

| The DD Q&A: Erynn Rowan Laurie |



by Druidic Dawn Community

Erynn Rowan Laurie lives in Everett, Washington and has been involved in the Pagan communities of the Pacific Northwest since 1984. An independent Pagan Scholar and one of the founders of the Celtic Reconstruction movement, she writes and teaches on many aspects of Celtic Paganism, Druidism and Filidecht. She offers readings, consultations and other services by appointment.

DD: Hello Erynn. First of all I'd like to thank you for taking the time to answer some of the community's questions. Welcome!

ERL: Hi Jenn, and greetings to everyone at Aontacht and Druidic Dawn! Thanks for giving me the opportunity to talk with you all.

DD: How did you first get involved in the Celtic tradition, and the Reconstructionist movement?

ERL: I first got actively involved in Paganism back in 1984. At the time the only thing I knew about out there was Wicca, so that was where I started, like so many others at the time. Reading Celtic mythologies and learning about ogam was what really sparked my interest in finding a Celtic path that was meaningful to me. The more I looked at the history and the archaeology and traditions of the various Celtic peoples, the more I realized that Wicca didn't fit the patterns I was seeing and so I gradually moved closer to a reconstructionist approach and attitude.

DD: Would you like to share some of your journey as an encouragement to the readers of Aontacht?

ERL: At the time when I was seeking, there wasn't an internet as we now know it. There were a few commercial online services like GENie or CompuServe, with some Usenet access and email listservs if you were lucky. There were also Pagan bulletin board services like PODSnet, which was run on a FIDO model, so communication was slower and less far-reaching.

Because I wasn't really finding anyone who was doing what I was doing, I started talking about my research and my experiences on Celtic-L and founded the PODS Celtic echo in hopes of finding like-minded others. Back then it was practically heresy to suggest that Wicca wasn't Celtic, though it's become much more accepted and understood now. The folks on Celtic-L mostly wanted to talk about sports and current events; discussion of mythology, non-Christian spirituality, and anything hinting of Druids tended to be discouraged, sometimes harshly. Because of this I founded the Nemeton email list, giving those of us who were interested in the spiritual end of things a safe place for discussion. From Nemeton, other groups and email lists developed and the ideas and ideals of Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism began to expand on the web.

I never much intended to become a "leader" in the community but, as has been said, history is made by those who show up. I was one of the many folks who showed up and did the work. We're all still doing the work today. CR is far from highly developed at this point, though it has been finding its bearings and branching into a rich and multifaceted movement.

People find themselves inspired by different Celtic cultures and languages, interested in and touched by many different Celtic deities, and working on and reconstructing a number of approaches to ritual, devotion, household worship, magic, and divination. This is really as it should be, because "the Celts" were never a monolithic cultural structure. It's only to be expected that different groups and locations will develop different responses to the stories, the research, the deities, and their own land.

We're at the beginning of a movement. Anyone who gets involved can help to shape it and bring forth constructive and meaningful dialogue and ritual. All it takes is a sense of devotion that evolves into action and to sharing with the rest of the community.

DD: What are some common misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Celtic Reconstructionism amongst other members of the Celtic Pagan community?

ERL: There are a considerable number, and some of us addressed these in the CR FAQ, which can be found at <http://www.paganachd.com/faq/>

While it's important to remember that this document was written by committee, a good deal of it applies fairly broadly.

Some of the big misconceptions include the idea that CRs are all druids (only a few of us use that title), that we're Celtic shamans (I think we all uniformly shudder at the idea), that we're hostile to Wiccans (some are but most of us just want folks to know we're not the same thing), that we're big meanies (okay, some CRs are obnoxious, but you get that in every community), and that we're all about intellectual pursuits to the detriment of our actual spiritual practices.

Like many misunderstandings and stereotypes, there's some small grain of truth to some aspects of these. For the most part, though, misunderstandings are just that. They may not always be helpfully dealt with by some in the community but there are those of us who are happy to engage with the rest of the Pagan community and to discuss the issues openly.

DD: What advice would you give the readers on how to address and overcome those misunderstandings?

ERL: Talking to folks in the CR movement is helpful if you're not familiar with us; unfortunately some of the folks on the CR lists tend to be very off-putting to new folks and anyone perceived as an "outsider". These folks make it harder for the rest of us. Just plain politeness from people speaking from the CR movement would go a long way to dealing with most of the problems. It's really hard for someone new to get

an accurate look at the movement as a whole when a few loud people are obnoxious to everyone who walks in the door. The fact that we identify with a complex of cultures where warriors and honor were important doesn't give anyone an excuse to go off on people, which is something I've seen all too often.

