

Celtic Influences on the History of the First Age

By Marie Barnfield

Introduction

In 1937 *The Silmarillion* was described by Edward Crankshaw, a reader of Allen and Unwin, as having "something of that mad, bright-eyed beauty that perplexes all Anglo-Saxons in face of Celtic art" and containing "eye-splitting Celtic names". J.R.R. Tolkien's reply was indignant. Of the names he wrote: "Needless to say, they are not Celtic," adding: "Neither are the Tales. I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh), and feel for them a certain distaste: largely for their fundamental unreason. They have bright colour, but are like a broken stained-glass window reassembled without design. They are, in fact, 'mad', as your reader says..."¹

And there one might be tempted to leave matters, seeking the inspirations of Tolkien's mythology only in the Germanic material for which he expressed an affection. However, by 1950, Tolkien was admitting that he had at the outset desired his work to possess "the fair elusive quality that some call Celtic" (still qualifying this with the gloss "though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things ...")²; the influence of the Welsh language upon the development of Sindarin he later freely acknowledged.³

Tolkien was apt to deny the sources of his material (as, for instance, the debt he owed to Wagner's Ring⁴). He was familiar with both branches of the Celtic languages, and with Celtic mythology; the Celts too, as the Germanic tribes, belong to the North-west corner of the Old World of which *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* represent the legendary past. It is likely, therefore, that the sound quality of Sindarin is not the only Celtic feature of Tolkien's world. In the following article I propose to examine the mythology of the First Age for Celtic narrative influences, the Second Age and the question of language being worthy of separate study in their own right.

"Celtic Things"

In describing Celtic things as "mad", Tolkien was probably referring to the unsatisfactory state of the tales as they have come down to us. Celtic tales lack the superficial cohesiveness and structure of Greek mythology, and some of the Norse matter. The druids allowed nothing concerning their religion to be written down, so that the tales were not recorded until after the decline of the beliefs upon which they had rested. Suppression of the old faith was stronger in Britain, and may account for the more garbled state of the *Mabinogion* and of the Arthurian matter. In Ireland, tales were written down by Christian monks who not only suppressed the divinity of the heroes and grafted their history on to the early chapters of the Bible, but were engaged in a process of synthesising various local traditions whose meanings they probably did not understand. But to dismiss "Celtic things" on these grounds would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater. With this thought in mind, I perused *The Silmarillion* briefly to see if any trace of the Celtic "baby" was to be found in Arda.

The Geography of Arda

The surviving Celts of the western seaboard resemble the peoples of Beleriand in one important respect, and that is their abode on the shores of the ocean, with the vast unnavigable sea stretching out westward before them. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is from the Celtic matter that Tolkien has drawn the inspiration for that which lay upon the ocean's further shores.

Alwyn and Brinley Rees point out⁵ that "in metaphysical formulation a 'crossing of water' always implies a change of state or status"; to the Irish there therefore existed across the Great Sea (as they too call the Atlantic) a happy Otherworld, home of the gods, known variously as the land

of the Living, the Islands of the Blessed or the land of Promise, "a paradise overseas, situate in some unknown, and, except for favoured mortals, unknowable island of the west ..."⁶. Jewels strew the shores of Valinor, and upon the Land of the Living "dragonstones and crystals rain".⁷ Irish voyagers reach their goal after passing various enchanted islands and traversing a final hedge of mist. Valinor similarly was guarded by the Enchanted Isles, where "the waves sighed for ever upon dark rocks shrouded in mist".⁸

But perhaps the most famous Other-world island in Celtic legend is the Arthurian Avalon, derived from the Welsh "Avallawn", Place of the Apple Trees. Tolkien relates that a portion of the high Elves returning from Middle-earth dwelt upon an island within sight of Aman (Tol Eressëa), the haven for their ships upon this isle they called by the name of "Avallonë". It is hardly possible to doubt that the similarity of these names is intended, that under the enchantment of secondary belief one is to view the tales of Avalon as but a faded memory of Avallone of Eressëa.

