



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

December 2024 | Issue 328

This Issue

- ✿ OBOD's World Rivers Day Celebrations by Lorien Cadier.
- ✿ We are all Storytellers by Nimue Brown.
- ✿ An Interview with Penny Billington.
- ✿ Plus lots more!



COVER: "Awen in Holly, Oak and Yew" by Caitlin Lee

Editorial

Welcome to December's edition of *Touchstone*!

There is a definite 'end-of-year' feel to this edition, with reflections on this year's Bardic Gorsedd, Mount Haemus Lectures and OBOD's World Rivers Day Celebrations. Nimue Brown takes a deep-dive into Bardic Magic and there are plenty of wonderful Bardic contributions, with both linguistic and visual treats. We also celebrate the contributions of OBOD's newest Honourary Bard - Penny Billington. Back in June, I met with Penny to talk about her time with the Order, her ethos in editing *Touchstone* and her books on Druidry and magic. Part one of that interview is in this edition with part two coming in the New Year.

The magical workings of *Touchstone* still amaze me. Twelve months into my tenure as editor, I love the infinite variety of contributions which come in to the *Touchstone* email address - every one holds a new and lovely surprise. I occasionally put out a call to the Universe if I need content - the most common call is "Please get someone to send me something stunning to put on the cover!" As evidence that this kind of magic works, the beautiful, wintry Awen symbol by Caitlin Lee on this month's cover came in after just such a request. As soon as I saw it, I knew it had to be our December cover. Thank you for sending in such a beautiful, evocative piece, Caitlin. It's perfect.

And don't forget, there is no need to wait for universal intervention for you to submit your poetry, articles and art work to *Touchstone*. There is no deadline - content is always welcome. Why not make it your New Year's resolution to contribute in 2025? Go on - you know you want to!



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Winter Solstice Haiku by Janet Elvidge

Wind moans through tree boughs.
Skeletal Moon sits on high.
Cold seeps into bones.



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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.

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Chosen Chief's Bit

Bandia daoibh a chairde!

I have news for you:

The stag bellows, winter snows, summer has gone.

The wind is high and cold, the sun is low: its course is brief, the tide runs high.

The bracken has reddened, its shape has been hidden;

The wild goose has raised his customary cry.

Cold has caught the wings of birds; It is the time of ice – these are my news.

Poem from the 9th century

In Ireland, at the Winter Solstice, crowds, Pagan and non-Pagan, gather at Newgrange to mark the rising sun, and for years, there has been a lottery for people to be in the chamber for the sunrise.

However, here in Kilkenny, we have our own Winter Solstice sacred site. Knockroe Passage Tomb in Windgap, Co. Kilkenny, known locally as the Caiseal, is an extraordinary place. This megalithic monument is about 5000 years old, and it's unusual in that there are two passage tombs aligned to the Winter Solstice, one to the sunrise and the other to the sunset.

There are some similarities with the Passage Tomb at Newgrange. Knockroe is situated in the Lingaun Valley at a bend in the Lingaun River. There are five different stone types in the monuments, all of which are found in the area. Many of the stones lining the passageways and around the monument are highly decorated with megalithic art, such as spirals, cup marks and zigzags. On one stone, there are what are known as the Druid's footprints. Cremated remains of between 50 and 100 people have been found in the two tombs, along with bone and antler pins, pendants, beads and fragments of pottery. There are some piles of white quartz at the entrance to both tombs. Knockroe is aligned with other special sites: Tullahaught Stone Circle, a cairn at the top of Sliabh na mBan (Mountain of the Women).

When I first began to go to Knockroe, there were only a few people there, but thanks to a very active local community, its popularity has grown. Last year, we were invited to hold a simple ceremony to honour the ancestors. This was the first time Druids were invited to do this. We offered elemental blessings to the site and placed a facsimile of a Beaker pot found in one of the tombs containing haw berries as an offering to the ancestors. It was cloudy on the day, as it so often is, so we did not get to see the rising sunlight hit the stones. In all of my years going there, I have only seen three sunrises and one sunset. The photo (above) shows the sunrise at the solstice in 2022.

I'd like to share with you one of my favourite poems, which I read every winter. It was written by Mairtín Ó'Direáin, a poet from Inis Mór, Aran Islands, in 1940. Although it is about Mary, the mother of Jesus,



it has for me a relevance and a resonance for the times we live in. Every time I recite this poem, I get very emotional.

Cuireadh do Mhuire

An eol duit, a Mhuire,

Cá rachair i mbliana

Ag iarraidh foscaidh

Do do Leanbh Naofa,

Tráth a bhfuil gach doras

Dúnta ina éadan

Ag fuath is uabhar

An chine dhaonna?

Deonaigh glacadh

Le cuireadh uaimse

Go hoileán mara

San Iarthar cianda:

Beidh coinnle geala

I ngach fuinneog lasta

Is tine mhóna

Ar theallach adhainte

An Invitation to Mary

Do you know Mary where you will go this year

Looking for shelter for your holy infant

A time when every door is closed in your face

By hate and pride

Of the human race

Wanderer, accept

An invitation from me

To an island in the sea

Far away in the west

There will be bright candles

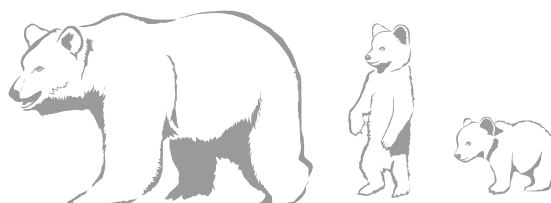
In every window lit

And a turf fire

Burning on the hearth

At this time of winter, I wish you many candles in your windows and a warm fire in your hearth and heart. Beannachtaí Grianstad an Gheimhridh, Winter Solstice Blessings!

