

# WILL-OF-THE-LAND: Wilderness Among Primal Indo-Europeans\*

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Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why ought man to value himself as more than an infinitely small composing unit of the one great unit of creation? . . . The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

John Muir 1916<sup>1</sup>

When the Scottish born John Muir embraced the wilderness movement in America he was answering the call of his cultural tradition. Muir and the Scottish peoples are members of the Celtic division of the Indo-European linguistic group. The ancient Celts worshipped Nature. Theirs was a spiritual tradition born of "Nature Awe."<sup>2</sup> For them Nature was alive with the same creative life force that humans share. Nature spirits animated springs, rivers, forests, and mountains. The Celtic conception of *will power* was extended wholly to nature, both animate and inanimate, which was recognized to have a compelling *will-force* "akin to that which impelled man . . . Even stationary nature — the everlasting hills and the solid earth — was endowed with feeling, will, and thought. All the mental powers that man found controlling his actions were unconsciously transferred to nature."

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The drawings which accompany this article are Celtic designs adapted from Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

In writing of his Scottish boyhood and his fondness for “everything that was wild,”<sup>4</sup> John Muir demonstrates a cultural predilection favoring this will-force. This ancient Celtic notion of *will* and *will-force* is akin to the term *wild*. Wilderness historian Roderick Nash tells us that “Etymologically, the term [wilderness] means ‘wild-deor-ness,’ the place of wild beasts.”<sup>5</sup> Nash argues that cognate terms such as *wild* and *wildern* present an image of an environment alien to humans which is outside of civilization’s order.

Nash makes it clear that “the root seems to have been ‘will’ with a descriptive meaning of self-willed, willful, or uncontrollable. From ‘willed’ came the adjective ‘wild’ used to convey the idea of being lost, unruly, disordered, or confused.”<sup>6</sup> Recognizing *will* or *willed* as the root for *wild*, Nash focuses upon the Old English term *deor* (animal or deer) stating that it “was prefixed with wild to denote creatures not under the control of man.”<sup>7</sup> While this may be correct for the selected wild derivatives — *wilder* and *wildern* — it fails to deal adequately with the “ness” suffix. “Ness” is likewise a term derived from Old Gothic languages. It is found in Old Norse, Swedish, Danish and low German in various forms. It appears in Old English as *naess*. *The Oxford English Dictionary* explains that later in Middle English it was “apparently retained only in place-names, from which the later use is probably derived,” and that the variant “ness may be due either to the understressed position in place-names, to dialect variation, or to Scandinavian influence.”<sup>8</sup> This usage may explain the deceptiveness of the term wilderness to which Nash alludes. He explains that the “ness” suggests a quality “that produces a certain mood or feeling in a given individual and, as a consequence, may be assigned by that person to a specific place.”<sup>9</sup>

A *ness* is defined as “a promontory headland, or cape.”<sup>10</sup> Walter Skeat concurs with this definition, explaining that the term was preserved in place-names, e.g. Tot-ness and Sheerness.<sup>11</sup> We also see it preserved in Scotland — Inverness and Loch Ness — both of which are areas that came under Scandinavian or Viking influence. Skeat further explains that in Anglo-Saxon, *ness* appears as *naes* or *nes* and is defined first as “the ground”; secondly as “a promontory, headland, as in Beowulf,”<sup>12</sup> that is, a prominence of land or a prominent mass of land.

Wilderness then means “self-willed-land” or “self-willed-place” with an emphasis upon its own intrinsic volition. The middle syllable *der* of wilderness possibly represents the preposition-article combination “of the.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, in wil-der-ness, there is a “will-of-the-land”; and in wildeor, there is “will of the animal.” A wild animal is a “self-willed animal” — an undomesticated animal — similarly, wildland is “self-willed land.” The word *wold* also combines the meaning of *will* with forest land or open, unoccupied country.<sup>14</sup> In these cases, the will, willful, uncontrollable state or elements is present. This “willed” conception is itself in opposition to the controlled and ordered environment which is characteristic of the notion of civilization. While control, order, domination and management are true of civilization and domestication, they are not essentials of primal culture. The primal peoples of northern Europe were not bent upon dominating and controlling all environments. Thus, their “will-of-the-land” conception — wilderness. — demonstrates a recognition of land in and for itself.

