

Fiona Davidson (Fionntulach)

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Profile

The Celtic Spiritual tradition has been the entire focus of Fiona Davidson's life for almost thirty years.

In the early eighties, she was a founder member of the Clan Dalriada, a Druid group then based on the Isle of Arran in Scotland. A few years later, she joined An Ceile De (The Culdee) order. Her ordination name is Fionntulach - Hill of Illumination.

From 1985 until 2002 she worked predominantly as a bard - a teller of the sacred legends of the Gael, a singer, poet and harper. During that time she toured the world performing and has recorded several albums. In the early nineties, in response to enquiries from some people in her audiences about the tradition underlying her work, she also began to offer occasional workshops.

Since becoming head of the Ceile De in 2002, she no longer has the time to tour as a performer, but still occasionally performs as part of a workshop or festival setting - or for people who really know where the bardic tradition comes from!

Today her time is divided between leading a contemplative life within the Order and teaching the Ceile De tradition.

Profile updated: 11 Jun 2005

Website: <http://www.ceilede.co.uk>

Published Works

Music, Song and Harp

"FONNSHEEN" - Watercolour Music FONCD013

Legend, Song and Harp

"THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS" - Watercolour Music WCMCD017

Available through specialist music stores or various traditional music web sites, such as <http://www.musicscotland.com>

She has also recorded several albums of Sacred Gaelic Chants, called Fonn, which are available on www.ceilede.co.uk.

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Interview

Interviewer: Emma Restall Orr

Interview date: 20 Jun 2005

Fiona, it is a real pleasure for me to have the opportunity to interview you here for the Network pages. I remember the first time we met, many years ago, when we were both giving a talk/performance at a goddess conference in Edinburgh. It was a small venue and not only your presence, but that of your ancestors and muses, filled the room. I am glad to know that so many others are now aware of your work.

Thank you ...!

Perhaps we can begin with a few definitions, because I am aware that we share a great deal in terms of spirituality, yet that also we walk very different roads. First then, do you consider yourself a Bard, and what does that powerful word mean to you?

I considered myself a Bard until about four years ago. Up until that time it was fully and wholly how I identified myself within the Universe. I have always been very traditional in my definition of Bard, perhaps because it is still a living word in the Gaelic culture here in Scotland, where I live – although it has meant different things at different stages in the history of that culture... A Bard, for me, is someone who plays the harp... sings... composes and recites poetry and tells Celtic legends.

Because my definition of the word is rooted in Druidism, the Bard is also a priestly figure. S/he mediates between the visible and the invisible realms and allows others to experience their Truths in a more powerful way than they perhaps had been able to before the doorway had been opened by voice and harp.

Bardism is a spiritual path in its own right, with its own practices and ceremonies. I have never seen it as a lower grade of Druidism, the way some people seem to. It was always taught to me as one of the many ways of being a Druid. It took, as we know, twelve years to attain the first degree in Bardism. Up to twenty to become a Filidh – or Doctor of Bardism.

I can appreciate that it is possible to work with the creative energies associated with Bardism using other tools, such as guitars... paint brushes, etc... The archetype of the Bard, however, is the former – and working with archetypes will always produce the most powerful results. It's interesting, though, how there is a sort of lending of the Bardic archetypal energy these days, carried through from the minstrel tradition, to the figure of the loon, wandering guitarist – the sort of early Bob Dylan singer/songwriter figure... definitely a modern translation of the ancient bard! I've seen this being worked with powerfully by modern Druids, such as Damh the Bard.

I've shifted archetypes now though. These days I am almost entirely involved in my work with the Order I belong to – An Ceile De.

I am aware that you are now bringing the Druid/Culdee Order within which you work into the open. Can I then lay, firstly, the word Druid before us and ask you to speak of the meaning it holds for you? And perhaps you would tell us a little about the Order - and could you elaborate a little on what you feel to be the main differences between Druid and Culdee?

For me, the importance of the word Druid lies in the image it immediately brings to mind in the group psyche. Although a few "people on the street" may still conjure up a picture of sacrifices on stone

altars, etc, undoubtedly it universally presents a picture of a person who is in touch in some way with the hidden mysteries behind Nature. I think these archetypes are important and can be worked with consciously and powerfully by modern Druids. I also think we have a great responsibility today not to damage that archetype through our representation of it, or it will stop lending us its power.