Eimear

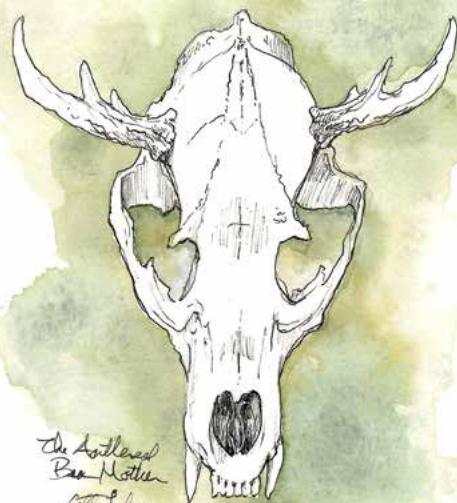




Bard's Page

Winter Solstice Invitation by Michelle Hawkins-Collins

Come and rest awhile. Build your strength
in the quietude of this, the longest night.
Find warmth in the embrace of loved ones,
gathering together around the fire.
Gaze awhile into the flickering flames
for they illuminate your inner path
and reveal the secrets of your soul.
But look outwards not just inwards
for there is hope with the returning light.
Soul and Spirit dance together to a new
rhythm,
renewing energy and rekindling your
dreams.
They invite you to take a step, to cross the
threshold.
As nature's wheel turns once more.



The Antlered Bear Mother by Cathy Johnson

Wren by Ann Beer

Tiny. Pale brown. In the hedge.
She hops from light back into dark.
Her young ones, from the time they fledge,
Can find the camouflage of bark.
She's taught them well, for secrecy
— evading notice — is her skill.
She knows how vulnerable they'll be
If predators search for a kill.
And though her smallness seems a flaw,
Her tiny beak no good defence,
She knows that hunting tooth or claw
Is no match for her expert sense
Of how to vanish from the scene,
The shadows veiling her from sight.
Her feel for danger is so keen
She'll choose escape, avoid a fight,
Turn every leaf into a screen,
Because she knows life is the goal,
For her and for her babies too.
Through quiet strength they can stay whole
And never quite come into view.
Yet this small bird is seen as great,
Her wisdom far beyond her size;
The eagle is her spirit-mate,
And highest heaven is her prize.
Sometimes she is the sacrifice
And other times the oak-wise priest.
She knows the nature of the price
That asks the greatest of the least.
Brave, tiny wren, your role is clear;
The Druid's friend you'll always be,
Deep in the shade, but
free from fear.
Your magic works where
none can see.



Salmon of Wisdom by Gillian Morgan

So the salmon jumps
The pool is clear
The trees surround
The hazel drops
A splash, a jump, a supple twist
The nut of Wisdom gone
The Salmon of Wisdom swims on.

Initiation by Joshua Green

As I walk up the hill, the pack on my back as
heavy as my mind and my eye lids,
I find my thoughts back in that space,
on the edge of the water,
the trees filled with the electric hum of all manner
of insect and bird.

Across the water I hear them,
Laughing, praying, communing.
I can feel their voices, yet I know not their words,
for my mind, it wanders,
from this warm, sunny place at the water's edge,
to the warm dark of my solitude in the belly
of the world.

The thing I've been seeking is there,
across the water, singing it's welcome to me.
The kind face, like a torch in that dark place, that
appears before me, greets me, and asks
me my name

And as I stand at the top of the hill,
that heavy pack on my back, now pulling
at my heart,
Urging me back to the circle
where hands and smiles pulled me from the dark
and greeted me as sibling.

I can feel the stones in my hands,
and the gladness in my heart,
but even then didn't comprehend the
magnitude of it.

I hear the well wishes, the welcomes,
I feel the warm hugs,
still not yet aware of what was actually
being given

And now I stand next to my car,
heavy pack, heavy eyelids, and a heavy heart.
And the gravity of it sets in.
It is too profound, to much too hold onto.
So I release it, and it falls to ground at my feet.
Just little, dark spots of gratitude in the dust.

I once again hear the voices singing together in
the circle,
and my nose fills with the scent of woodsmoke
that lingers in my clothes, and the taste of
communion sweet on my lips, and I feel the full
force of the love that was given

and I weep

As I sit in my car, the heavy bag no longer on my
back, my eyelids still heavy,
I realize that, my heart is now heavy, because
much like my pack, it is now full.
And I drive away knowing that I will be back,
Knowing that my grove has been opened,
knowing that there is a family waiting for
me to return
with the threat of song. With the promise of story.
With the music of love.



