

## Woodland Bard Session 17<sup>th</sup> April 2023

### Opening Invocation:

I invoke the land of Ireland, surging is the mighty sea,  
Mighty is the upland full of meadows, full of meadows is the rainy wood,  
Rainy is the river full of waterfalls, full of waterfalls is the spreading lake,  
Spreading is the spring of multitudes, a multitude of people is the assembly,  
The assembly of the King of Tara, Tara is a tower of tribes,  
The tribes of the sun of Mil.  
Warriors of ships, of vessels, Ireland is a mighty vessel,  
Flourishing is Eber Donn, a very wise incantation, of the very wise wives of Bres,  
Outcry of the wives of Buaighe, Ireland is a vast woman,  
Eremon smote her, Ir and Eber entreated her.  
I invoke the land of Ireland.

### Chant:

Eriu, Banba, Fodla, I invoke the land of Erin,  
Fruitful be her seas, perpetually green her forest,  
I feel her in my bones, I feel her in my blood.

### Invocation of The Sacred Hallows

**This tale is the battle of Maige Tuired and the birth of Bres, son of Elatha and his reign.**

A taking of Ireland, a strength that was not weak, the Tuatha De Danann took it: the name of the leader which they had, it was lucky, was Bethach, noble son of Iardaines.  
The seven other chieftains thereafter, with splendour, with combat, they were powerful against their firm conflict, the seven lofty great sons of Ethliu.  
Dagda, Dian Cecht, Credne the wright, Luichne the carpenter, who was an enduring plunderer, Nuada who was the silver-handed, Lugh mac Cein, Goibninn the smith.

### Chant:

Take me to the old ones, take me to the hidden ones  
Take me to the Sidhe, the guardians of the land.  
Dagda, Dian Cecht, Credne, Luichne, Nuada, Lugh, Goibninn.

## **The lore of the sacred Western Isles.**

There is a distant isle around which sea-horses glisten:  
A fair course against the white swelling surge,  
Four pillars uphold it.

An ancient tree there is with blossoms,  
On which birds call the canonical hours,  
'Tis in harmony it is their wont  
To call together every hour.

Splendours of every colour glisten  
Throughout the gentle-voiced plains,  
Joy is known ranked around music  
In southern white silver plain.

Unknown is wailing or treachery  
In the familiar cultivated land,  
There is nothing rough or harsh  
But sweet music striking on the ear

A beauty of a wondrous land,  
Whose aspects are lovely,  
Whose view is of a fair country,  
Incomparable is its haze.

Then if silvery land is seen,  
On which dragon stones and crystals drop,  
The sea washes the wave against the land,  
Hair of crystal drops from its mane.

There are thrice fifty distant isles  
In the ocean to the West of us;  
Larger than Erin twice is each of them or thrice.

Begin a voyage across the clear sea,  
If perchance thou mayst reach the Land of women.

**The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal- trans. Kuno Meyers**

Delightful land beyond all dreams!  
Beyond what seems to thee most fair —  
Rich fruits abound the bright year round  
And flowers are found of hues most rare.  
Unfailing there the honey and wine  
And draughts divine of mead there be,  
No ache nor ailing night or day —  
Death or decay thou ne'er shalt see!  
A hundred swords of steel refined,  
A hundred cloaks of kind full rare,  
A hundred steeds of proudest breed,  
A hundred hounds — thy meed when there!

**Michael Comyn - Oisín in Tir na nÓg**

## **PART 2 WILLOW- TREE OF POETS.**

*'The woodland willow stands, a lonely bush of nebulous silver,  
There the spring Goddess cowers in faint attire of frightened fire. '*

**Robert Bridges 1844-1930**

Whilst the woodland is still stark, the wind cold and the ground hard we witness a tree with golden yellow blossom as if it is reminding us that the sun is returning. The Sallow or Pussy Willow produces silver catkins first and then the catkins of the male tree laden with pollen turns gold, thus providing a valuable source of early pollen for the bees.

*'How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour  
And harvest honey all the day from every open flower,  
How skilfully she builds the cells, how neat she spreads the wax,  
And labours hard to store it well with the sweet food that she makes. '*

**Isaac Watts ( 1674- 1748 )**

The rest of the year the woodland Willow is probably unnoticed by most merging back into the dense woodland as just another small tree with green leaves. The other two tree species of Willow (the Crack and the White Willow) are huge forest trees with branches growing low and high creating a dominating bush-like structure of abundant leaves in the summer. The

Crack Willow is our most common large willow growing over many a waterway with shiny green leaves on top and silvery beneath. The White Willow can grow up to 80ft covered with silvery leaves on both sides creating an impressive sight in low-lying districts.