The other chief similarity between Arda and the world of Celtic mythology lies in its sacred centres. Mythologies world-wide speak of a single Centre, the World Axis, an umbilical link between our world and the Other. Its chief symbols are those of mountain, pillar and tree. Each people, however, observed its own territorial Centre, so that the Earth in ancient times was full of such symbolic holy places.⁹

The world of *The Silmarillion* too abounds with sacred centres of various models. Those in which the axis is represented by a tree may indeed have been inspired by the Norse Centre, with the world-tree Yggdrasil and the three wells at its roots. However, Celtic mythology also has its tree Centres, such as Emain Ablach, the Other-world "Palace of Apple Trees". The goddess who invited Bran across the sea gave him as token a "silver white-blossomed branch from the apple tree of Emain in which branch and fruit are one"; Niam, in a similar situation, offered to Oisín a golden apple.¹⁰ These apple trees of silver and gold bear more resemblance to Telperion and Laurelin than does Yggdrasil, these are, indeed, to quote Yeats, "the silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun."¹¹

It was from the final fruits of Telperion and Laurelin that the Sun and moon were formed, and the Silmarils, last repositories upon Earth of their light, were objects of quest, as are the Other-world apples of Celtic legend. The male and female nature of the Trees of Valinor has its analogies too in the numerous male and female tree-pairs of the Celtic world, such as the pines of Deirdre and Naoise, or the rose bush of Eyllt and the vine of Trystan.

There are tree Centres in Tolkien's mythology with other characteristics closer to Irish models than to the Yggdrasil Centre. Perhaps the best example in *The Silmarillion* is Valmar.¹² A brief comparison of this sanctuary with Uisnech, the sacred centre of Ireland¹³, will illustrate the similarities:

"In the midst of the plain beyond the mountains they built their city, Valmar of many bells": the royal seat of Tara;

"Before its western gate there was a green mound, Ezellohar": the hill of Uisnech to the west of Tara;

"The Máhanaxar, the Ring of Doom, near to the golden gates of Valmar": the rath or enclosure at Uisnech which held the board for the sacred fate-game of fidchell,

"... upon the mound ... the two trees of Valinor": the Ash of Uisnech (the feminine centre) and the Lia Fáil, the pillar-stone of Tara (the masculine centre);

"... the dews of Telperion and the rains that fell from Laurelin Varda hoarded in great vats like shining lakes, that were to all the land of the Valar as wells of water and of light": Connla's Well and the Well of Segais.

The History

The historical pattern set out in *The Silmarillion* strongly resembles that of the Irish mythological cycle, particularly as related by Charles Squire in his *Celtic Myth and Legend*, a work with which Tolkien could have been familiar. The Elves may be equated with the Tuatha Dé Danann, originally the gods of the Celts but presented by monkish redactors as an immortal race who inhabited Ireland before the coming of the Gaels: "the most handsome and delightful company, the fairest of form, the most distinguished in ... their skill in music and playing, the most gifted in mind

and temperament that ever came to Ireland."¹⁴ A resumé of the histories of both peoples will make the similarities plainer still.

The Elves came to Middle-earth from the city of Tirion in Valinor; they knew wars and sorrows in their long labours against Morgoth, until their fading and final departure into the West to make way for the age of Men. The Tuatha Dé Danann came to Ireland from the Other-world cities of Findias, Falias, Murias and Gorias. They knew wars and sorrows in their long struggles against the Fomorian demons, only to be doomed at last by the coming of mortals. Many of them then "chose to shake the dust of Ireland off their disinherited feet, and seek refuge in a paradise ... situate ... in some unknown ... island of the west..."¹⁵ The rest ceded to mortals the upper earth, and retired into their "sídh" or fairy mounds.

This, then, appears to be the inspiration for Tolkien's motive of the "fading". Squire contends that this is an ancient Celtic motive. "The story of the conquest of the gods by mortals ... is typically Celtic. The Gaelic mythology is the only one which has preserved it in any detail, but the doctrine would seem to have been common at one time to all the Celts."¹⁶

The other great theme of *The Silmarillion*, that of the quest of the three Silmarils themselves, cursed as it was by the kinslaying of Alqualondë, may have been inspired by the Irish tale "The fate of the Children of Tuirenn". Here, the murder of Cian by the sons of Tuirenn results in Cian's son laying on them an eric to seek and bring back for him the chief treasures of the world, first among these being the three golden apples from the apple-tree of Findchaire, or (in a later, classically influenced redaction) the Garden of the Hesperides. Though after long labours they succeed in their task, all die of the hardships and wounds they have sustained in their quest.

Some few of the Valar, Elves and Men have their counterparts too in Celtic legend. Others are such universal mythological archetypes that it would be unwise to claim for them any particular inspiration. Amongst the Valar, Ossë shows a clear resemblance to the Gaelic Manannan. Ossë is the vassal of Ulmo, "master of the seas that wash the shores of Middle-earth", who

"loves the coasts and the isles".¹⁷ Manannan is the son of the sea-god Ler. He is known by the title of "Lord of the Headlands", and is the special patron of sailors. Like Ossë, he summons storms. His homes are the isles of Man and Arran. Of Uinen, Ossë's spouse, Tolkien had this to say: "to her mariners cry, for she can lay calm upon the waves, restraining the wildness of Ossë".¹⁸ "Fand", the name of Manannan's wife, means "gentle".