Image of Glastonbury Tor at Night by Nigel Ball

I am the Cailleach

by Rita O'Reilly

I am the Cailleach the crone the hag
I carry stones in a wool crane bag
I am the water the wind the rain
I am the void the pleasure the pain

I am the seed the bulb the cone
I am the maiden beauty now flown
I am the mother grandmother to be
I am ice and fire sylph and sídh

I am the want the lack the more
I am the secret the yarn the lore
I am the reed the meadow the hay
The entrance the exit the way the stay

I am the tempest the fury the calm
I am the story the spell the yarn
I am the herb the petal the tree
The kettle the nettle the ant the bee

I am the wicker the bog the peat
The spelling and yelling for Earth for peace
I am the branch the well the shore
The dew the heather the hellebore

I am the shaman the seer the witch
I am Brigid's brat berry rich

I am the river the stream the tolling bell
I am Ériu the mist the holy well
I am the feather the heather the fire
The fish the flute the flaming pyre

I am the light the shadow the dark
The web the wind the sparking hearth
The mane the fur the earthy smell
The light the owl the breeze the swell

The bat the rat the stag the tree
The sun the soar the raging sea
The hooting owl
Eternity

I am you and you are me
All being one eternally
I am the Cailleach
of Druidry

Triad by Linda Graham

Three
unconditional
friends:

The Sun,
Moon
and Stars.

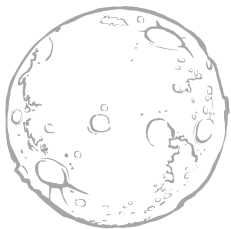


Image by Julianne Tyson

Aoife by Linda Davis

The bright Guardian of night
looks down upon the silver sea
where great Manannan rests,
his fair hair shifting in the shallows.
All at once a terrible cry,
a white Crane circles
calling her distress to the quiet sky.
The mighty god rises in a surge of sea
shaking off foam, eyes flashing.
The mournful bird tells her tale
of love and rivalry
and a curse.
A soul lost
but not passed to the Blessed Isles,
condemned to wander landless
for two hundred Cycles of the Sun's dance.
The girl is heard, shelter swiftly given,
the sea-green palace of the son of Lir
will be her haven.
At length, once again the pale faced Moon
spreads her calming beams upon the ocean
as gentle waves rock the sleeping world.

OBOD World Rivers Day Celebrations by Lorien Cadier

What a great response to the call to honour and connect with our local rivers and waterways for World Rivers Day on 22nd September 2024. Many of you combined an offering in your Groves or as an individual with your Alban Elfed or Alban Eilir celebrations.

“We went to the river to celebrate World Rivers Day. We had water from many rivers, which we poured into the River Nore, and Olwen read Amhrán Amhairghín Ghlúingheal, the Song of Amergin, both in Old Irish and English.”

Eimear Burke, Kilkenny Druid Grove

“The Towaliga River, Georgia, USA was a seashore 50 million years ago and marine fossils can still be found in the area. I left an offering here and expressed my gratitude to the Spirit of this river, gave hopes for health and healing, and wished Her a safe journey to the Atlantic.” @SheaSilversea

The Algonquin Water Song reminded us that, ‘Water is the life’s blood of our mother the earth. Water is the life’s blood of our own bodies’. During these celebrations and my presentation on ‘When Rivers Were Goddesses’ – available on the Hearth, Druid TV – you were invited to add the names of your local rivers to our World Rivers Day Circle and delighted that so many joined us from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, France, Netherlands, Germany, Canada, USA and Brazil: Anger – Poddle –

Towaliga – Ouse /Isis – Skelton Beck – Nore – Medicine Bow – Cullen Burn – Dee – Mersey – Thames/Tamesis/Isis – Clyde – Pool – White – Loxahatchee – Peace – Medway – Rother – Ethan – Schelde – Hudson – East – Cala Pata – Barranco de Montralet – French Broad – Ivy – Suwanee – Magnolia – Tamar – Plym – Dart – Tees – Bride – Thompson – Mississippi – Mease – Trent – Brent – Tame – Bride – Stour – Test – Itchen – Meon

We shared stories of our rivers, the Tees where the scary mermaid lives with the sharp teeth! The Goddesses Deva associated with the Dee, Sabrina with the Severn, Isis with the Ouse and Thames, Clutha or Clud with the Clyde, Tamara with the Tamar, Nehelenia meaning ‘she who lives near the sea’ at the end of the River Schelde that meets the sea in the Netherlands, where seafarers in the Gallo-Roman era offered Her stone tablets in return for safe passage across the sea, the God Tamesis with the Thames, the sacred sites of the confluences of

the White River in Indiana, a ‘joining rock’ used as a site for weddings in the Thompson River, British Columbia and where jumping over a stream in Ayrshire was considered the sealing of a marriage union. Finally, the birthplace of the Goddess Trisentona, the thrice beloved, that was said to be at the confluence of the Mease, Trent and Tame and where a stone statue in Her honour has been recently placed. The River Goddess lives!



Image by Liz Campbell



The OBOD Bardic Gorsedd 2024 by Mel Bhavsar

I've been walking my Bardic path for nearly two years now. I've stopped and started and mostly stopped again as life got more hectic. Part of what was stopping me from getting on with the course was that I found the rituals very intimidating. I had no prior experience of ritual other than church, which was very solemn and proper and must be done correctly at all times. When attempting some of the OBOD rituals, I felt silly and self-conscious - who was I to be calling on and working with the spirits and energies that are mentioned? What if I got it wrong and there was some terrible outcome? What if I did it right and felt absolutely nothing? All these worries tripped me up whenever I wanted to carry out a ritual (and I did WANT to do them), and so I took to avoiding and ignoring them whenever they came up.

