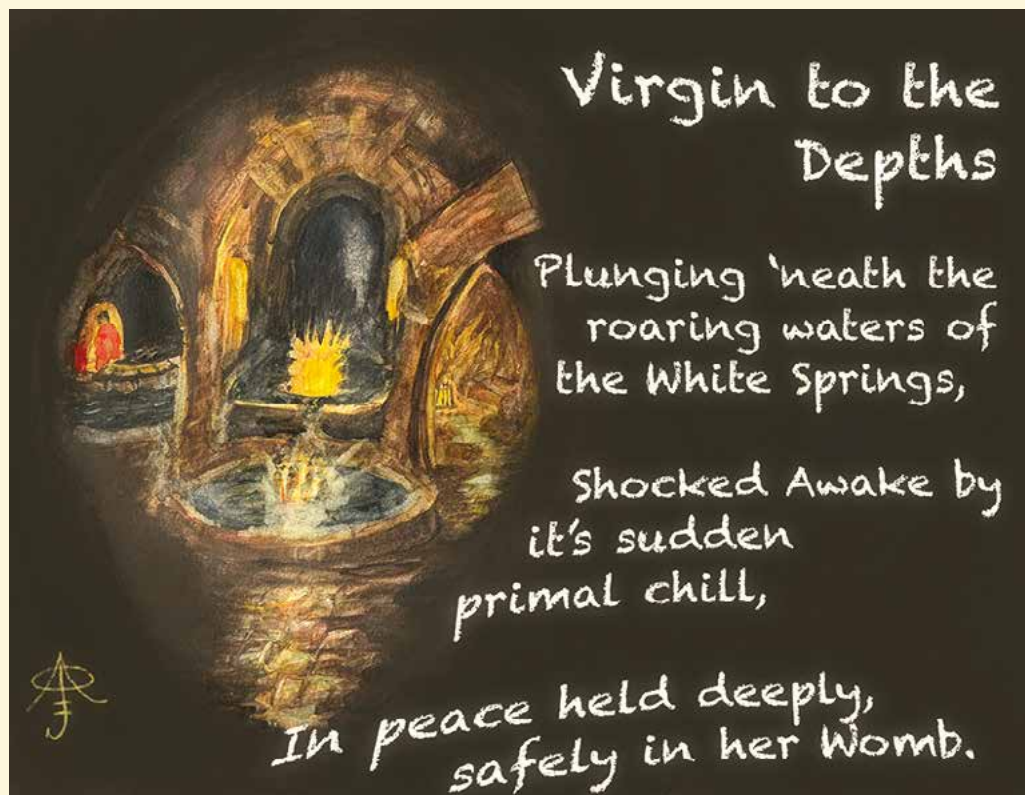
People often ask why we don't have a tradition of Elder wisdom in western pagan culture. Well, I think we did, except we masked it with a return to the self and to youth, by calling it Mabon. In Druidry, there is a clear distinction between the solar festivals and the fire festivals. The solar festivals are fixed occurrences, solstice and equinox. The fire festivals are seasonal. The solar festivals are labelled with the word Alban. So maybe the fault here lies with secretive Druidry? No one was out there talking about the Alban gates, or the Salmon of Wisdom when Kelly and the neo-pagan communities of the USA were looking to build modern Wicca.

But there is one more point I'd like to raise. Sitting here in the West Country in the UK, I am part of the branch of humanity that came out of Africa and turned left. Left, towards the setting sun. Another branch of humanity turned right and followed the rising sun, and some kept going north to fight with ice-giants, but all of my genetic ancestors literally followed the setting sun to Europe's rocky shores. And we sat on those

rocky shores and gazed to the West, and yearned for something else, the promise of another day, another year, another life. I think Tolkien reflected on this when he talked about the Elves' yearning for the West.

It is the force that drove Europeans to the Americas, dreaming of a better life, and then sent some of them further west to stand before another ocean. Could it be that this cultural conditioning, the very act of gazing at the setting sun at Alban Elfed, and contemplating better times tomorrow, is the foundation of the 'American Dream'? Maybe my inner bard is just getting carried away.

Young neo-pagans, the Tik-tok generation, don't seem to have time to venerate their elders or their ancestors. Instead the appeal of considering your light and dark self at 'Mabon' is more appealing and fits better on the socials. And let's face it, this elder has not contributed anything to his childrens' knowledge of social media: quite the reverse! I fear that does make me a crusty old Druid bleating into the Autumn winds: 'It's not called Mabon'.



