



The Religion of the Ancient Celts

John Arnott MacCulloch

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1911. In this work, MacCulloch attempts to rebuild Celtic paganism and to guess at its inner spirit. He portrays the Celt as a seeker after God, linking himself by strong ties to the unseen and eager to conquer the unknown by religious rite and magic art. The earliest aspect of his religion was the cult of nature spirits and of life manifested in nature.

The Religion of the Ancient Celts Details

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From Reader Review The Religion of the Ancient Celts for online ebook

Kitty Snaev says

While informative, it was outdated and had some misinformation. The author's Christian bias was evident at times, but it didn't seem to color what he was saying too much. This is not a book for someone who doesn't know anything about the ancient Gaelic, Brythonic and Gaulish people.

As a pagan, I think this would be useful to other pagans who want an informative text. Again, however, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt.

Where are the informative books on the religion of ancient civilizations that aren't colored by the author's own religion, Christian or Neo-Pagan?

Erin says

A bit outdated now, but still a solid study and a decent intro to the topic.

Andreas Schmidt says

Altro libro comprato più di una decina d'anni fa e mai terminato di leggere. E c'è un buon motivo. Per quanto mi sembri completo e complesso l'argomento, si tratta di un blocco di testo difficilmente digeribile. L'autore tratta con quello stile "mattoncino anni '20" l'argomento, seguono descrizioni solo per i veri interessati (e io non sono tra quelli).

Cwn_annwn_13 says

Originally published in 1911 MacCulloch uses various texts as a source to piece this tome on the religion of the pre-Christian Celts together. Overall a good work, especially when you consider this was written before most, if not all, of the major archaeological finds that gave great insight into the ancient Celts. I love reading historical books that were published in the 1800's and early 1900's because the authors are not chained by political correctness and were often willing to think outside the box instead of toeing the line of mainstream academia.

dragonhelmuk says

Kindled for free: Excellent book by MacCulloch. He calls himself part of the new generation of scholars, and in some ways he is right, reading him isn't nearly so frustrating as reading other early people. He even manages to balance out his ancient theories with modern examples, including human sacrifice on the rivers

dee and don! 3 quotes:

(Celts being "Keltic" :p)

Similarly French fishermen threaten to cut a fog in two with a knife, while the legend of S. Lunaire tells how he threw a knife at a fog, thus causing its disappearance.⁵⁸⁵ Fighting the waves is also referred to in Irish texts. Thus Tuirbe Trágmar would "hurl a cast of his axe in the face of the flood-tide, so that he forbade the sea, which then would not come over the axe." Cúchulainn, in one of his fits of anger, fought the waves for seven days, and Fionn fought and conquered the Muireartach, a personification of the wild western sea.

(I've never seen anybody else with these ideas, very innovative and ahead of his time!)

Leaden tablets with inscriptions were placed in springs by those who desired healing or when the waters were low, and on some the actual waters are hardly discriminated from the divinities. The latter are asked to heal or flow or swell—words which apply more to the waters than to them, while the tablets, with their frank animism, also show that, in some cases, there were many elemental spirits of a well, only some of whom were rising to the rank of a goddess. They are called collectively Niskas—the Nixies of later tradition, but some have personal names—Lerano, Dibona, Dea—showing that they were tending to become separate divine personalities. The Peisgi are also appealed to, perhaps the later Piskies, unless the word is a corrupt form of a Celtic peiskos, or the Latin piscus, "fish."⁶¹² This is unlikely, as fish could not exist in a warm sulphurous spring, though the Celts believed in the sacred fish of wells or streams

...