I booked onto this year's Bardic Gorsedd because the focus, "The Heart of Ritual", sounded exactly what I needed to break through my fears surrounding rituals, and hopefully to help me get started on actually carrying them out. When we received the itinerary, it was clear that if nothing else, the weekend would give us exposure to many different types of ritual, so I would at least get some experience to draw on.

It was so much more than that. Right from the start I was surrounded by lovely, welcoming and friendly people - other Bards like me (some

surprisingly like me in lacking confidence doing the rituals), and our three Druid leaders for the weekend, Tom, Lorraine and Fi. These three guided us with knowledge and wisdom and kindness; I barely felt self-conscious at all joining in with the Druid's prayer, the Vow or the awens whenever they came up, and very soon, ritual felt natural and simple and magical.

An opening ceremony to cast the circle, a dawn ritual to greet the sun, a scripted ritual exploring the elements of each quarter, an impromptu ritual on the shore facing Anglesey, labyrinth walking and a guided meditation. These were some of the rituals we experienced and shared throughout the weekend. Each was different, special and powerful, and showed me more clearly than any lectures or lessons why ritual is important and integral to the Bardic experience, and why I should embrace it.

Our eisteddfod on Saturday night was a wonderful safe space where we shared the fruits of our inspiration through the awen. There was no pressure to participate if you didn't want to, but nearly everyone did. It was another amazing ritual, more informal, that showed just how talented and creative bards are. Even though at that point we'd been together for less than a day and a half, I felt like I was among true friends, and I hope we'll be able to stay in touch now the weekend is over.



I arrived at the Gorsedd unsure whether rituals were for me, unconfident in carrying them out or joining in, and uncomfortable with the theatre of using sacred tools, wearing robes etc. On the way home, I found myself planning when I could do my next ritual - perhaps one to greet the sun tomorrow? - and wondering whether my family would want to join me in a group ritual for the Winter Solstice! The weekend has been truly transformative, enlightening and inspiring. I am filled with light and excitement for where the path will take

me next. As Tom said on the last day, we're not "just" Bards, we are Bards.

Thank you so much to Tom, Lorraine and Fi for leading and facilitating the Gorsedd, and to all the other wonderful Bards I met over the weekend. Thank you to the lovely Sisters who run Noddfa too for such an amazing place to stay and their hospitality. I can't wait to come again next year!

The next OBOD Bardic Gorsedd will be held on the 25th – 27th July 2025. For more information please email bardicgorsedds@obod.org

The Blessing of the Bards by the Bards of the Bardic Gorsedd 2024

May the blessings of Earth bring a foundation that anchors you, so that it brings stability and stillness. But within that silence, sings the song of ages, under the footsteps of the dragon, the earth is compressed and transmuted into an intensity of life burgeoning within the womb of Mother Earth. May the inspiration and strength, encased in those layers flow up from the earth into your veins like a fountain of Light.

Blessings from the east and of air. May the hawk of dawn bring you clarity on her wings. May inspiration encircle you like a warm summer breeze. May you have the courage of your conviction to stand against the hurricane and may your trust in yourself rise with each breath.

May you be blessed by the element of fire. May you feel its warmth and passion and may its light shine on you and out into the wider community. May the flames of the fire kindle your sense of adventure and bring delight, joy and fun to the path you walk.

May you be blessed with the energy of water. May you be refreshed and nurtured by water. May the seas and rivers, streams and rain sing to the water within you. As rivers flow gently and powerfully through the land may you flow gently and powerfully around the obstacles of life. May this blessing be a continuing spring of inspiration for us all.

The Mount Haemus Lectures 2024 by Bill Bruin

The 5th October marked the Mt Haemus Gathering, a celebration of the work of the winners of the Mt Haemus Scholarship, made possible by the generosity of the orders patroness, Dwina Murphy Gibb. The Mt Haemus award is open to any member of the Order who wishes to share their research on topics related to their Druidry and has been awarded to members of all grades and academic backgrounds. Traditionally the event runs every four years, however, the 2020 lectures were postponed, leading to the 2024 event featuring eight scholars instead of the usual four. Four presentations were delivered online: Dr Michelle LaFrance, RoMa Johnson, Dr Larisa White and Dr Dana O'Driscoll each presented their papers via video, and these can be watched on the order's Youtube account. The remaining four presentations were delivered at the in-person Mt Haemus event, which this year took place in St. Benedicts Church, Glastonbury. I was honored, and just a little terrified, to present my paper first. Titled *Fallen Branches: Reconstructing the Lost Saga of Caswallawn fab Beli*, it was the culmination of several years of research into an area of Welsh mythology. Being able to share my research with the order is something I will forever be grateful for. Dr. Paul White presented his paper titled *Discovering Meaning in Ireland: Megalith Spiritual Experiences*; which was a deeply affirming and joyous exploration of the numinous connections many people share with the ancient megalithic sites of Ireland. Dr Susan Jones was unable to present her paper in person, which was instead read by Phillip Carr-Gomm. Titled *What Druidry Does - A Perspective On the Spiritual Dynamics of The OBOD Course*, it was a wonderfully nuanced, wryly funny and deeply perceptive exploration of OBOD, its values, foibles and future. Dr Johnathan Wooly presented *The Elementary Forms of Druidic Life: Towards a Moral Ecology of Land, Sea and Sky*, in which he deftly navigated the complexities of situating Druidry with a cultural and philosophical context. The day was interspersed with the music of Arthur Billington, who's Bardic mastery echoed through the vaulted ceilings of the ancient church in a glorious ode to the creative power our shared Druid journey can inspire, both fascinatingly academic and deliciously creative.



