

Coelbren

Traditions, Divination Lore, and Magic
of the Welsh Bardic Alphabet



John Michael Greer

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Revised and Expanded Edition

John Michael Greer

AEON

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Einigan the Giant beheld three pillars of light, having in them all demonstrable sciences that ever were, or ever will be. And he took three rods of the quicken tree, and placed on them the forms and signs of all sciences, so as to be remembered; and exhibited them. But those who saw them misunderstood, and falsely apprehended them, and taught illusive sciences, regarding the rods as a God, whereas they only bore His Name. When Einigan saw this he was greatly annoyed, and in the intensity of his grief he broke the three rods, nor were others found that contained accurate sciences. He was so distressed on this account that from the intensity he burst asunder, and with his parting breath he prayed God that there should be accurate sciences among men in the flesh, and there should be a correct understanding for the proper discernment thereof. And at the end of a year and a day after the decease of Einigan, Menw, son of the Three Shouts, beheld three rods growing out of the mouth of Einigan, which exhibited the sciences of the Ten Letters, and the mode in which the sciences of language and speech were arranged by them, and in language and speech all distinguishable sciences. He then took the rods, and taught from them ...

—*Barddas*

An earlier and less complete version of this book was previously published in 2017 as *The Coelbren Alphabet: The Lost Oracle of the Welsh Bards*

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INTRODUCTION



This book owes its existence to a remarkable and unexpected discovery.

Like many others before me, I had long been interested in the curious, vaguely runic alphabet called the Coelbren of the Bards, which appears in the pages of *Barddas* (“Bardism”), the vast collection of Welsh Druid lore partly compiled and partly invented by Iolo Morganwg in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹ According to the texts included in *Barddas*, the Coelbren had been passed down by a succession of Welsh bards and loremasters since the days of the ancient Druids, and formed the key to a body of hidden lore, *Cyfrinach Beirdd Ynys Prydain*, “the Secret of the Bards of the Isle of Britain.”

Practically all scholars today reject the claim that the Coelbren goes back to ancient times, and most believe that Iolo invented the alphabet himself. The Coelbren’s roots in the Druid Revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though, make the old bardic alphabet a fascinating phenomenon in its own right, and like the other traditions of Druid nature spirituality that emerged from that movement, it needs

¹Recently reprinted as Williams ab Ithel 2004; the discussion of the Coelbren is on pp. 10–97 and 116–166.

no older pedigree. Like so many others over the last three centuries or so, I found my own spiritual home in the heritage of the Druid Revival. I've had the opportunity to contribute more than once to the process of recovering lost or neglected elements of the modern Druid tradition.

The Coelbren was a tempting candidate for a rescue mission of this sort. A great many spiritual traditions around the world have made use of writing systems as an important source of symbolism. The Hebrew alphabet plays an essential role, for example, in the Kabbalah, Judaism's mystical tradition; and *kotodama*—a system of spiritual interpretations of the Japanese *kana* writing systems—has as large a place in Japanese esotericism. The Ogham alphabet of ancient Ireland and Scotland, and the Germanic, Norse, and Anglo-Saxon runes, have a similar function in contemporary Celtic and Germanic paganism.

What gives each of these writing systems the ability to function as potent symbols in divination, meditation, and ritual is that they represent concepts as well as sounds. For example, the Ogham few (letter) Beith, |, represents the birch tree, and also beginnings, purification, and renewal, and the Old English rune Feoh, ƿ, represents cattle, and also wealth, creativity, and prosperity. The same is true of every other writing system that has been put to use in spiritual, religious, and magical traditions: knowing the meaning as well as the sound of the letters is the key to making the system work.

That was the difficulty with the Coelbren, though. The passages of *Barddas* that discuss the Coelbren have a great deal to say about its origins, history, and traditional uses, but they say nothing about letter meanings or even the names that were used for the individual letters. Lacking those pieces of the puzzle, the Coelbren remained silent. Some attempts had been made to assign meanings and symbolism to the letters in recent years, but those were arbitrary and worked poorly in practice.

In 2013, shortly after the publication of my book *The Celtic Golden Dawn*, I decided to tackle the riddle of the Coelbren, and see if I could find some way to make it work as a symbolic alphabet for modern Druids. Over the months that followed, I read and reread the pages of *Barddas*, and tried to find other resources on the subject, with very limited success. It was clear from certain passages in *Barddas* that the Coelbren letters once had a very important place in Welsh bardic symbolism and teaching. Small wooden sticks with notches were once used, according to one of these passages, to communicate the mysteries of

the bards.² The Welsh word *coelbren* itself, literally “omen stick,” strongly suggested that Coelbren divination was once part of the bardic repertoire—but what the individual letters were named, what they meant, and how they were used for any purpose but writing poems and prose, remained unknown.