The idea that CRs are only about intellectual debate and citing sources isn't helped by the dominance of that discourse in public. Very few CRs actually talk about their personal and group practices in public. The fact is that behind all the discussion there's a lot going on both ritually and as personal daily lifestyle practice, like living cultural virtues. Part of the problem is that people are hesitant to talk about their personal work because they're afraid they'll be told they're doing it wrong or they're not "Celtic enough." Many people feel they don't know enough to participate in the conversation and that restricts the types of discussions that are had in public forums. Remember that every one of us had to start somewhere and that we're all learning day by day.

Part of this is based in the misconception that there's only one "real" CR way of doing things. The fact is that the Celtic peoples were never a monolithic culture any more than Native Americans are one monolithic culture. Each tribe was doing different things than the tribe down the road a bit, and those things also changed with the passing generations. We need to understand and accept localization and regional variations within the movement, and to encourage discussions of what people are actually doing while listening with reasonable attention and respect. This doesn't mean that misconceptions shouldn't be corrected -- we're always going to correct someone if they start talking about ogams in North America, for instance -- but corrections need to be done in a way that encourages people to learn rather than shutting them down and shutting them out of conversation.

In the end analysis, courtesy and openness about who we are and what we do would solve a lot of problems.

DD: What originally inspired you to write a book on the Irish Ogam? What do you think is the book's overall message or relevance?

ERL: When I first ran into the Ogam system I was quite interested because it was something Gaelic. I picked up what books and materials were available at the time, but the more I read and the more research I did, the more I realized that what was being put out in the Pagan community wasn't actually true. There was no tree calendar. There was no tree astrology. Some of the letter names being used were entirely wrong, historically speaking. So I went searching for a more accurate historical perspective.

Eventually I realized that a non-tree-based system made a lot more sense to me and seemed more historically

authentic, but nobody outside of academia was talking about it at all. This was what pushed me to actually write my book. I got four false starts on it over a period of about 18 years and threw them out entirely. Eventually I got a booklet together for a class at PantheaCon in San Jose that became the core of my ogam book. From there it was a matter of further research, refinement of the system, and expanding on the booklet to include other aspects of my use of the system.

As to the book's message and relevance, I think it's important for people to understand the origins of systems they're using. Tree astrology may work for some people, but no one should be claiming it as an "Ancient Druidic Astrology System." To make that claim is fraud. I think it goes back to individual creativity; if you create a system that works for you, own that creativity rather than trying to give it a fake historical cachet. The important thing is that it works! Honesty helps all of us in the community, and to acknowledge our own creativity is important. I would have far less quarrel with "Celtic tree astrology" if people weren't claiming the ancient Druids did it.

I'd like to think that my discussion of my rituals and experiences with the ogam is relevant to the community as an example of what can be done with the system, and that it will inspire others to further the research and the work. I think it's also an important book because it was written from a specifically CR perspective; there's not much of that out there as yet. There's a good deal of interest, but the movement tends not to be very accessible for a variety of reasons. I hope to make it more accessible through my work and to demonstrate that CR is not just spiritless academic discussion.

DD: Is there a particular Ogam symbol or tree that speaks to you more than others? Is the 'Rowan' in your name connected to this?

ERL: Coll and nGéal are both very important symbols to me. Coll is the hazel tree and a symbol of poetry and deep wisdom. It's a quality that I work toward integrating and embodying in my life. It's an ideal I aspire to. nGéal is an ogam that addresses wounding and healing; it's both the wound inflicted and the work of healing the wound. As a disabled veteran, this is a really important concept to me; I've been working for years on bringing myself back to health and, while it's happening, it moves slowly. This fid or letter is a reminder of my goals and one I use for much of my healing work.

While the rowan tree was certainly the inspiration for my middle name, it wasn't specifically connected to the ogam.

DD: How are you progressing with your book about the healing potential of the Ogam?

ERL: It's going very slowly. I have about four books that I want to write at the moment, in addition to all the essays I've been doing for anthologies in the past year or so. I'm kind of overwhelmed with the amount of writing that I need to do and, as someone working with fibromyalgia, I only have a limited amount of energy to give to any one project at a time. I use the techniques I want to talk about, and they do often help me, but I still have a long way to go.

DD: Besides the Ogam and Irish Gaelic Reconstructionism, what are some of your other major interests, areas of study and hobbies?

ERL: Wow, that's a huge question! I actually have a lot of different interests outside of ogam and CR.