Virgin to the Depths by Leigh Jones

Using prayer Beads in Druidic Practice *by Rosy Rondot*

We all walk in different paths within the Order. We all find different ways to work through our gwersi. During my Ovate journey, I drew on my past practices to create prayer beads to aid me in my meditation practice.

I grew up in a Roman Catholic household. Church every Sunday, making rosaries in school, learning the prayers as I worked as an altar server. For me, there is a peace to be found in the sound of clinking beads in the still of sacred space, the quiet utterance of prayers, a practice formed from introspection rather than performance and high rituals. The older women that I knelt beside were so grounded, so powerful in simplicity. As I transitioned down my path as a pagan in my teenage years, that peace was missing for me. I struggled to ground myself, to the point of one of my original teachers constantly harping on me as I daydreamed or travelled outside myself. I needed an anchor. I tried holding onto different gems, tree work, guided mindfulness, countless meditation exercises... nothing worked as well as the clinking of beads.

As I began with the Order, I experimented with different kinds of prayer beads. I made my first set of rosary-style prayer beads around a set of prayers based on the Ogham and Celtic deities, modifying the prayers as my practice grew. As the years passed, I made my first of many malas to help me focus during meditation. Then came prayer bead bracelets, of all kinds of stones and wood beads. As I run my fingers over them, I can breathe deeply and use the touch to focus my mind. Some have a set of prayers to recite, while some have a single mantra to repeat over and over to ground it into a troubled mind or hurt heart until it is firm, it is true, and it is as resolute as the bones of my body.

Now I can share that gift with others who may find this is of help on their journey. Before going into the instructions of making a set of mala-style prayer beads, let us delve into a brief cross-section of mainstream religions and their use of prayer beads.

How Different Religions use Prayer Beads: Prayer beads, also known as rosaries or malas, have a rich and diverse history spanning

numerous cultures and religions. While their specific origins are difficult to pinpoint, evidence suggests that prayer beads have been used for spiritual and meditative practices for thousands of years.

One of the earliest recorded uses of prayer beads dates back to ancient Hinduism, where they were called “japa malas.” These beads were used to count the repetitions of mantras during meditation and prayer. The number 108, which is considered sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism, often corresponded to the number of beads on a traditional japa mala.

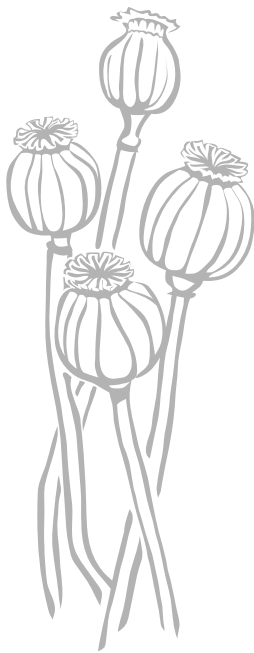
In Buddhism, prayer beads, known as “malas,” became an integral part of meditation and mindfulness practices. Buddhists used malas to count the recitations of mantras or breaths during meditation, aiding in concentration and focus. The number of beads in a Buddhist mala can vary, with common counts being 108 or a fraction thereof.

In Christianity, the rosary became a significant devotional tool, particularly within the Catholic tradition. The rosary consists of a string of beads, usually divided into five sets of ten beads, with a single bead between them. Catholics use the rosary as a form of prayer, reciting specific prayers, such as the Our Father and the Hail Mary, while meditating on the mysteries.

Across cultures and religions, prayer beads have served as tangible aids to meditation, mindfulness, and spiritual devotion. While specific designs and purposes may vary, the underlying intention remains consistent: to facilitate a deeper connection with the divine and cultivate inner peace and harmony.

How to Make a Set of Prayer Beads: As a disclaimer, this is for a set of mala-style prayer beads. There are other versions and formats for them, as many as Awen flows through to fuel you. If you would like inspiration, check out Sage Stone Malas: this is a maker close to me in Canada.