The spirit of the waters was often embodied in an animal, usually a fish. Even now in Brittany the fairy dweller in a spring has the form of an eel, while in the seventeenth century Highland wells contained fish so sacred that no one dared to catch them.⁶¹⁶ In Wales S. Cybi's well contained a huge eel in whose virtues the villagers believed, and terror prevailed when any one dared to take it from the water. Two sacred fish still exist in a holy well at Nant Peris, and are replaced by others when they die, the dead fish being buried.⁶¹⁷ This latter act, solemnly performed, is a true sign of the divine or sacred character of the animal. Many wells with sacred fish exist in Ireland, and the fish have usually some supernatural quality—they never alter in size, they become invisible, or they take the form of beautiful women.⁶¹⁸ Any one destroying such fish was regarded as a sacrilegious person, and sometimes a hostile tribe killed and ate the sacred fish of a district invaded by them, just as Egyptians of one nome insulted those of another by killing their sacred animals.⁶¹⁹

(Celtic Totemism? Very convincingly argued here with philology and a hint of geis)

In many individual names the first part is the name of an animal or plant, the second is usually genos, "born from," or "son of," e.g. Artigenos, Matugenos, "son of the bear" (artos, matu-); Urogenos, occurring as Urogenertos, "he who has the strength of the son of the urus"; Brannogenos, "son of the raven"; Cunogenos, "son of the dog."⁷⁴¹ These names may be derived from clan totem names, but they date back to a time when animals, trees, and men were on a common footing, and the possibility of human descent from a tree or an animal was believed in. Professor Rh[^y]s has argued from the frequency of personal names in Ireland, like Cúrói, "Hound of Rói," Cú Corb, "Corb's Hound," Mac Con, "Hound's Son," and Maelchon, "Hound's Slave," that there existed a dog totem or god, not of the Celts, but of a pre-Celtic race.⁷⁴² This assumes that totemism was non-Celtic, an assumption based on preconceived notions of what Celtic institutions ought to have been. The names, it should be observed, are personal, not clan names. (2) Animal tabus.—Besides the dislike of swine's flesh already noted among certain Celtic groups, the killing and eating of the hare, hen, and goose were forbidden among the Britons.

Jennifer says

This book has some interesting details and digressions, but overall I wanted something more substantive. Often it seems more a catalog of ancient inscriptions--the author hesitates to draw any conclusions from them. That being said, it has really impressive footnotes for future research.

Matt says

I really enjoyed this book. It's extremely in depth; but not boring. The author really knew his subject and he is cautious in his interpretations. The only reason that I did not give it 5 stars is due to the fact that this book is rather old (1911) and thus subject to relative lack of scholarship on the Celts. But so long as one keeps in mind that we have learned much more about the Celts since the publishing of this book, it's a great read!

Andrea says

Very good for what it is, which is Ann elderly book. More recent scholarship has some very different ideas, and if you're doing serious research you probably want to go elsewhere. However if you find how we remember history just as intriguing as the history we remember, this book is a fun read to compare with more recent works.

Kelly Johnson says

The text was a bit dry, and I wouldn't exactly recommend it for light reading. I mean, the first chapter went on and on about skull shapes. Skull. Shapes. The author also assumes the reader knows enough about ancient history such as who lived where and what civilization conquered which, so if you don't know much about that you might have a little difficulty placing them as you read. I did like the way he doesn't talk down on the Celtic religion in the way a lot of authors who wrote around that time frame (this was originally published in 1911, I believe). I've read a lot where you get the sense that the author is biased and looks down on "pagan" religions in a oh-how-cute-look-how-uncivilized-they-were-before-Christianity way that gets really annoying. In fact, MacCulloch actually acknowledges that the coming of Christianity distorted a lot of things about the Celtic religion and myth. In the end I liked it ok, but I wouldn't recommend it to someone who isn't a big Celtic mythology fan.

Heather Brooks says

Informative.....but soooo boring. Thankfully it's free on Amazon and I didn't buy it.

Julia says

An exhaustive and comprehensive overview of the Celtic religion as seen through the lens of the writers of antiquity. As other reviewers have shared, the information is dated as the book is over a 100 years old. However, I would still recommend for those already familiar with the subject and looking for an in depth resource.