By the autumn of 2014 my research was at a standstill. I’d learned everything about the Coelbren that *Barddas* had to offer, and tracked down the few scraps of additional information that earlier researchers had found out about it. I’d also learned about another obscure Welsh alphabet, the Alphabet of Nemnivus, which appears in precisely one old manuscript and may well have been some medieval scribe’s idea of a scholarly joke. None of it had brought me any closer to the key to the Coelbren. That’s how matters stood when I went with my wife and two friends to visit a big used book store in a neighboring town.

Used book stores in the north central Appalachians aren’t the kind of place you expect to find obscure scholarly books on Welsh grammar. Still, tucked in among a random assortment of unrelated books on the foreign-language shelf in the dimmest corner at the back of the shop was a battered hardback reprint of J. Morris Jones’s *A Welsh Grammar, Historical and Comparative*, a hefty work of old-fashioned scholarship originally published in 1913. I pulled it off the shelf and opened it to an early page at random, and the first words that caught my eye were “alphabet of Nemnivus.” That was intriguing enough, but the rest of the paragraph was even more so: it explained that this alphabet was discussed in a book I’ve never heard of, by an author whose name I recognized at once: J. Williams ab Ithel.

The Rev. John Williams ab Ithel was a major figure in Welsh Druid circles in the first half of the nineteenth century, and he was also the editor who produced *Barddas* out of a heap of disconnected manuscripts left behind by Iolo Morganwg. The book Morris Jones cited, though, was one I had never encountered: *Dosparth Ederyn Dafod Aur*, a grammar of medieval Welsh that appears to have been compiled or invented by Iolo Morganwg. Edited and translated by Williams ab Ithel, *Dosparth Ederyn Dafod Aur* was published in 1856 and, like most of the products of Iolo Morganwg’s circle, dropped out of print and out of sight shortly thereafter. What the alphabet of Nemnivus was doing in such a volume was a puzzle. Had the bardic circles around Iolo Morganwg made use

²Williams ap Ithel 2004, p. 155.

of that alphabet instead of the Coelbren, I wondered? Or was something else going on?

That night, I set out to find a copy of *Dosparth Ederyn Dafod Aur*. To my delight, it had been scanned and archived on the internet, and within a few minutes my elderly computer was struggling to download a ten and a half megabyte file over a balky connection. A quarter of an hour later, maybe, I started paging through the file. The alphabet of Nemnivus was there; so was the Coelbren of the Bards—and after a few minutes of reading, I found myself staring with my mouth open at the thing that so many people in the Druid community had been pursuing fruitlessly for so many years: a detailed discussion of the symbolic meanings of the Coelbren letters and the inner structure of the alphabet itself, which had been penned by John Williams ab Ithel 160 years before.³

To sum up briefly a theme that will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter Two of this book, the secret of the Coelbren isn't a matter of letter names with meanings, like those of the Ogham fews or the runes. Rather, the Coelbren letters take their symbolic meanings directly from the sounds they represent, and from the shapes made by the mouth in the process of pronunciation. As we'll see, there's a long tradition behind this approach, which is called "sound symbolism" by modern linguists.

Once I had that key, it took me only a short time to reconstruct the entire system and begin putting it to the test. The result was everything I hoped it would be—a coherent, effective, and meaningful system of letter symbolism for modern Druids, which can be put to work in divination, meditation, and ritual with excellent results. Other projects delayed the process of putting the system down on paper, but once those were out of the way, my earlier book on the subject, *The Coelbren Alphabet*, took shape promptly. Several years later, I had the opportunity to rewrite that text in the light of further discoveries concerning the Coelbren, including the number values of the letters and several other remarkable findings, and the book in your hands took shape in response to that. As a result, the Coelbren may now take its rightful place as a bardic and Druidical symbolic, divinatory, and magical alphabet.

It might seem surprising that something that was once of central importance to the Welsh Druid movement could have been lost so

³I have included the relevant passages in this volume as Appendix 3.

completely for so many years. Such things happen all the time in the history of alternative culture, though. Wales has always been richly supplied with poets, but the number of bards who studied with Iolo Morganwg and learned the details of his rituals and symbolism was never large, and a variety of historical forces discussed in Chapter One raised high barriers to the survival of many elements of the bardic tradition that Iolo transmitted and at least partly invented. As far as I have been able to determine, the meanings of the Coelbren letters were published only once, in the pages of Williams ab Ithel's translation of the *Dosparth Ederyn Dafod Aur*, and that was a work so rare and obscure that no one thought to consult it once the living tradition of the Coelbren was interrupted.