Cromë "is a hunter of monsters and fell beasts, and he delights in horses and in hounds ... and he is called by the Sindar Tauron, the Lord of Forests ... The Valaróma is the name of his great horn."¹⁹ Here we have a description of Cernunnos, the Celtic horned god, Lord of the Animals, who appears in English folklore as Herne the Hunter. In Irish legend he appears as Finn Mac Cumail, leader of the war band known as the Fianna. Finn, a deer deity beneath his mortal guise, lived by hunting in the forests and had two faithful hounds. His Welsh counterpart is Gwynn ap Nudd, the leader of the Wild Hunt.

Mandos "is the keeper of the Houses of the Dead, and the summoner of the spirits of the slain".²⁰ With him the souls of dead mortals rest before leaving the world. In Irish legend it is in the House of Donn (an island of the Skelligs) that "the dead have their tryst". McCana relates that "the belief has survived in Ireland that on moonlit nights the souls of the dead can be seen over the Skellig rocks, on their way to the Land of the Young."²¹

Of the individual tales which make up the history of the First Age, there is one which was close to Tolkien's heart and has enough Celtic influences to form the subject of an article in its own right. That is the story "Of Beren and Lúthien".

Elopedents form a recognised narrative branch in Irish mythology ("aitheada"). Their underlying symbolism, like that of abduction tales, is that of the rivalry between the gods of winter and summer for possession of the earth goddess. In the elopement stories, the lover represents the summer king with whom the goddess naturally chooses to flee despite attempts to prevent her by the old god of winter (represented either as her father or an aged husband who keeps her in seclusion).²² The

best known Celtic elopement tales are "Deirdre and the Sons of Uisle", "Diarmuid and Gráinne", and "Trystan and Eyllt". Other secluded maiden stories based on a similar theme are "Culhwch and Olwen" and "Cian and Ethne".

In "Deirdre and the Sons of Uisle", Naoise encounters the "loveliest woman in all Ireland" hidden "in a place set apart" by the aged King Conchubar who has brought her up to be his bride.²³ Deirdre, like Gráinne, Eyllt and Lúthien, elopes with her young love and endures with him many perils in the wild. Ethne's father attempts to keep her from marriage by shutting her away in a tower (neither on earth nor in heaven), just as Thingol imprisons Lúthien high in the boughs of the tree Hírilorn. Olwen's father, like Thingol, agrees to give his daughter in marriage if her lover will seize for him certain Other-world treasures.²⁴ Gráinne's lover Diarmuid, like Beren, is slain by a magical wild beast (the Boar of Ben Bulbin), which has been harrying the area and which he has hunted in company with his rival, Finn. The final scenes of "Of Beren and Lúthien" strongly recall "Diarmuid and Gráinne". Gráinne, watching from the ramparts of her castle, sees the hunters returning home, Finn leading by the leash Diarmuid's own hound, and thus she knows that her lover is dead. The body of Diarmuid is placed upon a golden bier and carried back to the home of his foster-father Aengus, the Irish god of love.²⁵

Thingol's opposition to Beren places him, mythologically, in the role of the winter king seeking to avert the doom pronounced by the coming of his rival. The text of *The Silmarillion* shows Beren clearly to be the representation of summer. He passed the winter in Doriath with "a chain ... on his limbs" so that he could not reach Lúthien. Yet "on the eve of spring", her song "released the bonds of winter", and "the spell of silence fell from Beren ... doom fell on her, and she loved him."²⁶

Other Celtic motives may be detected in this tale. The shadow cloak that Lúthien wove of her hair is reminiscent of Celtic cloaks of invisibility and darkness, and also of the magic cloak without which the immortal bride may not return to her own kind. Celegorm, like the husbands in these tales, hides Lúthien's cloak, and she

does not escape from him until Húan has retrieved it for her.

The motive in Tolkien's work of the union of mortals with women of immortal race is, as already mentioned, intimately woven with that of the Celtic notion of kingship, and is therefore to be found in several Celtic tales. As the representation of the land, the goddess became symbolic of its sovereignty, and no king could claim the right to rule save that she had accepted him as her spouse. "Nowhere was this divine image of sovereignty visualised so clearly as among the Celts, and more especially in Ireland where it remained a remarkably evocative and compelling concept for as long as native tradition lasted."²⁷ Lúthien's mother Melian also fulfils the role of goddess of sovereignty. She is wed to a king of non-divine race and herself maintains the land inviolate and free of stain. She inhabits, indeed, a sacred wood in the Celtic tradition, her nightingales reminiscent of the birds of Rhiannon, which "lulled the living to sleep".²⁸ This role is to be repeated again in a later age with Lúthien's descendant Arwen.