The animistic concept of spirits of nature is itself a recognition of the will inherent in nature. Such religious beliefs are often labeled pagan and “primitive.” But to understand Muir’s wilderness convictions and the Celtic culture’s deepest roots of wilderness preservation, we must examine the ancient Indo-European heritage. Nature worship among primal Indo-Europeans evidences a traditional theme of sacred natural places, free from desecration by humans and their technology. Such sacred natural places were wilderness in the deepest sense; they were imbued with *will-force*, — willed, willful, uncontrollable — and with spirit. Thus, they held about them a sacred mystery — a numinous presence. It is from this tradition that the “will-of-the-land” — wilderness — concept emerges.



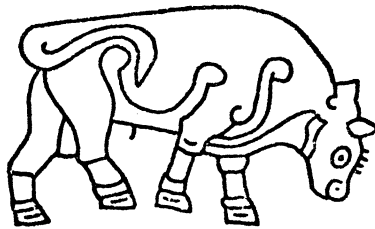
Among ancient Indo-European cultures, there are many examples of wild sanctuaries. There was a “tree of the tribe.”<sup>15</sup> In an article on “Tree Worship,” John Taylor describes Indo-European Oak worship which began with the appearance of forest-environments following the last glaciation. “In a purely animistic strain, the early Greeks believed the oak to be inhabited by a resident entity, the nymph or hamadryad.”<sup>16</sup> The Greek *temenos* was a sacred precinct beneath the branches of the oak. Sacred oak groves among the Italic peoples were inhabited by a sacred numen. Celtic and Gothic peoples believed that humankind was born from elements of the oak, that the oak was an instrument of divination. The notion of a “World Tree” is found among both the Celts and the Goths. Ward Rutherford explains that “The ‘World Tree’ was a centre of gathering where the Druids... met to pass judgment and to make their most solemn decisions. This assembly, no doubt itself held under trees... demonstrates the sacred role of trees in the Celtic culture.”<sup>17</sup>

The Baltic-Slavic peoples maintained an early animistic notion centered upon forces called *siela*.<sup>18</sup> These silvan spirits guarded the forest; they would not allow people to whistle or to shout there. They also protected animals, particularly the bear.<sup>19</sup> Taylor contends that “veneration of the oak continued among the northern Europeans until their sacred oaks literally came under the proverbial axe of the Christians.”<sup>20</sup>

Among the Celts, the sacred grove is known as a *nemeton*. These wilderness sanctuaries were located deep within the forest, and the people made long arduous pilgrimages to them in order to worship. The word *nemeton* contains the root *nem*, related to Breton *nemu* or “the heavens” in the sense of the Other World (paradise on Earth). A *ton* is a place, hence *nemu + ton* yields “Heaven-place.”<sup>21</sup> It is significant to note that these Celtic sanctuaries were unadorned, thereby free from artificial modification or manipulation.<sup>22</sup> Nora Chadwick explains that:

It has been shown that life in towns or cities was foreign to Celtic tradition, and some of the sanctuaries of the Celts reflect a ritual preoccupation with the natural environment.<sup>23</sup>

To demonstrate this point, she cites Lucan who asserted that “the Gaulish druids dwell in *nemora alta* (‘deep groves’) and *incolitis locis* (‘solitary places’).<sup>24</sup> Finally, Chadwick confirms that Celtic worship was free from the use of built temples. The temple itself derived from the sacred grove or *temenos* which, strictly, meant a piece of land apportioned to a god.”<sup>25</sup> Furthering this cosmological doctrine of Nature Awe, sacred groves — *nemetons* — were regarded among the Celts as a “piece of heaven on earth . . .”