The twentieth-century revival of interest in all things Druidical thus missed the old lore completely. By the 1980s, photocopies of *Barddas* were in circulation in various corners of the British and American Druid communities, but no one happened across the clue that sent me to the *Dosparth Ederyn Dafod Aur*, and so the one resource that could have answered the questions *Barddas* raised was never identified. Several writers attempted to come up with meanings for the Coelbren letters, most often borrowing tree-symbolism from the Irish Ogham alphabet for the purpose, while the actual symbolism and meanings of the letters remained lost. Even so careful a scholar as Nigel Pennick, whose *Ogham and Coelbren: Keys to the Celtic Mysteries* was published in 2000, apparently had not encountered *Dosparth Edeyrn Dafod Aur* and knew nothing of the sound symbolism of the Coelbren.⁴

The rediscovery of the key to the Coelbren thus opens a fascinating new branch of Druidical study to those who are interested in the old Welsh traditions, and to the broader field of Druidry and Celtic spirituality in general. I have found through practice that the Coelbren makes an effective divinatory oracle, and it's also a rich and flexible symbolic alphabet that can be used for the same spiritual, religious, and magical purposes as other sacred alphabets. All that's needed is the time and patience to master the meanings of the twenty-four Coelbren letters.

This book has been designed and written as a complete introduction to the Coelbren. The first chapter, "The Bard from Glamorgan," introduces Iolo Morganwg and the remarkable revival of Welsh Bardic and Druid traditions he helped set in motion. The second chapter,

⁴His survey of the Coelbren is otherwise admirable; see Pennick 2000, pp. 124–134.

“The Coelbren of the Bards,” sets out the traditional lore of the Coelbren. The third chapter, “The Letters of the Coelbren,” gives the name, keyword, meaning, sound symbolism, and divinatory meaning of each of the twenty-four Coelbren letters, and the fourth chapter, “Coelbren Divination,” explains how divination works and presents a series of layouts that can be used to make the Coelbren reveal the hidden patterns of the present and the foreshadowings of the future. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters, “Coelbren Symbolism,” “Coelbren Meditation,” and “Coelbren Magic,” extend the Coelbren further into other realms of inner practice. Finally, two appendices sum up the divinatory possibilities of the Coelbren and discuss how the old oracle of the bards can be used in conjunction with the system of Druid spirituality and magic I’ve presented and discussed in my book *The Celtic Golden Dawn*, while a third appendix gives the original text of Williams ab Ithel’s discussion of the Coelbren.

A few acknowledgments are due at this point. Two of the people who contributed the most to this project have since passed into the Otherworld of which Celtic authors wrote so vividly: Corby Ingold, who introduced me to modern Druidry and officiated at my initiation into the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids, and John Gilbert, who initiated me into the Ancient Order of Druids in America and passed on to me a body of occult lore that still guides my practices today. I am also indebted to Philip Carr-Gomm, past Chosen Chief of the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids, for access to the archives of that order and thus to a great deal of valuable Druid lore that has helped guide this project in many ways. On another level, the members of the Druidical Order of the Golden Dawn deserve thanks for their interest in the Coelbren and their enthusiastic exploration of its possibilities. Finally, I owe a debt to Oliver Rathbone of Aeon Books for making this second and much-improved edition possible. My thanks go with all.

Reveal the secrets of the esoteric druidic alphabet and unlock its potential as a powerful magical tool

Writing systems have been used for magical power and mystical insight in spiritual history for centuries, and the Coelbren Alphabet is no different. Originally devised by a famous Welsh poet the Bardic Alphabet, known as the Coelbren, has always seemed to hold great promise in the esoteric world. But because of its impenetrable nature, the capacity of the Coelbren Alphabet as a system of divination has remained hidden, simply a relic of a bygone era.

In this revised and expanded edition of his classic book John Michael Greer illuminates the power of the Coelbren Alphabet and shows readers how to implement it to full effect in their magical studies. Through in depth analysis of each letter, alongside Welsh keywords, *Coelbren* provides information on the meaning, symbolism, pronunciation, and divinatory interpretation of each letter, showing readers how to use this unique system for divination and magic.

Coelbren also provides sample readings, scrying, meditation techniques and tips for making your own Coelbren set. The new edition includes a chapter on gematria, as well as expanded chapters on the symbolism and magic of the alphabet.

John Michael Greer is the award-winning author of more than fifty books, including *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult*, *The Druidry Handbook*, *The Celtic Golden Dawn*, and *Circles of Power: An Introduction to Hermetic Magic*. An initiate in Freemasonry, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, Greer served as the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America (AODA) for twelve years. He lives in Rhode Island with his wife Sara. Greer is also the author of seventeen fantasy and science fiction novels and ten nonfiction books on peak oil and the future of industrial society. He blogs weekly on politics, magic, and the future at www.ecosophia.net.

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