If you intend to use these beads, I recommend making them in a sacred space. Whether you cast a circle or pray or meditate, still your mind and focus on the task at hand. A great way to do this is to make the beads while not speaking. Have some quiet music in the background, but do not



Reviews

Nature Meditations

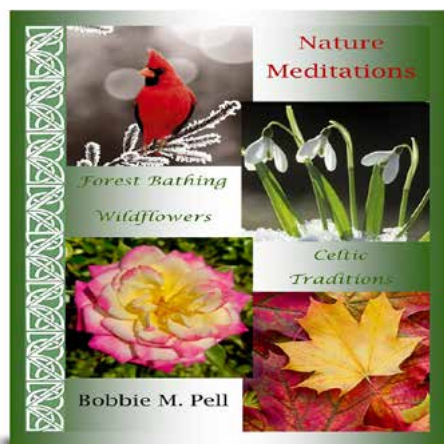
by Bobbie M Pell

When Bobbie sent me her book for review she wrote that it was her “way of adding love and light to the world.” This collection of poetry, photography and writing certainly achieves that goal. It is a wonderful little book to lose yourself in with a mug of something warm as the nights draw in.

The book begins, rather appropriately, with the Celtic winter festival of All Souls Night and works through each of the seasons. Bobbie's poetry is luminous and accessible, worth revisiting regularly. *The Woods Within*, can be found on page 5 of this issue of *Touchstone*. The visual elements of the book, including the author's own photographs, echo the content and move from subdued blues and browns in the winter season to a riot of colour in the summer.

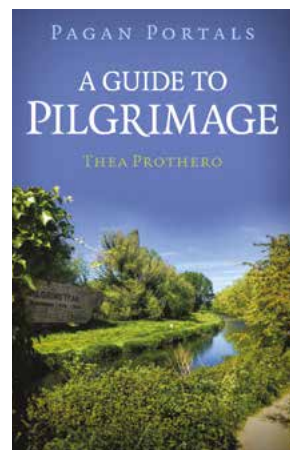
In amongst the wonderful bardic content are interesting practical suggestions to help the reader connect more closely with nature. These suggestions are often very simple, such as visiting a forest and just listening, but are often things we overlook in the hustle and bustle of daily life. Some of these activities also involve working with crystals.

I came away from this book feeling like it had been a real honour to see the world through Bobbie's eyes. There are universal observations here alongside personal reflections - the mandala which she created for her 11 year old golden retriever is simply beautiful and very emotive. She creates a magical vision of our world which is impossible to resist.



Pagan Portals: A Guide to Pilgrimage by Thea Prothero

Thea Prothero is a great writer and a frequent, valued contributor to *Touchstone* (her most recent piece on her pilgrimage to Shetland was in October's Folklore edition). Her many years of writing and reviewing, alongside her many pilgrimages, makes her the perfect author for this invaluable book.



A Guide to Pilgrimage is at once highly personal and helpfully practical. The earlier chapters on the history of pilgrimage and the role of pilgrimage within different spiritual paths are enlivened by Thea's personal reflections on her own pilgrimages, such as those to Walsingham, the grave of Sylvia Plath and the ancient oak trees Gog and Magog in Glastonbury. These personal insights imbue the text with a sense of confidence in Prothero's expertise and give depth to her knowledge of the subject.

And if you needed further reassurances, Prothero interviews other pilgrims throughout the book, such as Amanda Frances, who walked the Camino, and our own Eimear Burke, who has climbed Kilimanjaro and visited Lourdes. From all of this we understand that pilgrimage is not an easy thing to undertake, as Eimear puts it in her interview: “A Pilgrimage isn't just a nice holiday.” But don't worry, because this is where this book comes into its own. Prothero takes you step by step through the process, from initial planning and departure to arrival at the pilgrimage site and even how to adapt and reflect on your experiences when you return. This book will be your companion every step of the way and is a good size to fit in your rucksack.

There are interesting detours into travel writing, labyrinths and using daily mindfulness techniques to enhance your experiences. There is even a consideration of Gracelands, Elvis Presley's former home, as a pilgrimage destination. This book covers a lot of ground! If you are in the early stages of planning a pilgrimage, or even if you have had a passing thought about making such a journey, this book is invaluable. It is highly recommended.

This book is available to buy in the OBOD store - <https://store.druidry.org/products/a-guide-to-pilgrimage>

Andrew's Bit At The Back

Back in the September issue I wrote that one of the reasons I love autumn is because my birthday is on 5th November. However, Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes night is such a particularly English festival I wanted to explain a bit more about how it is celebrated for those of you who may not be familiar with it. If you fancy delving deeper, there are excellent sections on Bonfire Night in Ronald Hutton's *The Stations of the Sun* and Steve Round's *The English Year*.