### HEATHEN, HEATHENISM, HEATH

Heathen is a word common to all Gothic languages, and is used in the sense ‘non-Christian pagan.’ This usage demonstrates that it could only have arisen with the introduction of Christianity. A direct derivative of the Gothic *haipi*, heath — as in ‘dweller on the heath’ — heathen reflects the primal religious practices of northern Europeans. Heathenism is defined as “the religious or moral system of heathens; heathen practice or belief; paganism.”<sup>26</sup> The term pagan derives from *paganus* which originally meant a villager — rural or rustic person. Furthermore, as Christianity became the religion of the towns, those persons of rural districts which retained the ancient deities became known as “pagan heathens.” The impetus of these primal traditions — heathenism — becomes clear upon investigating the word *heath*. Characterized by the heather, this Gothic term means “Open uncultivated ground; an extensive tract of waste land; a wilderness . . .”<sup>27</sup> The term *moor* is a common synonym; less common are glade and grove. Northern Europeans worshipped on the heath, or in the grove — that is, in the wilderness. The spiritual leaders — Druids among the Celts — spent much of their time on the heath, in the groves, thus, in the wilderness.

In consequence, a heathen is one who worships upon the heath: moor, glade, grove, wild waste or wilderness. Heathenism is thus the religion of wilderness: nature worship. Further demonstrating this conclusion are the remarks of the Christian monk Gildas (c.560) who refused to enumerate the “diabolical” customs of the primal culture, stating, “Nor will I call out upon the mountains, fountains, or upon rivers, which now are subservient to the use of men, but once were an abomination and destruction to them, and to which the blind people paid divine honour.”<sup>28</sup>

*Nemetons* were wilderness sanctuaries where nature worship occurred. The sacred grove was unmodified and it continued in its wild — willful, willful, uncontrollable — condition. Thus, the will-of-the-land, its spirit, its sacred *numinous* character manifested itself. The land was holy and the wild conditioned the spiritual, sacred experience imbuing the people with a sense of the sublime and the *numen*. According to Keary (1882), this “early” connection with the land is a form “of intimacy with those far-off branches of the tree or with that unsearched mountain summit which were then his heaven.”<sup>29</sup> Among the Celts, *nemetons* — sacred groves — continued until replaced with temples as a result of the overpowering Roman influence.

In Gothic languages the words for “place of worship” or “temple” often had the meaning “grove.” Demonstrating this, “The Old High German *harug* is rendered in Latin as *fanum*, *Lucas*, *nemus* and the Old English *hearg*, commonly used for ‘temple’ or ‘idol’, had the meaning ‘grove’.”<sup>30</sup> — cf. Old English *bearu* (‘forest, holy grave, temple’) and Gothic *alhs* — temple, ‘holy grove.’ Likewise, Scandinavian religion was practiced in sacred precincts or groves known as *irminsuls*. Keary explains that the nature worship of Indo-Europeans “honoured the *sacred silence* which reigns about the grove.”<sup>31</sup>

These sacred groves were periodically the site for community worship — particularly during the earth festival days. For example, among the Celts, the Beltane (May-day), Samhain (Hallowe’en), etc. When these earth festivals were discontinued, in most instances as the result of compulsion by imperial force, the primal culture disintegrated. Rutherford explains that,

If we can detect a moment at which such change begins, it surely must be that at which urbanization begins and ‘the city’ in the true sense — as a machine for living in — emerges as centre. This with its communalized services brings men into a real interdependence with each other, a truly institutionalized life begins. But there is also a practical point involved, too: the concentration of population into a smaller area means they will expect to conduct worship within that area; they will no longer be prepared to make pilgrimages into the heart of the countryside. They are now the centre; formerly it was the religious sanctuary, the *nemeton*, drawing families to worship in it from over a wide area.<sup>32</sup>

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Demonstrating a non-anthropocentric perspective, the Breton war leader Brennus conquered Delphi and “laughed aloud on entering a temple to see that the Greeks represented their gods in human form.”<sup>33</sup> The Celts clearly disliked human representations of divinities, preferring Nature in its “wild” — willful, willful, uncontrollable — condition as manifested in the *nemeton* — wilderness sanctuary.