We talk a lot in our tradition about the **Oak Door of Mannanan** - a mythic entrance between this world and the Otherworld. In some people that door is locked... in others it is opening... in a few it is wide open. For me, a druid (connected as we know to the celtic words for oak) is someone who is familiar with crossing the threshold of that Oak door - in both directions. Whether his/her skill lies in the area of healing or bardism or whatever, s/he works that skill from a different perspective than say, a typical doctor or musician. For it to be Druidic healing or music, etc, there has to be an involvement with the Otherworld, which means an access to a deeper level of knowingness. We call that deeper level **éicse**.

This way of knowing is both potentially transformative and potentially dangerous – not only for the druid but also for the people s/he touches... access to these Otherworld energies can be a very powerful experience. This also demands a great deal of conscience and responsibility. I think in this day and age, it's important for people to decide whether or not they consider themselves to be following a Druidic path; ie. a spirituality inspired by the above ideas - or whether they consider themselves to be Druids; priests who are entirely dedicated to the pursuit of Higher Knowledge and the required deep inner life adjustments that requires. These can be powerful things to meditate on. In my case, for instance, it was always of crucial importance for me to think of my Bardism as a priestly function. Now, my role as a teacher of the Ceile De tradition comes very much into that category.

That leads me to the order I have given my self to now, which is Culdee - or **Ceile De** in Gaelic. The Ceile De (the Spouses. or servants, of God), legend says, came into being around 2000 years ago and, although it is rooted in the Druid tradition, it predominantly embraces the concept of a consciousness, called **Neart**, that is the sum of and also lies *beyond* the level of the many Gods and Goddesses.

For the Ceile De, there comes a time when we feel that, if we want to continue to grow spiritually, we have to begin to *dissolve*... There is an implication here that there is another level of consciousness that lies beyond that of the 'Oak Door' and the Otherworld. To gain access to that level, we have to surrender our attachment to things 'magical' and 'powerful'. It is about loss of Ego and the development of Unconditional Love. The archetype of this *par excellence* is The Christ.

The figure of the Christ in the Ceile De tradition embodies the notion that it is possible to serve Neart through a path of *unconditional* Love and detachment from ego. Indeed, there is a suggestion that unconditional love is not only the path toward an experience of Neart, but is also the only way to embody Its Truth in the world.

Modern Pagan Druids will argue, I guess, as to whether or not there was any emphasis on selfless love in pre-Christian Druidic theology. There seems to be little or no evidence that it was a ruling principle... If it plays any part in the theology of some modern Druids, I suspect that is because of the way the human psyche has changed in the last two thousand years or so.

It's a tough thing to aspire to – and we all know the Church hasn't always been a good example either! For me, the Ceile De represents the best of the Druidic love of the Earth and the Otherworld plus the power of transcendent Love, embodied in the Christ (or indeed Buddha) archetype.

...And so a Ceile De never throws out his/her relationship with the Otherworld and the many Divinities or the Sidhe... It is as if this realm is a place we journey through with great awareness and honour... being tested all the way by the beings who live there... The Otherworld, in the modern Ceile De tradition, is a mode of consciousness that is accessed via the *Imaginal* – yet is far more than the imagination. Artists have always understood this.

For many, myself included, Druidry is a fully Pagan religious tradition, with principal focus on the divine forces of nature. Yet there are many who blend its philosophy with Christian religious and theological vision, as you do with the Ceile De. Do you find that both Christians and Pagans express suspicion about your position?

I'm not taking a post-modern aesthetic stance and blending my idea of neo-Pagan Druidism with my idea of Christ-consciousness to create a modern smorgasbord... I'm following a specific Celtic Spiritual path that is two thousand years old, with its origins in Druidism, that has been practised continually in this country throughout that time.

I know that statement in itself is enough to arouse suspicion! But, that aside, The Ceile De tends to defy both categories...I have often joked that I stand, ready to be burnt, between two stakes - one prepared by the Church and one by modern Pagans! It would be hard to define the Ceile De as fully Pagan... and yet we are in no way typically Christian... We were outlawed by the Roman Church over 1500 years ago – the Pope in those days called us an abomination! Despite that, we were still a prominent presence as recently as the fifteenth century in the Celtic countries... And a lot of Druidic cosmology and spirituality was carried right through... So... which box do we fit into...?

With regard to religious stances and suspicions, I think there can be a subtle difference between holding a set of religious beliefs and leading a spiritual life. I think the former can often preclude the latter. As Jung said, more strongly than I would, perhaps, "if you want to guarantee you will never have a spiritual experience in your life - get a religion!"