Spiritually speaking, I'm a member of the local Shinto shrine and I do participate in occasional Hindu pujas when the opportunity arises. I do quite a bit of not-specifically-Celtic animist work. I've done a good bit of interfaith activism as well, though I'm certainly not on the level of the folks who are going to the Parliament of World Religions. My work has primarily been local on that front.

Sometimes when I want a break from working on intensive non-fiction writing I'll write some fanfic for fun and to clear out the cobwebs in my brain. I love to read, as well, though primarily nonfiction in the humanities and social sciences.

I really enjoy traveling when I'm able. This past summer I went on a three-week road trip to teach at an ADF camp-out and then visit many friends in California. It was a fantastic experience. It involved camping and hiking, which I love, as well as stops in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Cooking is a lot of fun for me, and when I have the energy I really love cooking for friends. I keep a blog at LiveJournal where I talk about the ins and outs of my daily life, and I'll often post some foodporn about whatever I've been cooking lately. I love food from different cultures, particularly Asian, Middle Eastern and North African.

Musically I've always loved singing. For several years I was performing with Seirm, Seattle's Scottish Gaelic choir, and that's not the only public performance group I've been a part of over the years. I've studied gamelan, which is an Indonesian percussion orchestra, as well as playing many other kinds of percussion. I used to play guitar, though too much pain in the hands put a stop to that years ago. I love to go to live concerts, though, in many genres of music. Lately there's been a lot of steampunk music in my area, and quite a few of my friends are musicians of varying types, from medieval a cappella vocals to gothic industrial bands and I love to support them when I can afford to go to their shows.

I'm also a big fan of weird, obscure, and foreign film. I get a lot of really fascinating stuff online to watch when I'm in the mood. I find stuff by Werner Herzog and Jan Svankmajer to be really interesting and fun. I also love bad, cheesy science fiction movies!

On a more serious note, I do a lot of information activism around women veterans issues like military sexual trauma, and am a member of Veterans for Peace. Peace activism, feminism, and environmental activism are important to me, particularly as they interact with human rights issues. A few years ago I was interviewed on the local National Public Radio station with one of the psychiatrists from the Veterans Administration about military sexual trauma, and I spoke on a panel to a regional Veterans Administration health care professionals conference on spirituality and post-traumatic stress disorder. The local CR group I work with is also doing a lot around ritual work for warriors in terms of rites for people going off to war, and for folks returning from military service. We had a panel last year at PantheaCon on the warrior ritual for sending someone out and will be doing a similar one this year on our warrior return ritual. One of our folks recently returned from Iraq and we'll be doing his ritual in January. One important bit of this is that one of the chaplains from the local Veterans Administration Hospital will be coming to participate in the ritual, which I think is a really groundbreaking thing. I've been talking about the ritual and this aspect of it on my blog, as well as my experiences with my own warrior return ritual twenty-six years after leaving the military.

DD: What is your stance on other spiritual traditions, and what are your methods to avoid cultural appropriation?

ERL: I think it's important to learn about and understand other traditions, and to work on building bridges between spiritual communities. Attending the rituals or services of other religions offers not just an opportunity to learn, but an opportunity to show respect for those traditions by participating when it's appropriate. I really believe that we're less likely to be suspicious of or to offend people of other religions if we have seen or experienced what they do and learn about their traditions. And they, conversely, are less likely to be suspicious of or to offend us if they know us as individual human beings whose path is simply different than theirs. One thing I've learned is that when you're polite and you're doing your best to understand, most folks are happy to have you attend a ritual or a service and tell you about their tradition.

As to cultural appropriation, that's an immense and difficult topic. I did a couple of essays for an anthology on Paganism and cultural appropriation that came out last year, titled *Talking About the Elephant*, from Immanion/Megalithica Press. Because no culture exists in a vacuum, it's impossible for cultures not to influence

one another. Respectful interaction is key. Knowing the sources of things and how they relate to one another is also vitally important.

It's also very easy to read "cultural appropriation" into things that are not appropriation. Some Native American groups express the belief that any non-Native sweat practice is appropriation of Native tradition. The truth is, sweat rituals and practices are found in cultures around the globe. From Finnish sauna to Gaulish stone sweat-houses, there are models that exist and that do not in any way steal from Native American cultures. One can legitimately be studying and trying to reconstruct an Irish sweat tradition without appropriating, for example, Lakota sweat ritual. The fact that most of the Irish tradition regarding this is lost means we have to look at other cultures to try to understand what might have been done, but that doesn't mean we can do a Lakota ritual and claim it's Irish. Honesty about our sources cannot be over-emphasized.

