

REVIEWS

Barry Cunliffe, *Druids: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 145 pp., \$11.95 (paper).

The Druids are a persistently attractive subject for publications; almost everyone has a vague idea that Druids once inhabited western Europe and, for some, there is a perception that they still exist in current Druid groups that meet today all over the world. Despite its pocket size, Barry Cunliffe's new contribution to the ever-increasing body of published work on the subject presents an impressively incisive, yet highly accessible portal to a complex and multi-faceted theme. From its modest title and compact length, readers might expect this book simply to be a summary of current knowledge and conjecture. Yet Cunliffe manages to employ this arena to present us with new insights into this well-documented but highly enigmatic group of people whom Classical writers called Druids. It is a salutary lesson to all scholars that it is possible to put over a complicated subject in comparatively few well-chosen words.

The volume is divided into ten chapters, many of whose headings – “Altars steeped in human blood” and “Twilight in the far west” for instance – beckon the reader with their bewitching titles. Cunliffe begins with a sensible summary of what is and what is not valid evidence for the ancient Druids. He clearly presents their likely origins in the European Iron Age and traces their fate under the Romans and their presentation in the strange collection of early medieval “mythic” Irish texts compiled in Christian monasteries between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE. He navigates us through the maelstrom of Druidic rediscovery in the early modern and Renaissance periods, leading to the invention of new Druidic groups in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The book contains a terse and succinct demolition of such Druidic ancestral nonsense as that expounded for Wales by the eighteenth-century Glamorgan stonemason Iolo Morgannwg. The penultimate chapter takes a sensitive, respectful glance at current Druidic belief-systems and seeks gently to disentangle today's celebration of the summer solstice at Stonehenge from the genuinely ancient Druids whom we meet in the pages of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and Tacitus's *Annals*.

The close reading of Classical texts and the possible contribution of the travel-writer Pytheas in the late fourth century BCE are particularly illuminating. But I believe a disproportionate amount of limited space is taken up with the Irish medieval textual material, to the detriment of new and exciting archaeological material. For example, the

recent work on evidence for Druids in the Roman period – such at Chartres – indicates that far from being a spent and subdued force they were alive and kicking (albeit perhaps somewhat remodelled) in the later first and second centuries CE. New work on Gallo-British curse tablets, too, presents us with strong evidence for magic, and for seers who sometimes went by names or titles that hint at their Druidic nature.

It would be unreasonable to expect too much in the way of illustrations in such a modest volume. However, I would have found at least one map of relevant parts of Europe, with the names of prominent sites and tribal areas, very useful. A few errors have crept into the Further Reading section, notably M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, which was published in 1986 (not 1968), and her *Exploring the World of the Druids*, first published in 1997 (again not in 1968)! Notwithstanding these minor *caveats*, I will have no hesitation about recommending *Druids: A Very Short Introduction* to students at all levels of their study, and established scholars, too, will find much in here that provokes thought. One can ask no more of a pocket academic book than this.

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