

The Welsh Plygain Through Time

(the meaning of which will be apparent to those who read on)

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After reading this little treatise, ask yourself:
Do you resonate with the Welsh Plygain? And are you, perhaps, a lapsed Druid?

The Plygain is a dawn candlelight service of harmonized singing — traditional carols of worship whose origin goes back into the dim mists of Celtic and Druid history. Take a moment and watch a modern Plygain: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwCIDQ34hk>. (This doesn't depict a full morning service, just the singing.) The Plygain in mid-Wales has been recorded as existing in the 17th century, but something about it embodies ancient Druid rites performed at dawn and dusk, at the two solstices. These are the extremes of the day and year, the shift points of time on two levels, analogized to the human extremities of birth and death. On a spiritual level initiation to Vision comes with a death, the initiatory death that precedes a birth into higher consciousness.

On another level of symbolism, appreciated by Druids, the concept resembles the cyclic process of the tree, from seed to fruit with the sap moving up and down through the tree throughout the seasons.

In recent years the Welsh Plygain is experiencing a resurgence. Arfon Gwilym and his associates are reviving the practice and recording the remembered carols still performed in country churches, and have produced a book called [*Hen Garolau Cymru*](#).¹ A memorable revival service was held in Anglesey in 2010, at the church of Santes Ceinwen in Llangeinwen, Inys Mon (click image for link):



These spiritual services in Wales retain old ways adapted to orthodox Christianity. They are humble and sincere, devout and undeniable in their beauty and simplicity. And what

¹ See <http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/277> and <http://www.sainwales.com/store/sain/sain-scd-2599>.

does the term mean? Ply-gain is a two-part construct in which “-gain” means song, related to *cain*, *caint*, *cainte*, and *cant* (as in *canting*, song singing.) The root appears in the word incantation, which is a sung or recited hex, charm, or verse. To recant is to unsay. It’s also related to *ken* or *kenning*, which involves perception and language versifying. “Ply” means “cock”, as in a rooster, a rooster cock-a-doodle-doing at dawn, singing the song of awakening, or sunrise, life and light. The Plygain is of ancient origins. Within Christian spirituality which the Plygain is adapted to, dawn is the light of God. God appears at sunrise, and like the awakening birds we sing. A candle is lit that symbolizes the solar light and the spirit of God. It is the soul of the world.

The Plygain songs are homilies, carols, often performed around Christmas and usually in three-part harmony — blended voices in the ancient Brythonic language of Cymry. The Plygain in Wales is related to the traditional Oiel Verrey performed on the Isle of Man (early 19th century), thus suggesting these are ancient and widespread cultural practices, attributable to Celts and Druids.²

Sometimes the rite is performed at dusk, when the sun is setting through the forest, glinting through the trees. During the low, diffuse, and muted angles of dawn and dusk, one can look right into the sun and directly experience the glory and transformational energy of the solar source, the grand deity. When this is ritually practiced, the sun can activate the inner eye, the seventh chakra, the Pineal Gland which although buried deep in the brain contains optical tissue and secretes hormones that regulate other glands in the body. One hormone is the neurotransmitter serotonin, which like melatonin is activated by sunlight. The effect of increased serotonin on perception, which is visionary and consciousness expanding, can be imitated by serotonin imitators present in certain shamanic plant preparations like *ayahuasca*. It’s probable that the Druid’s sacramental use of mistletoe and holly (which grow on the sacred oak; “druid” means “oak seer”) involves visionary brews made from these plants. Mistletoe stays green throughout the Christmas season. In folklore it invites the kiss (the spiritual union of opposites). It is the Green Man still alive on the comatose oak in winter and it was harvested in midsummer for its magical properties (some studies have found DMT in it, but the amount assayed seems time-specific).

The preparation of mistletoe elixirs was the work of the Druid priest. The libations drunk during the Plygain are probably a late echo of the sacramental drink of Druid rites. The Plygain singing likewise echoes the mantric incantations performed to resonate and open the mind and soul to the vibrational energies of dawn, solstice, and spiritual ecstasy.

That “ply” means “cock” (rooster) is probably a humorous pun on that raucous morning alarm clock, and the meaning is better expressed simply as “dawn.” The singers in the Plygain incantate the “Dawn Song”, which recalls the meaning of the ancient Vedas composed and chanted long ago in far off India. Those, too, were dawn songs of spiritual awakening. The Vedic sages also stared into the sun (safely) at dawn and dusk to activate spiritual awakening (as mentioned, this was more of a biology-based technique than a baseless belief). A connection between the Celts and India may be historically and ethnically valid since the Celts and early Germanic groups were western expressions of the Neolithic Indo-Aryan tribes that were spread throughout the vast Indo-Eurasian continent.

² See http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/catalog/d010_oe.htm.

We can imagine the ancient Druid bards, rising to greet the dawn and divine the day, much like Sencha the Druid (Mac Aillella) did during Cuchulain's war in the Ulster Cycle of ancient Irish myths (circa the 1st century AD).



This Druid priest was Cuchulain's teacher in the many arts. He was a poet, historian, and counselor to kings. His name became (or already was) a symbol of the Druid priest's bardic function or role. "Sen-cha" (or sen-chan) means "chief of the old lore."³ The root "chan" or "cain" (or "gain" in later Welsh) relates on one hand (as cyn, kyn, chinn), to "chief" or "head" and on the other hand (as "cain," "cant") to "song, singer, incantation, and poetry" (as previously described). It is, of course, seen in the word Plygain. The "sen" part of the name morphed later into the Gaelic name Sean or John, but early on meant "old spiritual lore," or "holy, sanctified." We see this latter meaning in how, in the Cornish Brythonic language that is related to Welsh, "Sen" means "Saint." As the root that relates to the name "John", it retains the sense of "John = gracious gift of God."⁴ Dawn *is* the gracious gift of God. God is experienced in the gracious gift of dawn (even the cock knows that — just ask my girlfriend! ☺).

Staring into the dawn light, activated by the magic sacramental brew, singing Druidic *iquaros*⁵ to resonate the consciousness with the transcendent, gathering with like-minded acolytes in a candlelit ceremony at a propitious time of the year and day — all of these elements are players in the ancient Druidic rites of shamanic initiation and

³ Senchan Torpeist (7th-century AD) shares this moniker and role as Chief Druid.

⁴ The varieties of "John" in Celtic languages includes Sean, Siôn, Shawn, Siôni (Johnny), Sian, the rare Zhahn, and the nickname Jack.

⁵ Songs chanted by South American shaman during ayahuasca healing and vision ceremonies.

awakening, and are reflected in a muted modern form in the Welsh Plygain. It is the Dawn Singing that the Senchan (lore singer) would facilitate. The spiritual vision that animated the ancient Druids runs forward through time's contingencies to re-manifest like a perennial bloom in the rite of the Plygain. And poets and mystics of all times can tune into that frequency, for the secret resides within the soul of each human. It's the same secret the resides in the dawn sun.

Old Druid Song

I hear you're goin' to the stars today
I got nothin' to do
They say there is no other way
so I'm goin' with you

We will fly into the sky
we all live and we all die
and baby maybe we will see
what's true // eternity, eternity, eternity

The Green Man's coming up around the bend
sittin' in the tree
He sees the beginning and he sees the end
it's all a mystery

He will never tell you why
He does not live and does not die
and every flower is a star
like you

There is a cottage in the forest glen
waiting for you
You hear the music and you do the dance
drink deep the magic brew

Time will fly, bye bye
we will laugh and we will cry
and baby maybe we will see
Eternity...
Eternity...
Eternity...

—Zhahn Siencyn, May 23-25, 2014