

# Gwern in the Fire

By John Bonsing

The Second Branch of the Mabinogi holds the story of the burning of Branwen's son, Gwern, in a great fire prepared at a feast arranged to settle a raid upon Ireland by the troops of Britain. The story comes down to us from the compilations of the the White Book of Rhydderch (1325) and the Red Book of Hergest (1400) whose contents comprise redactions of earlier mythological material. What is remarkable is that the story of Gwern in the fire bears a striking similarity to the traditions of the Beltaine fire customs recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Thomas Pennant, John Ramsey and Walter Gregor in the Highlands and Islands. Intimately involved is a cauldron of rebirth, and this magical cauldron appears throughout Celtic myth and poetry of both Ireland and Wales, as well as featuring in the famous Gundestup cauldron that dates from the first century. Presented below are these three occurrences of the motif, giving us glimpses of this ancient Beltaine story.

## The burning of Gwern in the Fire

And the men of the Island of Ireland came into the house on the one side, and the men of the Island of the Mighty on the other. And as soon as they were seated there was concord between them, and the kingship conferred upon the boy, Gwern son of Matholwch king of the Island of Ireland by Branwen daughter of Llŷr, sister of Bendigeidfran son of Llŷr, king of the Island of the Mighty. And Efnisien arose and took up the boy by the feet and made no delay, nor did a man in the house lay hold on him before he thrust the boy headlong into the blazing fire. And when Branwen saw her son burning in the fire, she made as if to leap into the fire from the place she was sitting between her two brothers. And Bendigeidfran grasped her with one hand, and his shield with the other. And an uproar rose up throughout the house, and each man caught up arms. The Irish began to kindle a fire under the cauldron of rebirth. And then the dead bodies of the Irish were cast into the cauldron until it was full, and on the morrow they would rise as good fighting men as before, save that they were not able to speak. And Efnisien saw the dead bodies of the men of the Island of the Mighty, heaped up in the house. 'Woe is me that I should be the cause of this heap of men of the Island of the Mighty,' said he, 'And shame on me if I seek no deliverance therefrom.' And he crept in among the dead bodies of the Irish, and he was fetched and cast into the cauldron as though he was one of the dead Irishmen. He stretched himself out in the cauldron, so that the cauldron burst into four pieces, and his heart burst also.

*recorded in the Mabinogi of Branwen daughter of Llŷr, from Wales before the C. 14<sup>th</sup>*

- The Mabinogion (1947) translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones, Everyman, London, adapted from pp.30-31.

## **The Cailleach Bealtine**

This fire had the appearance of being immediately derived from heaven, and manifold were the virtues ascribed to it...the stoniest poisons were supposed to have their nature changed. This was termed *tein-eigin*, forced fire or need fire. A feast was then prepared, with singing and dancing, and lots drawn to select one man. He was called the *cailleach bealtine*, Beltane carline, a term of great reproach. Upon his being known, parts of the company laid hold of him, and made a show of putting him into the fire, but, the majority interposing, he was rescued. And in some places they laid him flat on the ground, making as if they would quarter him.

*a custom used in the islands of Skye, Mull and Tiree, reported by John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, late 18th century*

## **A Highland Bel-tein sacrifice**

They make a fire of wood, on which they dress a large caudle of eggs, butter, oatmeal and milk: The rites begin with spilling some of the caudle on the ground, by way of libation, on that everyone takes a cake of oatmeal upon which are raised nine square knobs and each person turns his face to the fire, breaks off a knob, and flinging it over his shoulders says, 'This I give to thee, preserve thou my horses, my sheep,' and so on, and 'This I give to thee, O Fox! spare thou my lambs; this to thee, O hooded Crow! this to thee, O Eagle!'. When the ceremony is over, they dine on the caudle.

*a custom used in the Highlands, reported by Thomas Pennant in 1769*

## **Scattering the oatmeal cake**

Fires were kindled by every farmer and cottar. Old thatch, or straw, or furze, or broom was piled into a heap and set on fire a little after sunset. Some...sized portions of it on pitch-forks or poles and ran hither and thither,... while the younger portion, that assisted, danced around the fire or ran through the smoke, shouting 'Fire! blaze and burn the witches; fire! ,fire! burn the witches!' In some districts a large round cake of oatmeal was rolled through the ashes. When the material was burned up, the ashes were scattered far and wide, and all continued till quite dark.

*a description from the hinterland of Aberdeen published by Walter Gregor, Folk-Lore Society, 1881*

- These customs are recorded in *The Stations of the Sun - A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (1996) Ronald Hutton, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.220-222.

## The Cauldron of Rebirth panel on the Gundestrup Cauldron



The motif of the cauldron of rebirth featured on the Gundestrup Cauldron, dating to the first century. Held above the cauldron the warriors like those from the Island of Ireland in the Mabinogion, are given rebirth. The fire implied by the cauldron is the Beltaine fire, in which Gwern or the *cailleach bealtine* of later myth and custom is held. After the raid on Ireland in the Welsh myth, only seven returned, just as after the raid on Annwn in the sixth century Welsh poem The Spoils of Annwn. At Beltaine the Pleiades, the 'Seven Sisters', rise at sunrise marking the renewal of the Celtic year.

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