DD: What would you say is the predominant Celtic Reconstructionist view on topics like reincarnation, animism, ecological activism, meditation, etc?

ERL: I don't think there is one. The wide variety of personalities, locations, and cultural emphases in the movement means that all of these things are tackled as matters of individual conscience and personal practice.

DD: Do you mind briefly sharing your own personal opinions on the above topics?

ERL: I tend to believe in reincarnation as a transmigration of souls, that we come back in many different forms many different times. I think this view is supported by Irish and Welsh poetry where the poet identifies with many different kinds of animate and "inanimate" objects, and by a number of tales that tell of a venerable ancient who returns again and again in different forms.

Surviving evidence of beliefs does suggest that Celtic cultures experienced their religions as animist, with spirits, deities, or various other entities occupying landscape features like mountains or wells. It's how I approach my own personal practice. I think of pretty much everything as ensouled in some way.

As far as ecological activism, whether or not such a thing can be supported by lore, I think it's imperative. Without immediate, rapid movement on issues like global climate change and over population, there's not going to be an environment left that will support human life. It's a matter of survival rather than theology or ideology. We're killing ourselves and we should stop that.

Meditation is a part of my personal practice, but I also know folks who don't really get anything out of it, or who have a lot of trouble settling into it. I don't think it's something everyone absolutely has to do. I think incorporating your spirituality into your daily life as a given that permeates everything, rather than as big formal ritual, is more useful and important. Living the various traditional virtues like generosity and hospitality has more practical value than trying to clear your mind for ten minutes if all you're going to do is get frustrated because you feel like you're not making any progress. Absolutely, keep up with some sort of practice, but don't keep it separate from everything else you do and are.

DD: Is it possible to have a "general Reconstructionist opinion" on any single given topic (ie is the Reconstructionist group cohesive enough to have an agreed stance)?

ERL: No. At best you're going to get a "most CRs think this is important" rather than "this is what all CRs believe or do".

DD: How do you make the historical, academic side of Celtic Reconstructionism into an well-rounded but active, every-day practice?

ERL: Study, research, learning, and communicating what has been learned has always been a traditional part of Celtic cultures. It was incredibly highly respected and encouraged. In the most traditional sense, one cannot be a Druid or a Fili without it. In the original cultures, people would spend years or decades studying and learning in order to fulfill their responsibilities to their tribe or clan.

For me, the research is usually fun, and I find wonderful things to integrate into my personal and group practices, often in the most unexpected places. Law texts have been as much a rich source for me as traditional mythological tales and folklore. Excerpts from source texts often make it into rituals or deeply influence the way I work. Language study is important because it allows participation in a worldview that can otherwise only be seen from outside. To understand what words mean and where they come from helps contextualize practice.

As a poet and a devotee of Brigid, study and history give me a rich field of myth and symbol that influences my writing and poetry. There's no part of my spiritual life that doesn't incorporate something from the historical and academic aspects of CR. The plants I use, the words I choose, the way I conceive of cosmology -- all of it is deeply influenced by the reading and study I've been doing over the years, and what people in the movement are sharing with each other face to face or in correspondence with one another. Trying to separate the "academic" from the "spiritual" would be impossible for

me.

It's the academic work that tells me about the deities I worship. Their sobriquets and their names have meanings, which we can't really know unless we understand something about the Celtic languages. It makes a huge difference knowing that Daghdha's epithet "Ollathair" means "great-father", not "all-father," for instance. Without looking at a wide variety of sometimes difficult-to-find sources, I wouldn't have found the protective prayer that invokes the "silver warrior who has not died, who will not die" and the "seven daughters of the sea". Research taught me that juniper smoke was used for purification. Commentary on early Irish law texts gave me the image of the preserving shrine and of the connecting thread of poetry in all things. Archaeology has given us images of deities like Nehalennia and Coventina, of Ogmios and Taranis. This is the stuff of my daily practice. Without this, we would have nothing upon which to base our practices.

Working with this material is also a reflection of the Gaelic preoccupation with truth or *fir*. Without knowing what's true, how can we practice at all? The study of history and Celtic cultures helps us find and recognize truth. It helps us separate the real from the fraudulent. Armed with truth, we can recognize when people are trying to scam us with fake "Celtic Bibles," Atlantean origin stories, and similar impossible claims. If Atlantis works for you as a metaphor, more power to you, just don't try to tell anyone that the Druids really came from Atlantis or that your granny left you a previously-unknown Old Irish text that you only have the German translation for.

