

THE ANCIENT DRUIDS: An Example of Inutile Methodology

A CRITICAL REVIEW

In the first paragraph of "Ritual in the Celtic World: The Dance of the Ancient Druids" (Herman, 1979) the author implies dramaturgical and liturgical models¹ and quotes secondary (or perhaps tertiary) sources as her informants. She also applies her own unconscious model of prehistory in an attempt to marry the mystical with the factual -- a desire that, in this writer's opinion, she fails to fulfill as she admits toward the end of the article.

Herman writes, "One major problem was that the Druids left no written records of their festivals and the dance rituals involved. We thus have to depend on second-hand accounts for the most part" (1979:208). Her 'second-hand' sources are classical historians, i.e. Julius Caesar and Pliny, who disagree on the origin of the Druids among other questions of significance. "But we must read his [Caesar's] comments in the exaggerated light in which they were written" writes Herman (p. 205). This reveals faults in translation as well as a blatantly subjective interpretation of Caesar by Herman.

Her other second-hand sources are James Hastings (1921) who does not distinguish definitions of magic and religion; a separation that some anthropologists make. Two further sources used are Edward Davies (1809) and William Borlase (1769) who supply the eyewitness accounts of two Welsh bards, Meugaint (VII cent. A.D.) and Aneurin (VI cent. A.D.), who in turn do not give us detailed accounts of the Druidic dancing nor of its purpose, i.e. whether or not it was 'ritualistic'.

The bards' descriptions are nebulous and Herman endows the quotations used with meanings that are not there. For example, "Rapidly moving in the course of the sky, in circles, in uneven numbers, Druids and bards unite, in celebrating the leader" (Meugaint) seems to be interpreted as ". . . the Druidic custom of turning round the body while praying, and of circling the assembled worshippers" (Herman, p. 206). It is not clear whether they were praying while circling and if they circled all the 'worshippers'; the fact of the 'worship' is hypothetical. Herman's model is embellished with imagination and is the opposite of reductionism.

Throughout the article Herman tries to endow the hypothetical with fact, or as she puts it, "text-free archaeology" of the Druids (p. 202). Aside from not knowing what a 'text-free archaeology' might be, the two models of the scientific (the 'facts') and the dramaturgical or liturgical views do not work together. Herman acknowledges this in her conclusion but persists in her attempt to synthesize them. It appears that she is unable to relinquish a cherished romantic concept in the light of inadequate evidence to support it.

Although the Druids are labelled "primitive" by Hastings as a source in her article (p. 205), Herman proposes that the Druids were on the threshold of becoming a more advanced society before the 'diminishing' of the Celtic world. She advocates that the Druids went beyond "ritual appeasement" in the use of the dance and ". . . experienced a sense of heightened joy and exhilaration, and a union, no matter how temporary, with the gods" (p. 202). Is this any different from 'uncultured' (p. 202) societies that probably had their own, and as far advanced, cultures?

Herman again relies upon Hastings to explain the rite of human sacrifice among the Druids, so abhorrent to Christian ethics. One such interpretation 'by the classical historians' is that the Druids were indifferent to human life although they were priests ruling human life (p. 205). Rather than emphasize human sacrifice as a symbolic act of exchange with the gods as explained by John Beattie (1964: 235-6), Herman calls it "a means of appeasing (underline supplied) the gods" (p. 206). She does however mention the cleansing implications of the rite of human sacrifice as a way of eliminating undesirables to ensure the benevolence of the gods. This is a more rational reason for the phenomenon of sacrifice, but it is a subject that cannot be dealt with sufficiently in one paragraph as Herman attempts to do.

Evans-Pritchard, in his Theories of Primitive Religion (1965), mentions three fallacies that several writers on religion have utilized. They are: 1) the 'if I were a horse' theory, 2) the pars pro toto² theory and 3) the 'once upon a time' theory. These three fallacies are mainly errors of psychological thought. Herman frequently commits the fallacy of "if I were a horse I would do what horses do for one or other reason" (Evans-Pritchard, 1965:43). Her description of the importance of dancing to the Druids is one example (Herman, 1979:202).

The fallacy of pars pro toto is that ". . . because things may resemble each other in some particular feature, they are alike in other respects" (Evans-Pritchard: 46). Herman is guilty of this kind of thinking when she claims that "In essence, Druidic 'religion' was of the most basic kind -- a sort of faith in the supernatural that is common to most early societies" (Herman:205). Here, she presumably talks about magic. How can we possibly know whether the Druids practised 'magic' or 'religion' without written records of their ceremonies? Most anthropologists find this distinction important.

The final example of fallacious thought applies to the entire article -- that of 'once upon a time'. "To my mind, it is extraordinary that anyone could have thought it worthwhile to speculate about what might have been the origin of some custom or belief, when there is absolutely no means of discovering, in the absence of historical evidence, what was its origin" (Evans-Pritchard, 1965:110). The same author continues, ". . . and I hold that it is not sound scientific method to seek for origins, especially when they cannot be found. Science deals with relations, not with origins and essences" (1965:111). The illustration for the article by Herman in Dance Research Collage bears the inscription "Hypothetical druidic circle dance". The illustration well portrays the flawed approach in Herman's research.

One questions why Herman chose to attempt the study of the ancient Druids rather than what is available to scholars on contemporary Druids. At the beginning of her article she states: "In particular, I am most interested in exploring the dancing of the ancient Druids -- when they danced, why, how -- as a preliminary to discovering what, if any, Druidic and Celtic dances remain today" (1979:201). She is apparently ignorant of the developments in anthropology that emphasize what can be known, not fabricated. This is an important contribution to the area of research, no matter what the field of interest. Herman reveals this lack of knowledge in quoting interpretive sources of the 'twenties' and 'thirties' whose approach is usually invalid for serious anthropological or historical research. Thus a study of the ancient Druids is futile based on the evidence she cites. A study of the contemporary Druids would not be, if it were accompanied by careful fieldwork for evidence rather than supposition.

Leslie Martin

FOOTNOTES

1. Generally, a model is a conceptual 'tool' used to define and translate the subject under consideration. It is an "intellectual construct" (Williams, 1980) formed from assumptions. The 'dramaturgical' and 'liturgical' are two types of models having certain rules by which such events can be understood.
2. Pars pro toto may be translated as 'a part before the whole' or 'a part instead of the whole'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beattie, J. 1964. Other Cultures. N.Y. The Free Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1965. Theories of Primitive Religion. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Herman, Anne L. 1979. 'Ritual in the Celtic World: The Dance of the Ancient Druids', in P.A. Rowe and E. Stodelle, (Eds.) Dance Research Collage. New York:CORD.
- Williams, Drid. 1980. Class lectures at New York University.