The first thing to note is the night's closeness to Hallowe'en: they are only five days apart. When I was a child, Hallowe'en was a much less prominent festival with the focus on Bonfire Night. Over the years that has changed and Hallowe'en has become the dominant festival. We still do not do Hallowe'en as well as the States but it has really grown in people's hearts. The short amount of time between the two festivals encouraged some to suggest that Guy Fawkes Night was England's version of Hallowe'en, that we simply transferred the Samhain bonfires to 5th November. However, Ronald Hutton disputes this and provides plenty of evidence to show that "There is, in brief, nothing to link the Hallowe'en fires of North Wales, Man, and central Scotland with those which appeared in England upon 5 November."

The history of the night stretches back to 1605 when a group of Catholic conspirators tried to blow up the House of Lords in London in an attempt to assassinate King James I. The most well-known of the plotters, Guy Fawkes, was discovered in the basement of the building on 4th November guarding 36 barrels of gun powder. With the plot foiled and the conspirators gruesomely executed, November 5th became a night of national celebration where the disruption of the scheme was celebrated. The tone of the festival and many of the traditions associated with it have changed enormously over the years. Steve Round writes that "Over the next 300 years, Guy Fawkes Night continued to develop as a mass working-class event with the streets of most towns thronged every year with crowds, bonfires everywhere, fireworks thrown, and guns fired indiscriminately, along with spectacular practices such as the rolling of blazing tar barrels." These traditions can still be seen in the towns of Lewes and Ottery St Mary which have spectacular Bonfire Night celebrations.

With the 5th getting a reputation for being a night of riot, debauchery, and anti-Catholic discrimination, there was a conscious attempt to change the traditions associated with the festival,

to make them more family (and middle-class) friendly. It had long been the practice to burn effigies on Bonfires but the creation of the effigy or 'Guy' was given more specific focus. A tradition called 'Penny for the Guy' developed where children created a replica of Guy Fawkes and took it onto the streets to collect money. I did this myself as a teenager, but by that stage the tradition was already dying out.

Fireworks became central to the celebration and families would regularly have displays in their gardens. Children were given a pack of sparklers to celebrate the evening – I still get a pack every year as a birthday present. However, the prevalence of fireworks in the hands of high-spirited teenagers was never a really good idea and this has been tightened up, with most people going to an organized firework display these days. Certain types of food have become strongly associated with the night – many of which can be seen on Josh Warren's wonderful front cover. Jacket potatoes (which can be cooked in the bonfire), toffee apples and parkin are staple fayre of the evening. Can I also recommend sausages (appropriately nicknamed 'Bangers') and barbeque beans as part of your Bonfire feast.

While the roots of the festival lay in celebrating Parliament and the King's survival, there is a strongly anarchic quality to the night. We can see that in the historic riots described above but, in recent years, that sense has returned. This is likely connected to the 2006 film *V for Vendetta*, which was based on a comic by Alan Moore. The film is set in a dystopian, far-right Britain where the vigilante, V, threatens to make good on Guy Fawkes' attempt to destroy the ruling party. The popularity of the film and of V's now (in)famous mask has reignited interest in the potency of the night.

I know I am biased but I love Guy Fawkes Night. Its light has dimmed somewhat under the shadow of Hallowe'en but I really hope we never lose the traditions associated with it. Fingers crossed we all listen to the words of that well know folk rhyme and keep those bonfires burning:

*Remember! Remember!
The fifth of November
The Gunpowder treason and plot.
I know of no reason
Why the Gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot!*

*Until
next time,*

Andrew



Events



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 2024:

Samhain: November 2nd | Alban Arthan: December 21st |

*A hard gaze across the
horizon:*

*In barrows, dear parts of
me slumber,*

*In circles I once watched
the sun,*

*The stones I once painted,
silent,*

*Their names on the tip of
my tongue.*

*The gold I once wore
behind glass,*

*The hunger to know
what I knew,*

*The need to sink my
hands and feet and teeth
into the earth,*

*Wrists bound in bracelets
of blue.*

*The bated breath held in
collective,*

*Oak sinking beneath the
sea foam,*

*The old yew calls to my
blood & my bone,*

*A gnawing and need to be
home.*



Poem and Image
by Caitlin Lee