

## Excerpt from “The New American Dream: Taking the Celtic Cure in Mediated Landscapes”

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In the forthcoming book, *Cornwall's Story: Landscape Narratives of Cultural Identity*, G. Tregidga, B. Keys, and K. Milden (eds.). London: Francis Boutle. (2012)

### Page One . . . . Introduction

In Boulder, Colorado, there is a small, independent bookstore that has held its ground on the most coveted real estate in the city, remaining against all odds where other independent stores have folded. The store is what some would call New Age—it’s a spiritual odyssey through the world’s cultures and a feast for the senses as delicate tunes from a Celtic harp and heady scents from Native American sage bundles envelop the bricoleur, the consumer, the cultural voyeur and the idle curiosity seeker. In the past fourteen years, during which I have fallen at least once into all of these categories of patronage at the store, the Celts have crept toward territorial victory on aisle two, flexing media muscle at neighboring UFO and extraterrestrial studies.

Nestled against the peaks that punctuate the ending of the great plains of America and the beginning of the Rocky Mountains, Boulder is the venue for many a Celtic event, from Scottish shamans who heal depression to Irish priestesses bearing sacred waters from Brigid’s holy well. The stores offer a dazzling array of Celtic goods—amulets, knots, athames, crosses, dragons, folk songs, power crystals, and bath salts—mostly marketed with a decidedly otherworldly, spiritual framing. Beltane, Lughnasa, Samhain, Imbolc and Yule have become ritual celebrations in a town where crusty cattle ranchers

settled next door to ore miners and where the house from the Mork and Mindy television comedy is a stone's throw from the Buddhist temple.

Mostly these products, holidays, and visiting experts highlight the “Celtic” part of their origins rather than the particulars of their lineage of Cornish, Scottish, Welsh, Manx, Irish or Breton. This falls into line with the ways in which traditional understandings of “Celtic” --as a bounded reference to ethnicity, nationalism, geography, or culture—have been problematized and contextualized within polysemic discourses of individuals and groups. In the American New Age and Healthy Living media and marketplace, the term's cache seems to lie in its promise for a cure for the aches and pains of modernity.

My research has focused on New Age and Healthy Living (alternative medicine, Mind/Body/Spirit goods and services, ecological/sustainable goods, and natural and organic products) media and markets and the intersection of media, religion and culture. That work revealed pervasive references to Celtic cultures and traditions (real or imagined). Mostly, these were contextualized as avenues to recover a lost way of life, wisdom or spirituality and very often any reference to Celticity was coupled with, even framed within, certain types of landscapes. As I collected more materials, I wondered how the constructions that were taking place might link with, impact or contradict the progenitors—those real objects in real spaces.

In 2002, I obtained a six-week fellowship to travel to Cornwall. My goal was to examine expressions of Celticity through the lens of cultural geography, media and religion.

Page Four ... A Yank in Cornish "Gardens"

As I pulled into the village of Tintagel, the first shockwaves registered: who had turned Merlin into a capitalist? His be-robbed, be-spectacled, bearded self was everywhere I looked: on cups, on signs, on books and, in one case, embodied in the shop owner. The more I saw of him, the more I felt robbed of that intensely private moment when I would impose upon Tintagel the full force of my own dreaming, achieving a therapeutic moment when I would feel myself and the world to be different. Try as I might, however, I couldn't get the Merlinized shop owner out of my head. As I peered down at the castle, I felt conspicuous in my American accent and tourist gaze. What had I expected—to be the lone walker on the footpath? To be the only person on the face of the earth to know about the legend? A childhood of dreaming suddenly seemed quite silly.

I was relaying this adventure to a dinner companion later that evening. A former Cornish china clay miner, he sighed and said, "We aren't just a land of pixies and saints, you know" and he decided at that moment that I was in need of an education. The next morning we took a drive to a land that he found deeply meaningful as a spiritual compass point not only for himself but also as a Cornishman with a social history to be negotiated. The "tips," those ridged white pyramids of the remains of china-clay mines, had I stumbled upon them alone, would have done little to move me. I hail from a land scarred with the pits and strips of mines. But standing at their edge with my guide, I was deeply moved at his respect for the mines and his sorrow at the loss of the china-clay industry. Many of these White Alps had been leveled, considered as blights on the landscape. He was truly puzzled as to why Cornwall's proud industrial heritage should be considered less Celtic than the region's holy wells, standing stones and Arthurian connections.