Joseph Campbell once said that, at a World Congress of Religions, all the priests of the various religions were arguing over their respective dogmas... whilst the mystics – and by that he meant those whose beliefs were based on personal experience, rather than the need to conform to a specific group – all got on perfectly well. That's how it tends to be with me. My dearest soul-friends are Sufis, Christians, Pagans, New-agers. What we share is an understanding that what we love is a Great Mystery that is way above Name or Gender. How we go about exploring that relationship is, to a very great degree, a matter of personal taste and what works for us.

Having said that... There are needs that come and go in different world eras and undoubtedly the need to reconnect in a spiritual way with the Earth has caused the current re-emergence of a Pagan spirituality, as well as a greater emphasis on eco-spirituality in other traditions. It has also contributed to a strong backlash against so-called Christian values, which many Pagans (including myself, once) tend to view as a major cause of patriarchal and un-worldly spirituality... That may well be true in some cases – but it seems not to have been the case in the very early Celtic church, which glows with a lyrical mix of love for the Earth, the mythic and magical and a deep searching need to understand the qualities of the enlightened soul, such as goodness, compassion, gentleness and selflessness... This latter emphasis I have to confess I missed in my Pagan days... you see... I want it all! If I lean too far towards the Earth only, I lose my spirit, if I forsake the Earth, I lose my soul.

Because it is hard to find a place of belonging in either the broader Christian or Pagan community, what would be your advice to one who finds their path touching both the Christian and the Pagan within Druidry?

There was a time when Christians felt very isolated and threatened in a Pagan world. When I found Paganism (£\$&*! years ago!) it was the other way around (although not in quite as life-threatening a way!). It was certainly hard to find other Pagans... Things change... These days its surprising how many people seem to find a need and a value in swimming in the pool where both streams converge. My quick advice would be : www.ceilede.co.uk!

The longer advice would be to try to live in and from the following inner place - I think its impossible for anyone living in the 21st century to be unaffected by both the good and the bad that has coloured

our psyches in the last two thousand years and in the time before that, whether we like it or not. I don't think Pagans and Christians are as different as we think under the skin... under our need to wear specific mental/religious outfits.

I would image that you, Bobcat, think of yourself as a Pagan of this millenium and wouldn't particularly want to live exactly as they may have done in the days B.C.E...

Similarly, I think of myself as being the product of the entire spiritual adventuring of the Celtic group-soul, from the days of the megalithic people to the days of the Druids, to the days of the Celtic saints - they have all played a part in my soul-journey. I could never believe it possible - as I guess most "Churchians" do believe - that the entire spirituality previous to the last two millenia should be thrown out as mistaken or invalid.

I would say to others out there who feel the same way that it is more than possible to reconcile "Heaven" and "Earth" within ourselves... I would go so far as to say that is the major spiritual challenge of our times. Paganism has been a healthy reaction to some of the excesses of the Church, etc - but we needn't throw the "Holy Baby" out with the bathwater! Christ and the Goddess - what a beautiful wedding feast that would be! As the sufi poet, Hafiz, says - "The song of Venus moves Christ to dance"... I often use the term The Pagan Christ, just to challenge people, Pagan and Christian alike, to think out of their boxes. If you want to keep your magical sidhe side and your dirt-pretty wildness without losing the holy love of the saint.. then go for it! St Francis did! Never forsake the deeply felt heart's-calling and where it takes you... however out of the herd you sometimes feel. What you resist persists, somewhere lurking in your shadow.. so embrace everything - and be a true pantheist!

Can you speak of the key elements of your spiritual practice? What are your sources of inspiration and clarity in terms of theology, mythology and teachings?

The key four-times-a-day spiritual practices in the Ceile de are largely contemplative. Some use ancient Gaelic chants called **Fonn** - a word which means song, state of mind and the land. There are also very inspired ways of working within the Temple of Nature, using streams or trees... rocks or whatever, that speak in the moment and tell us how to proceed with a specific practice. There is a great emphasis in the teaching on methods of gaining access, through time, to an inner initiatory stream of knowingness (the éicse I mentioned earlier) that inspires us how to work with the energies in Nature.

My primary source of inspiration and inner strength is what flows, through Nature, from the Beyond. I tap into that (on a good day!) by giving It all my love and attentiveness.... Like one does to a lover... When you're deeply in love, the Beloved is more important to you than you are. My Beloved is the Great Mystery that lies both behind and within Form. I think of this blessed, sacred Land and every being in it as the face of The Beloved.

Are there any particular temples or landscapes that personally inspire you, lifting your soul to communion with deity?