As with the Alder Willow is intrinsically linked with the waterways, invoking a feminine presence which breaks up the skyline and encourages wildlife where the land meets the water. The beauty of our rivers, brooks and streams is a joy to behold and one can see why our ancestors gave names to the rivers linking them to the Goddess.

The terrible pollution of our waterways is in direct contradiction to the tradition and importance of their function.

Willow is the female guardian of the waterways, the 'Lady'. Giving names to the landscape and its features creates a more intimate and familiar relationship with it.

Our relationships are key to our psychological make-up and when we are in good relationship with someone or something we wish to respect it in every possible way.

Our ancestor's relationship with rivers acknowledged their life-giving properties to the otherwise barren land. This quality is reflected in the nourishing aspects of the mother archetype thus giving rise to the rivers being named as goddesses.

This is a universal concept as seen in the river Ganges in India, named after the great Mother Ganga. In Europe the Goddess takes form as Danu in the river Danube, Sequana of the river Seine, Nimue and Diana in the lakes of Brittany, in Britain as Sabrina of the Severn, Vaga of the Wye, Sulis of the springs of Bath and in Ireland as Boann of the river Boyne.

In Celtic lore the Goddess is seen as three in the Matronae and as nine in the form of the gifting mothers or muses. Ultimately the source of inspiration in Celtic lore is seen as flowing from the cauldron of life which over-pours into the waterways, offering inspiration to all who drink from its source.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (author of The History of the Kings of Britain 1136AD) recognises this concept in his writings as he notes the importance of the three main trading rivers of Britain in the Thames, the Severn and the Humber. These could be seen as the arms of the Matronae in Britain, the Triple Goddess giving life, abundance and fruition to the beauty of the landscape. Geoffrey of Monmouth (Vita Merlini 1150AD) explores this further with the nine sisters which are prevalent throughout Celtic lore.

Their function is to bestow our souls with the gifts we can offer to the web of life and guide us to fulfil our destiny.

The Kennings of the Willow tree take us into the realms of death linking willow to bees, grief and loss:

Willow, the colour of the lifeless one  
owing to the resemblance of its colour to a dead person.  
Hue of the lifeless.  
Beginning of loss, willow.  
Strength of bees.

### **Book of Ballymote 1391**

Bees represent a connection to the Other-worlds and also were considered an inspiration to community life as they work together as a whole to benefit the swarm.

The Queen bee represented the Great goddess in Classical traditions, often referred to as 'birds of the muses' bestowing eloquence and honeyed words. Bees as knowers of ancient lore are connected to the underworld. The female power and poetry they represent are not just about beauty and love but also take us deeper into the mysteries.

In Celtic lore the old women of wisdom, may be gnarled and twisted just like a Willow but command respect and bestow wisdom. In fact, it is the old crones like the Cailleach and the Morrígu who are the guardians of wisdom and the mysteries of death.

The early poet's initiation into their arts was through a deep connection to darkness and the deep wisdom of the earth.

Willow invites us to acknowledge our grief and suffering and be aware of the destruction we unleash onto the green world. Owing up to the part we play in harming nature need not be a depressing or guilty process but an empowering, compassionate and ultimately freeing process.

The poet's art was learned in the dark side of the year once the harvest was gathered in. The arduous training was conducted in dark cells sometimes likened to imprisonment. This enabled the poet to awaken the inner light which is spoken about in Shamanic traditions all across the world.

Celtic traditions encouraged Willow trees to be planted at burial sites so that the spirit of the corpse can rise into the sapling above, Willow probably being a preferred choice as it is said to ease the passage of the soul at death, a psychopomp- a guide for the soul to find their place after death.

To wear Willow is to grieve openly and the tree I suspect encourages us to be open to our deeper emotions.

Witches brooms may be bound with Willow to dedicate the broom to the goddess and the moon. Its leaves, bark and wood may be burnt as incense for similar reasons.

Celtic lore speaks of Willow connected to in-between states and otherworld experiences. Her connection

with water (as already discussed) enhances that as water represents that more fluid otherworldly state, the cycle of life and death and our returning to the source. Gypsies cut Willow on Green George day (23rd April) to propitiate water spirits, bless the crops, herds, and pregnant women, and to heal the young and old.

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