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## **EXPERT COMMENT: Britannia, Druids and the surprisingly modern origins of myth**

Professor of Modern History, [Matthew Kelly](#), discusses Britannia, Druids and the surprisingly modern origins of myths for The Conversation.

The new TV series Britannia, which has won plaudits as heralding a new generation of British folk-horror, is clearly not intended to be strictly historical. Instead director Jez Butterworth gives us a graphic re-imagining of Britain on the eve of the Roman conquest. Despite its violence and chaos, this is a society bound together by ritual under the head Druid (played by Mackenzie Crook). But where does this idea of pre-conquest British religion come from?

Contemporary sources of the period are very thin on the ground and were mainly written by Britain's Roman conquerors. No classical text provides a systematic account of Druidical ritual or belief. In fact, little was written at length for hundreds of years until William Camden, John Aubrey and John Toland took up the subject in the 1500s and 1600s. But it took later antiquarians, including William Stukeley writing in 1740, as well as William Borlase in 1754 and Richard Polwhele in 1797, to fully develop their thinking.

Popular ideas of pre-Roman Britain today are derived from their elaborate Druidical theories: the bearded Druid, possessor of arcane knowledge, the stone circles, the ritualistic use of dew, mistletoe and oak leaves in dark, wooded groves, and the ultimate horror of human sacrifice and the bacchanalia that followed.

**Ancient disputes**

The antiquarians were a disputatious lot and their debates can seem baffling, but underpinning them were fundamental questions about the first settlement of the British Isles and its religious history. In particular, the antiquarians asked if ancient Britons were monotheistic, practising a “natural” religion awaiting Christian “revelation”, or polytheistic idolaters who worshipped many false gods.

The answer to this question determined how the antiquarians understood the monumental stone structures left by this past culture. Were Stonehenge, Avebury or the antiquarian riches of Devon and Cornwall not just relics of idolatry and irreligion but also evidence of the supposed hold the Celts once had over the land? Conversely, if the stone circles and other relics were evidence of the struggle by an ancient people to make sense of the one true God before Roman Catholicism corrupted their beliefs (remember these antiquarians were all Protestant thinkers), then a God-fearing Englishman could claim them as a part of his heritage.

Stukeley believed Britain’s first settlers were eastern Mediterranean seafarers – the so-called Phoenicians – and they brought Abrahamic religion with them. In studies of Stonehenge (1740) and Avebury (1743), he argued that the ancient peoples descended from these first settlers lost sight of these beliefs but retained a core grasp of the fundamental “unity of the Divine Being”. This was represented in stone circles, so “expressive of the nature of the deity with no beginning or end”.

By this reading, Druidical veneration of heavenly bodies, the Earth and the four elements was not polytheism but the worship of the most extraordinary manifestations of this single deity. Moreover, that this worship was conducted in the vernacular and relied on the development of a teaching caste intended to enlighten the people meant that Druidical religion was the forerunner of Protestantism.

Borlase, surveying Cornwall’s antiquities, rejected much of this. He scoffed at Stukeley’s Phoenician theories, saying it was illogical that Britain’s first people were overseas traders, and he argued that Druidism was a British invention that crossed the channel to Gaul. Borlase reckoned patriotic French antiquarians, convinced Gauls and Druids had resisted Roman tyranny, were reluctant to admit that “their forefathers [were] indebted so much to this island”.

But was Druidism something to be proud of? By drawing on classical, Biblical and contemporary sources, Borlase developed an elaborate account of the Druids as an idolatrous priesthood who manipulated the ignorance of their followers by creating a sinister air of mystery.

According to Borlase, Druidical ritual was bloody, decadent, immoral stuff, with plenty of sex and booze, and only compelling in atmospheric natural settings. Druidical power rested on fear and Borlase implied that Catholic priests, with their use of incense, commitment to the Latin mass and superstitious belief in transubstantiation, used the same techniques as the Druids to maintain power over their followers.

### **Going over old ground**

Poems such as William Mason's *Caractatus* (1759) helped popularise the idea that the Druids led British resistance to the invading Romans – but by the 1790s sophisticated metropolitan observers treated this stuff with scorn. Despite this, Druidical theories retained much influence, especially in south-west England. In Polwhele's *histories of Devonshire* (1797), he wrote of Dartmoor as “one of the principal temples of the Druids”, as evident in iconic Dartmoor sites such as Grimspound, Bowerman's Nose and Crockern Tor.

Most important were the “many Druidical vestiges” centred on the village of Drewsteignton, whose name he believed was derived from “Druids, upon the Teign”. The cromlech, known as Spinsters' Rock, at nearby Shilstone Farm invited much speculation, as did the effect achieved by the “fantastic scenery” of the steep-sided Teign valley.

Polwhele's influence was felt in Samuel Rowe's *A Perambulation of Dartmoor* (1848), the first substantial topographical description of the moor. Many Victorians first encountered Dartmoor through Rowe's writings but the discussion of these texts in my history of modern Dartmoor shows that a new generation of preservationists and amateur archaeologists did not take Druidical theories very seriously.

For the late Victorian members of the Devonshire Association and the Dartmoor Preservation Association, scepticism was a sign of sophistication. If an earlier generation had detected Druidical traces in virtually all Dartmoor's human and natural features, these men and women were more likely to see evidence of agriculture and domesticity. Grimspound, once a Druidical temple, was now thought to be a cattle pound.

Despite Protestant hopes during the Reformation that superstitious beliefs associated with landscape features would be banished, the idea that the landscape holds spiritual mysteries that we know but cannot explain, or that the stone circles of antiquity stimulate these feelings, remains common enough. Indeed, Protestantism came to terms with these feelings and the Romantics saw the beauties of the British landscape as the ultimate expression of God's handiwork.

Britannia recalls Robin of Sherwood (1984-6), with its mystical presentation of the English woodland and, of course, the BBC comedy Detectorists, that delicate exploration of middle-aged male friendship against the rustle of rural mysticism. A sense of spiritual presence can also inflect the British landscapes of the New Nature Writing.

But Butterworth is working according to an older tradition. Rather like his antiquarian predecessors, he has created a largely imagined universe from some scattered classical references and a great deal of accumulated myth and legend. Whether Britannia will re-enchant the British landscape for a new generation of television viewers is impossible to say, but my hunch is that those lonely stones up on the moors, such as the Grey Wethers or Scorhill on Dartmoor, are going to attract a new cohort of visitors.

*This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). You can read the original article [here](#).*

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