The other thing it's important to recognize is that scholarship continues to move. What we thought was the truth twenty years ago is quite different now. New archaeology opens up new possibilities, uncovers the names of new deities, and sheds new light on historical practice. New translations of texts correct misinterpretations or offer up manuscripts that have never previously been available outside of their native languages, and these can influence ritual and practice very deeply. The interplay of history, academic work, and practice is a complex, ever-shifting dance. We can't remain static in the face of this ever-changing tapestry.

These are good for examining the connection of spirituality and poetry with ecological sensibility and the process of connecting with the land.

DD: If you could recommend any authors or books to us, which would be, say your top five or top ten on that list, in no particular order?

ERL: This will be a rather idiosyncratic list, given my focus and interests. Always understand that other folks would recommend other books and authors. These are

primarily recommended for folks interested in the path of the fili or sacred poet.

Joseph F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition*

John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*

John T. Koch & John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales (4th edition)*

J. G. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne: The Frenzy of Suibhne*

Robin Skelton, *Spellcraft*

Robin Skelton, *Samhain and other poems in Irish meters of the Eighth to the Sixteenth Century*

Jane Hirschfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*

These deal with aspects of poetry, metrics, translation, and poetry as magic.

Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*

Jason Kirkey, *The Salmon in the Spring: The Ecology of Celtic Spirituality*

These are good for examining the connection of spirituality and poetry with ecological sensibility and the process of connecting with the land.

DD: What are your future plans, both personally and professionally?

ERL: I intend to keep writing as much as I can, though it does go more slowly than I'd like. There's a lot to say and to explore and there are so many things yet to contribute to the community to help it grow and mature. Definitely expect more anthology essays from me as well as new books in the coming years.

More immediately, I'll be heading down to PantheaCon again in February of 2010, so if you're going, look me up! I go every year and usually do a class or two.

For the most part, I'm in a pretty good place with my life. I love the Pacific Northwest, I've got a good local community to work with, and I love having friends come visit me from all over. Most of my networking takes place over the internet, through my website and my LiveJournal. I'm always open to discussion with new people, though I don't always have as much time to talk with folks as I'd like.

At some point I'd love to go visit Scotland and the Isle of Man and experience the land there. I was blessed with the gift of ten days in Ireland some years back and had a

a fantastic time there. I think it's important to travel to the places that are important in our myths and stories so that we have a deeper understanding of the roots of this path. Those of you who live there already are very lucky to have that kind of connection with the land.

Mostly, I just want to keep practicing the fine art of being human. Someday I might even get it right!

DD: How do you see the future of Celtic Reconstructionism and Druidry developing in the 21st Century? How can we make them relevant for our present world crises and challenges?

ERL: I think that the ecological sensibilities of the Druidic movement are already relevant to the current situation. The ideal of our connection with the spirits of the land that we find in CR and the interest that many groups have in localizing that sense of the sacred follow the same spiritual logic. I believe that helping people move away from mono-vision is one potential role for these paths; to see the world through polytheistic eyes opens vast new possibilities. There's less of a sense that there can only be one truth or one solution to a problem.

I believe it will be important to recognize that there are important ways that we can never and would never want to recreate the past. CR needs to adapt and be open to change if it is going to be relevant in the 21st century. We can learn many valuable lessons from the past, but we can't remain stuck in it. Regionalizing and localizing are going to be important forces in the movement. Recognizing local climate, local ecology, and local sensibilities will, I think, become increasingly necessary. What works for Seattle, Washington isn't going to work for Phoenix, Arizona. The land is different and so are the people and the energies. We can't expect to do everything exactly the same way someone in 2nd century Ulster or 1st century Gaul would; for one thing, we just don't know the exact details. Our technologies are different, as are our social expectations.

I do believe that CR and Druidism offer a model for more sustainable living with the land. The development of a virtue-based ethic is important within CR and could have a strong and lasting impact on the world at large if it's whole-heartedly embraced.

I don't know what the future will bring. I just hope that we regain our collective sanity before we manage to wipe ourselves off the planet.

DD: Do you have any closing words or advice you would like to leave with us?

ERL: Live in the world like a poet. See the world through lovers' eyes. Practice compassion. Be kind to

yourselves. Be excellent to each other.

For further information about Erynn and Celtic Reconstructionism, you can visit these web sites: <http://www.seanet.com/~inisglas/index.html> and <http://www.paganachd.com/faq/>