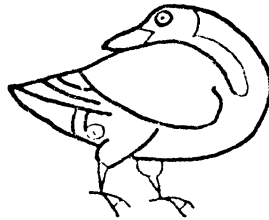
Furthermore, it was in these *nemetons* — sacred groves — where the Druids, the Celtic shamans, learned their lore and developed their wisdom. This wisdom of the spirits of wood and stream, leaf and flower, is the foundation of the kinship between humanity and wild nature. This ancient wisdom constituted Druidic ecological ethics. Kinship with land and

its continued health are central themes of the Celtic worldview.

True to this Celtic heritage, John Muir devoted himself to wilderness. Something of a “wild man of the woods,” he practiced this heathenism in ways which the more domesticated could not understand. When Emerson visited Yosemite, Muir implored him writing:

Do not thus drift away with the mob while the spirits of these rocks and waters hail you after long waiting as their kinsman and persuade you to closer communion. . . I invite you to join me in a month’s worship with Nature in the high temples of the great Sierra Crown beyond our holy Yosemite. It will cost you nothing save the time and very little of that for you will be mostly in eternity. . . In the name of a hundred cascades that barbarous visitors never see. . . in the name of all the spirit creatures of these rocks and of this whole spiritual atmosphere Do not leave us *now*. With most cordial regards I am yours in Nature, John Muir<sup>34</sup>

Dwelling on the Sierra heaths and moors, John Muir rediscovered the primal mind — the ancient wisdom. And in that wild beauty and sweetness which is the primal mind, Muir lived his name; for you see in Scotland, the dialect variation for moor — wilderness — is *muir*. ↪



#### ENDNOTES:

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1. John Muir, *A thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1981) pp. 138-139.
2. The notion of “Nature Awe” as a religious tradition embracing wilderness is posited in my article “Nature Awe: Celtic Views of Nature” which originally appeared in *Western Wildlands* (Missoula: Montana Forest and Conservation Station, School of Forestry, University of Montana, vol. 9, no. 1, spring 1983).
3. Alex MacBain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917), p. 21.
4. John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 3.
5. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Third Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 1
8. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971), p. 1914: 98.

9. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, p. 1.
10. *OED*, p. 1914:98.
11. Walter Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898) p. 391.
12. *Ibid.*
13. This general observation is recognizable in Gothically derived English words where “er” acts as a reflexive prepositional suffix in forming descriptive nouns — e.g., *wilder* which literally means “of the” wild.
14. *OED*, p. 3807:131.
15. Charles Francis Keary, *Outlines of Primitive Belief Among the Indo-European Races* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1882), pp. 65 & 69.
16. John Walter Taylor, “Tree Worship,” *The Mankind Quarterly*, Vol. 20, nos. 1&2, (1979).
17. Ward Rutherford, *The Druids and their Heritage* (London: Gordon and Cremonesi 1978) p. 69.
18. Marija Gimbutus, *The Balts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), p. 19.
19. Jan Machal, “Slavic Mythology,” vol. III in *The Mythology of All Races*, Louis Herbert Gray, editor (Boston: Marshall Jones Co.), p. 261.
20. John Walter Taylor, “Tree Worship,” p. 120.
21. Jean Markale, *Celtic Civilization*, (London: Gordon and Cremonesi, 1977) pp. 295-296.
22. Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World* (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1979), p. 88. Also cf. Ward Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
23. Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 142.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *OED*, p. 1277: 170-171.
27. *Ibid.*
28. MacBain, *Celtic Mythology and Religion*, p. 86.
29. Keary, *Outlines of Primitive Belief*, p. 38.
30. E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion to the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1964) pp. 236-250.
31. Keary, *Outlines of Primitive Belief*, p. 38.
32. Rutherford, *The Druids and Their Heritage*, p. 140.
33. Markale, *Celtic Civilization*, p. 67.
34. Stephen Fox, *John Muir and His Legacy: The American Conservation Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), p.5.