We are all Storytellers: Bardic Magic by Nimue Brown

Most people aren't conscious, deliberate storytellers and yet most of us are engaged in storytelling every day. We communicate in stories, telling tales of what we did, sharing jokes and anecdotes. The stories we tell in this way impact on the people we share them with, and also have a huge psychological impact on the person telling the story. As a consequence, bringing deliberate bard-craft to these everyday tales is a powerful choice

What stories are we telling? It's good to start by noticing the stories we tell day by day. What are we expressing to our friends, families and colleagues? What kinds of stories do we write or share on social media? It's good to look at this without judgement. Be gentle with yourself and simply try to notice what sort of stories you share. Social media can be helpful in this regard because there's a written record you can go over to see what your habits are.

Part of the process of telling stories where is one of seeking attention. That's a deeply human impulse and there's nothing wrong with it at all. It's good to be conscious of the terms of which you seek attention through stories. Make sure that truly aligns with what you want to achieve and how you want to be seen. Social media often makes posts more visible to others when they involve drama, conflict or distress – it's a feature of the algorithms. This can encourage us to focus on certain kinds of storytelling so as to be rewarded with attention.

There's also pressure on us to present the best and most attractive versions of ourselves at all times. This can lock us into states of toxic positivity where we can't speak of our challenges and setbacks reinforcing feelings of shame and making us feel alone with our struggles. Think about how you want to be understood, and what kind of tone your stories have.

If you only tell one or two kinds of story, consider diversifying. What other kinds of stories can you tell that would create a more balanced picture of who you are? What of your life can you share in a way that would help you feel more authentic? In what ways do you need to feel seen and understood? Ask whether the everyday stories you tell are meeting your emotional needs.

What values are we expressing through our stories? Every story we tell represents choices and values. What to exclude and ignore, what to highlight. We give value to things when we tell stories about them. It's easy to see this in the media. For example the choice to tell stories about immigration rather than stories about climate change has a huge impact on some people's

perceptions and actions. We also get to make those choices when we highlight things through our stories.

Taking the time to reflect on the stories we tell, we can see whether those values align well with our Druidry. The things that are hardest to notice are the everyday things that are so normal that we take them for granted. What we say to the people we see regularly can be part of this. Do we play down our troubles or talk about them at length? What impact does that have on ourselves and on others? Do we share funny stories? Does that cheer people or trivialise things? Working out what impact our stories have isn't easy, but it is worth investing time in it.

When do we stay silent? This is a really important consideration. Do we stay silent to better hear others and avoid speaking over them? Does our silence help keep the peace? Is our silence complicit in keeping someone else silent? If you let a bigot dominate the conversation, many people in the room may be silenced by this. Many people will not be able to even be in the room in the first place. Countering misinformation and prejudice in other people's stories is important work if we mean to make justice part of our Druidry. It isn't an easy choice, but the more power you have in a situation, the more responsible you should feel.

What kinds of stories could make a difference? This is without a doubt the most important question we can ask as bards examining our everyday storytelling. I think there are several broad areas that are widely applicable. We can look for stories that promote kindness – through empathy, patience, humour and warmth we can tell our tales in ways that encourage other people to respond kindly. In terms of social change and care for the planet, cultivating kindness is the best way to inspire people to live gentler lives. We can encourage people to be kind to themselves.

Kindness can be brought to people through expressions of gratitude and offerings of praise and encouragement. We can tell people stories that reflect back to them the best versions of themselves, and that offer hope. Centring other people in our stories can offer them balm for the soul – it is healing to feel seen and understood, so we can give a lot when we get that right. Telling stories that express praise and gratitude helps foster a more positive and uplifting environment and promotes flourishing. Getting away from mean-spirited gossip, knockdowns and criticism helps everyone to feel more peace and act more effectively.



We also urgently need stories that express our relationship with the planet in healthier ways. Simply sharing stories about wildlife we have encountered, speaking warmly of the land, talking about unmowed lawns and butterflies, we can help shift the people around us towards more sustainable perspectives. When we share the beauty of the world – in words or in images – we invite people to notice, and care. Getting people to engage with nature is key to getting people to make more sustainable choices.

When we tell stories that are warm, encouraging, hopeful and uplifting we change ourselves. As the storyteller, you are affected by the stories you tell. If your everyday stories include gratitude, joy and kindness then that becomes very much part of who you are and how you experience yourself. In giving praise and encouragement, you tell stories that let you feel like a better sort of person. The stories we tell about our own lives are also stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Taking control of those stories is powerful. Deciding how to tell our stories puts us more in control of our lives, and of our thoughts. This can be healing, empowering and liberating.

Stories are rife in our wider society. Adverts tell us stories about what we should want. Too many politicians tell us stories about relentless growth and consumption. We hear stories that reduce the living world to resources, products and profits and that turn life into cold numbers ready for exploitation. We need better stories. In our everyday storytelling, be that talking about the weather or describing our day, we have opportunities to change the perceptions of those who encounter our words.



Yule Deer by Fiona Graham

Seasonal Recipe

Winter Solstice by Sue Wilson

It is the time of year to eat rich, warming foods. Root vegetables are abundant and, love them or hate them, brussel sprouts are in the market, their sweet, crunchy green sprouts just asking to be loved and cherished.