The landscape of where I live! (I'm very lucky!) I cannot live in towns. There is a quality in the air around the mountains of Scotland that seems to be filled with luminosity. Perhaps because my soul and the soil here are made of the same stuff, my homeland nourishes me more than any other place I know.

I think I could also live in Ireland... the land there speaks a similar, though subtly different, soul-language. That, I feel, is one of the powers of working a tradition that is rooted in one's own land. It connects you with the power of the ancestors that you mentioned at the start of our conversation.

Perhaps we can talk a little about the place of stories (old and new) in your own spirituality and in that of your tradition? And do you have a favourite story?

Sacred stories are the language and teaching of the soul. It is the Feminine – the psyche's - way of teaching. It never works to explain them too much. I think its OK to say what they mean to us personally at this point in time - but never to feel one has the definitive explanation of them. Definitions are important too, but they're the God's department! *Mothers* tell stories – myth comes from the Otherworld and from the Sidhe – the children of the Goddess.

They are so important to us today particularly, because we have become so left-brained. We undervalue the power of the *Imaginal* – that place where the visionary and the spiritual world meet and merge. The Imaginal is the Otherworld! And myth is nothing other than a container for the tremendous energy of that place. Prolonged exposure to its power can change us forever. It is important, however, to balance that exposure with a real sense of *natural* morality – or we can do ourselves and the world harm. Otherworld Power + Goodness = Wisdom.

One of my favourite legends is the **Wooring of Angus Og**. For me (at this point in time!), it tells the story of what happens to someone when they are having a spiritual awakening. Angus will do anything to be united with his Love... even face the terrifying unknown and death itself. I don't see the love in this story as "relationship-type love" – because his lover is called "Yew Berry"... that is Death-in-Eternity! Neither do I see his transformation into a swan to be with her as merely that. They are moving together, through love, into a higher state of consciousness. All over the world, the swan in mythology symbolises this. When I was younger (sigh...) that legend had a far more personal, romantic meaning for me... The beauty of any Myth is that your understanding and interpretation of it can change and grow as you do. It isn't fixed like mere story, or religious dogma... it is a shapeshifter...

You said earlier that you are no longer a Bard. Have you given it up altogether?

No... never...! But I can no longer give all my energy to that. I will always harp and carp occasionally for people who really know where I'm coming from. I gave it up full time for two reasons – firstly, the previous head of the Ceile De passed over and the order, which had always been quietly just chugging along in the Highlands and Ireland... was in danger of completely falling apart. Its older members, including the previous Head, preferred anonymity than the danger of being absorbed into what they perceived as the generic pseudo-Celtic soup of some aspects of the "New Age". But at the same time, its members were dying faster than they were being replaced! I wanted to hold safe what we have in the Ceile De – but also make it more available for others who sincerely wish to follow a deep and challenging real path of transformation with as rich a method as, say, Buddhism or Sufism.... But it's ours... it belongs to here...

But anyway... I digress... back to bardism..! My other reason for giving up full time bardism was already slowly taking its toll on me when you and I first met all those years ago. I had got sucked into the world of the professional touring musician. My life was becoming a life of contracts, airports. To be honest, I didn't always get on with the people I rubbed shoulders with in that world... it was too late night-y... too boozy.. and it could be very false at times. At best, I was unable to fit in. At worst, I could only fit in by being false to myself, which was starting to make me ill. I came to see that it was harming the very spiritual life that had led me to it in the first place. I needed to look at that very hard... I needed to come home...

But I will always love the bardic tradition – and my harp... My work has been fairly well known in traditional music and Celtic harp circles for almost twenty years...It's ironic, I guess, that I only seemed to become well known in modern Druid circles towards the last few years of my Bardic career.

When you play the harp, it seems to me that your body blends with the instrument, so that your movements become the dance of one soul. Have you always been a natural musician? When did you first take up the harp?

I guess I am a "natural musician" in that I've had virtually no training... I've had about four harp lessons in my life! My inspiration and true teacher doesn't live in this world, he taught me from that between place behind the oak door.... A trained harpist would deduce from watching me play that my invisible teacher didn't place too much store on technique, either!

I was a late starter on the harp. It came entirely out of my spiritual life. I've been three kinds of musician in my life. Firstly, in the late 70's I was (almost) a rock musician. I was offered a recording contract with EMI and everything! Turning that down was a pivotal moment in my life. I decided that leaving the green world (they wanted me to move to London to be "groomed") was too big a price to pay. There seemed to be something dangerous and false in that world. I wouldn't have been strong enough then to survive it.