Lisa says

Overall I didn't care for this book. Some parts were really interesting which is what kept me reading but overall I think there are probably better books on the subject out there. I definitely wouldn't recommend this to a beginner on the subject as the author moves through a lot of information very quickly and seems to assume that the audience knows what he's referencing. For someone who studies the topic though there might be some insightful information here. He talks quite a bit about continental Celts as well as those on the British isles so there's a lot of information.

One thing that stuck out to me often was his constant negative references to other writers. Even to the point of seeming petty in the way he down talked their findings. He particularly seemed to have it out for John Rhys.

If you're interested in a particular topic I might read the section on it, but overall I wouldn't recommend the whole book. Below are the chapters/main sections.

- The Celtic People
- The Gods of Gaul and the Continental Celts
- The Irish Mythological Cycle
- The Tuatha Dé Danann - I actually found this chapter pretty helpful for my own understanding.
- The Gods of the Brythons
- The Cúchulainn Cycle
- The Fionn Saga
- Gods and Men
- The Cult of the Dead
- Primitive Nature Worship
- River and Well Worship
- Tree and Plant Worship
- Animal Worship

Cosmogony - This was a pointless chapter. He says in the beginning "the Celts may thus have possessed the Heaven and Earth myth, but all trace of it has perished" but then proceeds to write a chapter about the topic.

-Sacrifice, Prayer, and Divination

-Tabu - I would recommend reading this chapter before the chapters on the Cúchulainn cycle or the Fionn Saga, they both make a lot of references to material in this one.

-Festivals

-Accessories of Cult

-The Druids: The author didn't seem to care for druids at all. He says that most of the information about them is exaggerated and that "their astronomy was probably of a humble kind and mingled with astrology; their natural philosophy a mass of cosmogonic myths and speculations; their theology was rather mythology; their moral philosophy a series of maxims such as are found in all barbaric communities."

-Magic

-The State of the Dead

-Rebirth and Transmigration
-Elysium

Maya says

The Pros and Cons of the Book:

The Cons:

1. The book was not intended for the beginner. Most of the time the author assumes you know what and who he is talking about.
2. It was written at an early stage when not a lot of archeological sites were found about the Celts.
3. Some of the information is a bit out dated or confusing.

-----> Conclusion: Don't read this as an introduction to the Celtic Religion.

The Pros:

1. It is one of the first books that give you a mix of information about the religion as opposed to just the history of the Celts alone or the history of the Druids alone.
2. It talks about many diverse things like how animals, water, rivers, wells figure in the worship of the Celts. It does not romanticize them. It talks about the festivals, the people and the Gods of Ireland, Brythons, and the Gauls. It talks about magic, transmigration and rebirth.
3. The preface tells you right off that the info in this book is only as current as the discoveries of archeology of the time, so you know right off that some information might need more digging or clarifying.
4. But most of all I loved the documentation of the information so that you can check it yourself.

----->Conclusion: A good book to read if you want to know the stages of research involved in the discoveries of the Celts and for information that some books actually shy away from mentioning.

-----> Over all conclusion: I would recommend this book to anyone who is not a beginner but is looking for information and things to compare and discover.

My opinion? 4 stars out of 5 because it is a tad out of date and if you have no background confusing (but not too confusing if you want to do a little research else where while you are reading)

Krista says

In a nutshell. Fascinating information, seems well researched but I wouldn't know. Old timey writing which made for a slog fest reading adventure, for me.

Lynn says

This book discusses the religion of the ancient celts. Much is taken from a text found in the 10th century and some burial sites. I think it might had been better for me to read read the legends first to really understand but I got something out of this text. The cleats interacted with many cultures over the years and adopted their gods and combined with theirs. Roman and Greek gods were adopted as were Vikings' and Christianity later. The Celts had some animals they worshiped but it died out as years went on. There was some human sacrifice because life was thought of as paying for life. This is hardly a text that explains a lot about the Celts but I know more now. I would like to read more about the Celts in another text.