So if you think you like neither Brussels sprouts, nor tofu, here is a recipe that may just change your mind.

Stir Fried Sprouts and Tofu

For the marinade:-

2 tablespoons chilli jelly, or redcurrant sauce
2 tablespoons shoyu or soy sauce
3 tablespoons toasted sesame oil
1 tablespoon mirin or maple syrup

For the sprouts:-

4 tablespoons rapeseed oil
400g brussels sprouts
2 red chillies, deseeded and sliced
1 block firm tofu

1. First prepare the marinade - combine all the marinade ingredients together.
2. Cube the tofu and add to the marinade. Leave the flavours to infuse for an hour or two.
3. Take the outer leaves from the sprouts, then slice each sprout in half.
4. Heat the oil in a large frying pan. Add the chillies. Cook for a minute or two, then add the sprouts.
5. Cook over a high heat without stirring so that the sprouts become charred in places.
6. Decant the vegetables into a serving dish and keep warm.
7. Add another couple of spoonfuls of oil to the pan. Using a slotted spoon, drop the tofu into the hot oil, and cook over a high heat, turning once.
8. Add the tofu to the sprouts in the serving dish.
9. Pour the marinade into the frying pan and cook over a high heat until the sauce thickens.
10. Serve the tofu and sprouts on a bed of rice, topped with the sauce.



An Interview with Penny Billington; Part 1 by Andrew Anderson

Way back in January, when I was putting together my first edition of Touchstone, it was suggested that I interviewed out esteemed Editor Emeritus, Penny Billington, to celebrate her 22 years of editing the magazine. It took a while for us to arrange a meeting but, on a beautifully sunny day in early June, Penny and I met outside the Market House in Glastonbury and chatted over a coffee. In this first transcript of our conversation we discuss how Penny came to OBOD, what it was like to take over Touchstone and the ethos which guided her editorship of the magazine.

AA: Before we get on to your time editing *Touchstone*, I thought I'd ask you how you came to OBOD.

PB: As with most things in my life, it was both magical and completely prosaic. I've always been a spiritual seeker and tried lots of different things and none of them had stuck, mainly because they came from other cultures and I wanted something rooted in this land. I started going to a meditation class and didn't know that the teacher was an OBOD member. Then one day, in the middle of the living room, was a paper invitation to send away for the OBOD course. It just appeared, like magic, when I needed it. I'd had the meditation teacher round for tea and the fact it fell out of her bag didn't stop it being a magical intervention at the right time. Then I was fortunate enough to go to the first camp. That was when OBOD was quite a small organization, so everyone, all the tutors, Philip and Stephanie, all of the people in the office, were there and I got to know them in an intimate setting – that is, passing them on the way to the loos and the wash house! Camping is a great leveler. I got to know people around the fire and that was just a joy. My husband, Arthur, had taken the camper van down. He was just going to check that the group weren't weirdos and leave me and Ursula there while he walked the Ridgeway. He saw someone play a guitar by the fire and he just didn't move off camp for ten days! It made me feel, not only was I coming home with the gwers but I'd met a lot of very lovely people in those surroundings.

AA: I think, even though OBOD is growing, although you don't meet people on the way to the loos anymore, it has still got that friendly feeling about it.

PB: You meet people on *The Hearth* and you meet them in the virtual ceremonies; you join in with the virtual ceremonies, you're not spectating, you're part of that experience which people are facilitating for you.

AA: So, how long after you joined OBOD did you take over as editor of *Touchstone*?

PB: People who don't know me don't know that I can be quite opinionated! I'm an ideas person. No one ever asks to hear them but I still feel the need to share them! So, at the time, Damh had just taken over as editor and I would often email Damh and say "Why don't you do that?" Or even "Why did you do that?" So I suppose I was in people's minds as someone who was an active contributor of ideas. Damh was doing the work of about 3 men, so when he put down *Touchstone* I went for a weekend induction and then I started in September 2001 as editor. It was all pen and paper, getting lots of letters and typing them up. I'd see a 2,000 word article and think 'my typing skills aren't up to this!' I had to put a piece in the magazine saying 'Please, no attachments' because email was so clunky and slow that a little attachment could make the computer break down.

AA: What was it like when you started editing it? Was it a booklet, as it is now?

PB: It started as an A4 news sheet but, when I took over as editor, it was the same format as now - 16 pages in 2 columns.

AA: Over the years that you were working on *Touchstone*, do any articles stick in your memory?

PB: Everyone's Druidry is different so some people respond to articles completely differently to how others respond. Some people flick over the archaeological articles, some flick over the mystical ones but there's something in *Touchstone* for everyone. It always surprised me that when I thought 'I'm not sure about this' there would be a positive response from someone else, because everything is subjective. Everyone has a right to put something in *Touchstone*. As editor, you also get to know authors. Every editor has a stable of authors. Their work doesn't turn up that often, maybe only every two years, but when you see that name, you know you are going to get something really thoughtful and considered, and steeped in Druidry. So I always looked out for



Image: The Two Editors
by Arthur Billington

those articles and thought “I’m in for a treat now!”.

AA: When we started our handover you told me there were some rules you had. Firstly, that it had to be about Druidry and also that it can’t give away anything about the course. Were there any other unspoken rules you had which you helped you to pick content?