Cornwall's industrial past holds a deep spiritual meaning as the source of nurture and identity, as I was reminded by the Christmas card I received years later from a Cornish friend that showed the ghostly silhouette of an abandoned Cornish tin mine.

My next tour guide in Cornwall was an official in the Anglican Church. Zipping his car through the winding roads, my guide explained that he found no antagonism between so-called Paganism and Christian traditions and freely embraced both in his parish church through festivals, field trips and liturgy. He took me to the graveyard of St. Levan's church where a large, cleft boulder was flanked by a phallic-shaped tall stone. Amid the Christian crosses and headstones, these geologic wonders represented an alternate worldview to the Christian end-of-time scenario. One legend had it that when the cleft enlarged wide enough to allow a cart and horse to pass through, the end times were nigh, but the more ancient story embedded in the rocks was clear as the "male" menhir rose sharply before the labial stone.

We visited another small parish church at St. Buryan. Inside the church, in each pew, were individualized prayer pillows cross-stitched by members of the congregation. One in particular caught my eye: it showed a shining, towering cross of gold bursting forth from the center of a standing stone circle. My own Celtic bias provided the first reading of the pillow as the blending of Pagan and Christian symbolism, but without interviewing its owner, it was impossible to know whether both the cross and the circle were considered spiritual or if the integration of the two simply reflected one or the other as a religious object embedded within a particular cultural and historical framework.

The search for spiritual Celtic landscapes resulted in delightfully open-ended interpretative performances. There were navigations to Carn Euny in a thick mist; to

Madron Well past tattered clouties; to St. Levan's hermitage ruin where I longed instead to run down the slope to join the bathers at sea; to Helman Tor where I saw in the rocks the shape of the rabbit goddess as I stood for photos with my Methodist hosts; to the Dragons and Saints Festival at a church, its name lost during a dizzying one-day tour of stone churches; to the solitary day spent at the Witchcraft museum in Boscastle; to Pendennis castle where I was treated to my first pasty; and to Gwenapp Pit where I started to understand the full importance of Methodism in the county. As a result of those experiences, my own sense of Celtic has shifted.

I've asked other Americans who regularly seek out sacred Celtic places, experiences and objects why Celtic songs are described as hauntingly beautiful, Celtic trees as wise, and Celtic sea salts as healthier? Why are mists elsewhere portals to mysterious ecstasy when at home they are considered a damnable fog? Why are our Cottonwood trees "big weeds?" It seems to hinge on the degree of familiarity—actually unfamiliarity. The less we know about a society, a culture or a group, the more useful they are as vehicles for transportation out of our own everyday concerns, which are reflected back at us in our own green lawns (need mowing), our own gnarled trees (need pruning), our own fogged up windshields (need wiping), and our own table salt (needs dinner).

The imagination of Celtic lands provides a relief from our ordinary and our imagining of them holds a sense of magic and "the force of magic lies in its use of desire as a major contributing factor in causing hoped-for results," (Grimes, 1990, p. 49). These geo-spiritual texts serve as conceptual stakes in the ground to declare that purposeful activity is occurring in our imagination (Grimes, 2000, p. 266). But how to keep those stakes in the conceptual ground is another problem.

I overheard an American tourist who was visiting Cornwall complain about her earlier trip to Glastonbury, calling it a sad disappointment. The place, she said, was worse than Disneyland and she accused the village of becoming a caricature of itself, with shopkeepers relentlessly commodifying the sacred. She felt cheated and disoriented. I could imagine the type of experience she had in mind as she climbed the Tor or visited the Chalice Well, hoping that some small magic would make itself known. If the spiritual experience is articulated in terms of the anticipated results, as Grimes says, one of those surely is the hope for a launch-pad from which to begin a private journey of self improvement and change. And even if commodified culture is the avenue through which we first approach, inform and shape our Celtic spiritual ideal, we bracket out that market culture in hopes it won't contaminate our experience. Media may provide a private space for imagination, but reinserting those internal reflections into a public space is often less accommodating, and real-world contact with spaces and places means possible ruptures in the hull of our dreams, and that can be both a lucky and unlucky happenstance.