Then I was very serious with the classical guitar for a few years. I had just got to the stage of teaching and doing recitals when I got my first harp – and *WHAM...!* That was it. I found something that I could use to straddle all my worlds. It brought everything together for me – my spiritual life, my love of music and, through exploring the bardic tradition, I discovered a new passion - in the form of storytelling.

I like your image of the dance of one soul. That's what it is for me. The harp is my "other half" when I play. It is the focus, like an icon or an altar, for all my deepest feelings for the Divine in all things. As I move away from bardism as my primary focus, I edge with great humility towards the deep wish to make whatever is in front of me at the time my altar in that same way.

Is music an integral part of telling stories? Can you speak a little of the importance of blending the two, both for yourself and within the tradition?

The ancient Chinese say that words are of the order of this world, whereas music is at the hidden source. The Gaels imply the same in their mythology... and more... that music lies in some mysterious way (that modern physics knows well) at the heart of the manifest world. Music also adds colour to what is being said – and helps the tale-teller find a new dimension within her/his expression. Because music has always taken me *right there*, it helps me tremendously to mediate the sacred when I tell legends, rather than to be an actor telling stories – there's a subtle but hugely important difference.

Much is said of the extraordinary memory of the old Bards. How much value do you place on the power of memory and the discipline needed to extend it? Do you ever write a story down?

I use pen and paper when I first write them out in my own words – and when other people want to learn them. I know that, within the bardic tradition, memory is a way of approaching the Oak Door... but that would be a whole new conversation in its own right...! Suffice to say that, in my own experience, memory lives in a part of our psyche that opens us up to the Deep... the Ancestral...

Can you say something of the role and importance of women within both Druidry and the traditions of the Bard?

I think that's an important question. People have told me I'm an important role model for women because I seem to come over in some positive way that is useful for that. I have no idea what that is... The shocking truth is - I have never thought of myself as a woman – I am a human being.

However (if it doesn't sound too contradictory) most women – and men well-integrated with their anima – are far better able to connect with the aspects of life that are suffering these days, those values we associate with the Feminine, such as feeling, intuition, communication...The Earth Herself... and on and on... I needn't identify them all on a site such as this, people will know what I mean. The more equally well-integrated women we have in any field the more complete the human race will become. We need more powerful female archetypes to inspire us – powerful, though, in the sense that they affect us deeply – not that they make us feel a need for power...

Who has inspired you upon your path? Are there other musicians, storytellers, teachers, writers, singers and priests who have guided and lit your way, and any whom you would recommend to readers of these words?

I have learnt from people... because of people and also despite people. Amongst the human beings I most admire are still the first Pagan teachers I ever had. They have never shrunk in my eyes in all the years I've known them. There is a goodness that shines out of them that has always warmed my heart. Even to think of them takes me to a warm soul-place.

I feel in love with the Celtic harp after hearing Alan Stivell (Renaissance of the Celtic Harp) – so he has to be on the list. The work of Mythologist Joseph Campbell had a profound effect on me. His book – and also video interview - "The Power of Myth". I like Lisa Gerard and the way she experiments with her voice – its good to have permission not to sing "sweetly and prettily" all the time. She's good for people who want to find their inner Banshee! Loreena McKennit, who sounds like she loves God when she sings...

I am also deeply in love with Myrddin, Amergin, Christ and St Francis!

My inner teachers who walk the Way with me are hard task masters. But I aspire to what they hold up before me as my potential. I think reading the spiritual writings of other world traditions has also helped me tremendously to understand my own – and I can recommend it to anyone. I've learnt a lot from the Gurdieff tradition too...reading Ouspensky (a pupil of Gurdieff) is a good antidote to the self delusion that is always a danger when we follow any path.

The best teacher any of us will ever have is your own inner voice and conscience... The best musician any of us will ever have to teach us is the wild Green Harper within...

Is there a piece of advice you would pass on to one beginning the path of the harper or storyteller?

Love your craft with all your heart... give yourself to it with all your being.. and the Otherworld will, without a doubt, come to help you...

But always remember that your art is a means to an end – and that end is not success or money – it is Self-realisation and Self-disclosure. When you are able to be your True Self in front of an audience you will be as good as you're going to get – skill is secondary to that. However... the catch is... when you are brave enough to be your True Self, you may find you don't need to be anything anymore.....

But do whatever you do anyway – not for love of the thing you do – but for Love...

Thank you so much, Fiona. It is a pleasure to share with you.

Neart : In ancient Gaelic, neart, meaning both energy and void, was one of the terms for the Great Spirit that moved through and lay behind the many Gods and Goddesses. ([return to text](#))