PB: I’ve always prioritized articles over poetry, because they are written with a purpose to communicate an idea to the rest of the membership. Poetry is a personal thing that can be a gift to the world but an article is written to be communicated. Also, because a lot of Druids come from the healing modalities and because aspects of OBOD are a self-development course, I’ve veered away from the personal therapeutic aspect. Everyone has an interesting story, but the magazine could be full of those personal stories, which would be most relevant to the person. Whereas how the Druidic application of one’s healing journey – that helps everyone else. I also believe that everyone deserves to present their Druidic ideas as well as they can be to the other members of the order, so I would occasionally make helpful grammatical changes to articles.

AA: Someone came up to me this weekend and said they wanted to submit an article but were dyslexic and were concerned about that. I said I would edit their and send it back to them before publishing it.

PB: And I think that’s worth mentioning occasionally in an editorial to give people confidence to do it. Because not everyone has words as their primary skill but it doesn’t mean they can articulate their ideas on paper and get them across.

AA: Like you say, the point of *Touchstone* is to show people at their best.

PB: And we do have rules of grammar so, hey, let the editor use them!

AA: You also run the Inner Journeying workshops with Matt and Gary, which has been such an important part of the path of so many members. What can you share with readers about the course?

PB: The trouble with people generally in their pursuit of their Druidry is they are too full of integrity and ethics and really want to do it right. You have to give yourself permission to just do it. The gods, the spirit, the otherworld or whatever you want to call it, understands your intentions. Things don’t stand or fall by what the poor little humans do right or wrong! Relax into it and do it. That’s the important thing.

To be continued!

Art of Ritual Workshops 2025

We recently recieved the following testimonial from Michelle Hawkins-Collins about the Art of Ritual Workshops:

“What an enriching, nourishing and fun two days on the level two Art of Ritual course with Matt McCabe, Gary Llewyn and Penny Billington. Having done level one, I had a rough idea of what I was letting myself in for and it didn’t disappoint! It deepened my knowledge of ritual far beyond the Gwers in a very hands-on and practical way.

As I walk deeper along my Druid path, it can also sometimes feel quite solitary so events are a wonderful reminder of the supportive OBOD community. If you’re considering one of these courses, go for it! The benefits are immense on so many levels.”

Ritual workshops will be running again in Glastonbury in 2025.

Level 1 5&6 April. FFI email mattmccabe.1@outlook.com

Level 2 is projected for autumn.

Would level 1 completers register interest - with no obligation - or request further information from mattmccabe.1@outlook.com for level 2 in Sept or Oct.

Or come and chat to Penny, Matt & Gary at the OBOD Winter Gathering

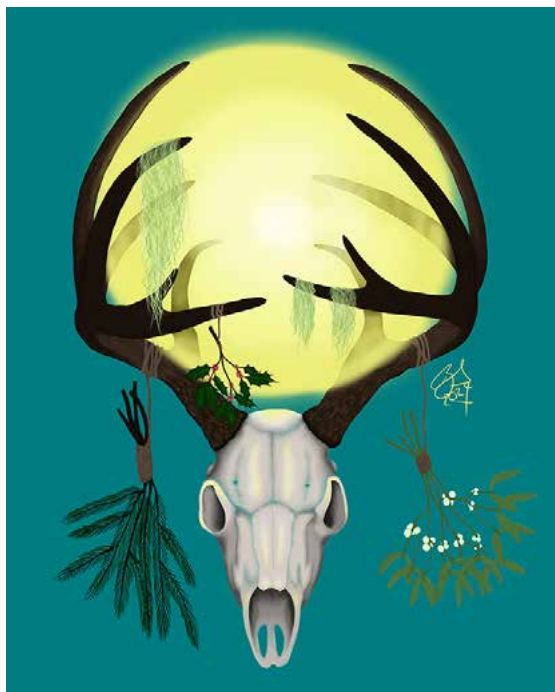


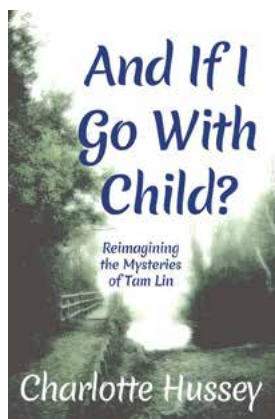
Image: Alban Arthan by Beth Amos

Reviews

And if I Go With Child

by Charlotte Hussey

This collection of poetry takes its inspiration from the mediaeval Scottish Ballad *Tam Lin* but, rather than simply reimagining the story, Hussey deconstructs the tale into a series of shorter pieces. In the introduction she explains “Using the ballad’s lines as prompts, I went on a search for evocative images from any time period, or place that spoke to these lines.”



As such, the reader finds themselves transported between the Celtic setting of the poem to a whole host of times and places. The poem *Faery Riders at Miles’ Gas Station* is a case in point, juxtaposing “the human on the white horse ... fatted with honey cakes” with a modern, “oily-smelling” forecourt. The collection is peppered with these striking images of modernity – the “battered blue Ford”, the “Winnebago” – which give the poems an immediacy and relevance. The final poem in the collection, *Hearts of Stone*, plays with a sense of nostalgia from listening to Elvis on the radio and takes it to a powerful and unexpected place.