The Celtic goddess as simple personification of the earth's fertility is also easily recognisable in *The Silmarillion*. Of the Welsh Olwen we are told that four white trefoils sprang up wherever she walked.²⁹ Similarly, Tolkien wrote of Vána³⁰: "All flowers spring as she passes"; and of Lúthien³¹ that "flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed".

Conclusion

In summary, it may be said that Edward Crankshaw was correct: *The Silmarillion* is rich in Celtic inspiration; indeed, it is Celtic at its very core. The topography of its enchanted West, and the greatest of its Other-world treasures, the Two Trees of Valinor and the Silmarils that entrapped their light, have a provenance in the apple-trees of Avalon and Emain Ablach. If it was from Teutonic myth that Tolkien took the name of "Elves", then it was from Irish legend that he drew their soul. From Irish legend too comes the history of their long defeat, the motive of the "fading". Though the meeting of Beren and Lúthien was "conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire"³² where Tolkien's young raven-haired bride danced and sang, it was upon

ancient Celtic "aitheda" that the tale of their elopement was modelled.

A closer study of the tales of the First Age would no doubt yield enough Celtic material to fill a volume of its own, but the borrowings cited above are enough to demonstrate that, though there are many other influences upon it, there is a sense in which *The Silmarillion* is the broken stained-glass window of Celtic myth, reassembled with design. And that the light that shines through it, the Light of the Blessed Realm, is the very same that greeted St. Brendan as he emerged from the hedge of mist upon the shores of the Land of Promise, that land that "will remain forever without the shadow of night. For its light is Christ."³³

NOTES

1. *Letters*, ed. Carpenter Allen and Unwin, 1981. no. 19.
2. *Ibid.* no. 131.
3. Allan, J. et al. *An introduction to Elvish* Bran's Head, 1978. p.49.
4. This subject was discussed by K.C.Frazer in his article "Whose Ring was it anyway?" (*Mallorn* 25).
5. Rees, Alwyn and Rees, Brinley *Celtic heritage* Thames and Hudson, 1961. p.107.
6. Squire, Charles *Celtic myth and legend* (2nd ed.) Newcastle Publishing Co. Inc., 1975. p.133.
7. From "The voyage of Bran, son of Febal", in: MacCana, Proinsias *Celtic mythology* (2nd ed.) Newnes Books, 1983. p.125.
8. *The Silmarillion*, Allen and Unwin, 1977. p.102.
9. See: Tolstoy, Nikolai *The quest for Merlin* (Sceptre ed.) Hodder and Stoughton, 1988. Chapter 9.
10. See: Graves, Robert *The white goddess* (pbk. ed.) Faber, 1961. p.254, and Rees, op.cit., p.314-315.
11. From "The song of Wandering Aengus" in Jeffares, A. Norman *W.B.Yeats: selected poetry* Macmillan, 1965. Golden apples, of course, appear in other European mythologies and folk tales, having in some (such as the Firebird) a clear solar significance. Niamh of the Golden Hair herself would appear to be a solar deity. Her name means 'brightness', and her other epithet, 'Deor-gréine', is 'Tear of the Sun'.
12. *The Silmarillion*, p.38-39.
13. Rees, op.cit., Chapter 7.
14. *Ibid.*, p.30.
15. Squire, op.cit., p.133.
16. *Ibid.*, p.119.
17. *The Silmarillion*, p.30.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p.23.
20. *Ibid.*, p.28.
21. Rees, op.cit., p.97-98.
22. *Ibid.*
23. From *The Tír*, tr. Kinsella, Thomas. (2nd ed) OUP, 1970.
24. *The Mabinogion*, tr. Jones, Gwyn and Jones, Thomas. Dent, 1974.
25. Taken from: Neeson, Eoin *The second book of Irish myths and legends* Cork: Mercier Press, 1966.
26. *The Silmarillion*, p.165-166.
27. MacCana, op.cit., p.92.
28. *The Mabinogion*, p.115-116. The name "Rhiannon" itself means "Great Queen".
29. *Ibid.*, p.111.
30. *The Silmarillion*, p.29.
31. *Ibid.*, p.165.
32. *Letters*, no.340.
33. Severin, Tim *The Brendan voyage* Arrow, 1979.