The poetry in this collection is strong and sensual. The imagery in the titular poem strongly evokes feelings of queasiness and nausea through taste and smell while *Midnight, Miles’ Crossing* beautifully conjures up Halloween night where the “Gutted pumpkins sputter / and glare. Dogs howl. / A whip of lightning strikes / a skeletal sapling.” Hussey tackles all elements of the *Tam Lin* story, which some may find triggering, so it is worth looking at the ballad before going further. However Hussey does give an overview at the start, while extracts from the ballad help to structure the collection as a whole. This is a thoughtful and evocative engagement with an ancient story, making it resonate with the modern world. It is well worth reading.

Ancient Whispers

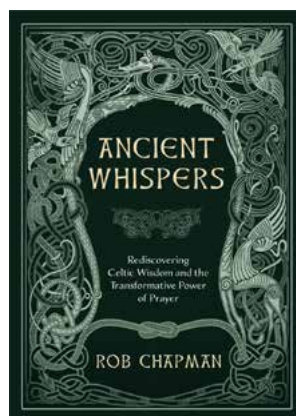
by Rob Chapman

Ancient Whispers is a wonderful little book full of deep spirituality. In the introduction, Chapman states that: “Through these pages, I hope to breathe on the divine spark that already resides within you, so that the spark becomes a steady, living flame.” This book more than succeeds in doing this.

This is, in essence, a modern prayer book which has grown from the roots of Celtic Christianity. However, even if you are not a Christian, the prayers here are easy to adapt to a Pagan Celtic path. What unifies this approach is the tradition of Celtic spirituality itself which “speaks to our longing for connection, belonging, and a deep sense of purpose.”

At the heart of this book are forty *Lorica* or “Breastplate” prayers to help the reader seek guidance on a range of qualities. Some of these you may expect, such as finding purpose and meaning in life and embracing one’s own vulnerability. But there are prayers for a far greater diversity of experience here than may be expected, such as choosing a fulfilling career path, navigating social media and undertaking a digital detox. Whatever situation you find yourself in, there will be a prayer for you.

Bookended by the exploration of the power of prayer at different times of day and prayers for a range of Celtic saints, such as Patrick, Brigid and Columba, this is a treasure trove of a book which will enlighten any spiritual path. In the heart of the dark days of winter, this book casts a magical circle of light around its reader.



Andrew's Bit At The Back

"With the blessing of the Great Bear of the starry heavens and the deep and fruitful earth, I call upon the powers of the North."

Whenever we undertake an OBOD ritual, we invoke the spirit of the Bear in the Northern quarter. The North is the place of grounded, earthly energies and yet the bear transcends that, bringing not only the solidity of the ground beneath our feet but also the potency of the stars over our heads. It is that contrast of realms – "the starry heavens and the deep and fruitful earth" – which I have always found intriguing. We don't find it with any of the other animals of the quarters – the hawk soars in the air, the salmon swims within the waters of the pool and the great stag is consumed in the heat of the chase. Yet, in our invocation, the bear sits in two realms at once.

The bear actually sits in three realms – the starry sky, the earthly, physical plane and the underworld, where she hibernates and raises her young – but, for this festive December article, at a time when the constellations become needlepoint sharp and we tell tales of stars being followed by magi, let's focus on the bear's connection to the stars!

A few years ago, I took a deep dive into bear deities for my book *Artio and Artaois*. It transformed my spiritual practice enormously and I am now an out and proud worshipper of the bear mother and bear son. Researching these two Celtic bear gods was not easy; there is not an awful lot of information out there about them, so I had to cast a wide net to be able to piece together what they may have been like. One of the things I found particularly interesting is that the connection between bears and the stars is ancient and repeats across cultures.

Perhaps the most well-known bear who sits amongst the stars is Honey Paw, the bear in the book of Finnish myths, *The Kalevala*. Honey Paw is an epithet for Otso, the spirit of all bears, who is created from fragments of wool by Mielikki, the lady of the forest. Raised into the "regions of the Moon-land" in a birchwood basket hung on chains of gold, the baby Otso is rocked into life in

their lofty basket among the stars. Although they do come down to earth, they also return to their basket to be rocked to sleep.

But it is the constellations which we in the west call Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, named after Callisto and her son, Arcas, from Greek Mythology, which are associated with bears in societies around the globe. In Hindu culture, the seven stars of Ursa Major are known as the seven bears. The Ostyak and Vogul people in northern Russia tell stories about how the earthly bear was born on a cloud close to Ursa Major. Similarly, a whole host of Native American peoples also link the constellation with bears.



Bear Guardian by Cathy
Johnson

An interesting expansion of this mythology can be found in The Greek Magical Papyri which states that bears not only rule the stars but use their position high at the apex of the sky to turn the earth upon its axis. A similar tale can be found in English folklore where Ursa Major is known as Arthur's Plough and Ursa Minor is Arthur himself, pushing the plough across the sky. The name Arthur is, of course, derived from the Welsh word for bear, Arth.

This sense that the greater and lesser bears do not just sit above us in the sky but are actually turning the earth on its axis is a beautiful and wholly magical idea. It taps into one of the other recurring themes which emerges when looking at the symbolism of bears around the world – renewal. This is seen most potently in the behaviour of bears in the winter. They head into the

underworld to hibernate and emerge when the light returns with their cubs, a new life born in the darkness. So, when you look up into the sky on Alban Arthan, look for the light of the bears, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, the bear mother and bear son, Artio and Artaois, leaning in to the axis of the firmament, moving us out of the darkness and back into the light. Brighter days are coming.

*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:

Alban Arthan: December 21st |



Image: The Sacred Grove by Leyawenn