

UNIVERSAL MAJESTY,  
VERITY & LOVE INFINITE

*A Life of George Watson*

*Macgregor Reid*

Dr Adam Stout

THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS  
MOUNT HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2005

## THE MOUNT HAEMUS AWARD

**There was already the Bond or circle of Druid fellowship between them, called the Caw, and companions of these several bodies founded the present-day Mount Haemus Grove in 1245.**

**Now Mount Haemus is a real mountain in the Balkans, and either this or another of the same name was the classical prison of the winds. ... The Aeolian isles off Sicily are also, however, given for this windy prison. It was, whatever the location, the allegorical name for powerful inspiration which lurked beneath the surface.**

Ross Nichols, *The Book of Druidry*

**As for the Mount Haemus Grove of 1245, I am simply baffled. The only historical connection between Druidry and Mount Haemus that I can discover comes from the mid-eighteenth century, when William Stukeley wrote letters describing himself as 'a Druid of the Grove of Mount Haemus'. All that he meant by this was that he was one of a group of friends who met at his house on a hill in the Highgate area near London which, because of its windy position, was nicknamed by them after the mountain in Greek mythology which was the home of the winds. His letters were published in the nineteenth century, and may somehow have become the basis for a myth involving the Middle Ages and John Aubrey.**

Ronald Hutton, First Mt Haemus Lecture

Recognising the vital part that history plays within Druidry, and thanks to the generosity of the Order's patroness, the Order is now able to grant a substantial award for original research in Druidism, with particular emphasis on historical research. We have called this scholarship the Mount Haemus Award, after the apocryphal Druid grove of Mt Haemus that was said to have been established near Oxford in 1245.

Philip Carr-Gomm

Chosen Chief

The Order of Bards Ovates & Druids

Alban Eilir 2005

# UNIVERSAL MAJESTY, VERITY & LOVE INFINITE

## *A Life of George Watson Macgregor Reid*

Adam Stout



“Mary P. What your friends say is undoubtedly true. I am a crank”, replied the Editor of *The Nature Cure* to an enquiry from a reader. “My compliments to your family doctor, his friends, and your family; tell them I hope to survive their criticism, even if I die a crank” (*TNC* 1909:1, 258).

George Watson Macgregor Reid died sixty years ago, and yet he’s still one of the most inspirationally different characters I’ve ever come across. I first encountered him while I was doing my PhD. I was looking at the relationship between

*From Nature Cure Annual, 1907* “fringe” and “mainstream” understandings of the ancient past, and discovered that it was Reid who put Druidry at the heart of the Stonehenge summer solstice. His speeches were often reported verbatim in the local papers, and the more I read of him the more fascinated I became with his utterly unique take on the world.

Was he a quack? A charlatan? What do these words mean? He was bombastic and impatient, quarrelsome, wonderfully conceited. He was no saint, although he probably thought he was. He took pride in being one of the “peculiar people”. He was a flamboyant dresser, inventive not just in the costumes he wore at Stonehenge but also on Clapham Common, preaching socialism from the back of a van wearing “a silk hat and long frock coat” (Peacock 1945:15-16). As ‘Ayu Subhadra’ he was photographed, tonsured and robed, in *The Path That Is Light*; (Subhadra 1910, fp128) as the Dastur Tuatha de Dinaan, he posed “in the Dress of the Libyan Arabs” (*TNL* 1913:fp 256). He had a big physical presence. “This giant of a man, he is said to have weighed 16 stone, used to attract huge

crowds by his powerful oratory” (anon 1946b). People tramped in their hundreds across Salisbury Plain or South London to hear his magnificent rantings, this fringe-land demagogue who for half-a-century preached from whatever platform he could find, and managed to transform Stonehenge into his own stylish soap-box.

He preached social and spiritual transformation. One thing that really strikes me is just how topical so much of his stuff still is. Modern Druidry emerged from a much-forgotten foment of idealism that historians, interested in Mainstream Events, have tended to bury beneath bigger labels. Yet health reform, back-to-nature, natural health and anti-vaccination movements; food reform, vegetarian and anti-vivisection movements; political reform, feminism, anarchism and socialism; religious reform, theosophy and mysticism, Celticism and anti-imperialism – all these were live issues then as now. They were the ideals of the counter-culture, and George Watson Reid was right in the thick of it.

### ***The Nature of the Evidence***

Reid published one book and a number of poems and polemics, under a variety of pseudonyms. Some of his unpublished manuscripts survive. He edited several journals, notably *The Nature Cure* from 1906 to 1909 and *The New Life* from 1912, on and off and in one form or another for the next two decades. His speeches during the twenty years of his active career as Chief Druid were often reported verbatim, and thanks to the hoarding instincts of the Civil Service a useful stash of Reidian outpourings have found their way into the National Archives. In short, for much of his life there’s plenty of material to work from. The trouble is that Reid, like many a mystic, was constantly shaking up the kaleidoscope, creating wild and contradictory claims about his past that might have been designed to throw all plodding wannabe biographers of the scent. You can never take any of his assertions for granted. All lines must be read between, all statements externally verified. He’s an amazing challenge to the historical sleuth, exciting and contradictory. Nor was he the only one to obfuscate the story of his life. Various versions for various purposes were cooked up by his successors, and the process is still going on.

I’m sidling up to explaining that what you’re about to read is far from the full picture. It’s a bit skeletal, for one thing. I’ve gone for bone-dry ‘facts’, since they’re so hard to find. I’ll put some flesh on these bones later. It’s also very much work-in-progress, and all comments will be gladly received. I’d really like to thank Philip Carr-Gomm and OBOD for giving me the chance to indulge my obsession; already I’ve righted a few minor wrongs in the detail

of the thesis. My thanks are due to many other people: to the Rev. Andrew Hill of the Universalist Church in Edinburgh for putting me on to the excellent work of Bruce Aubry and Alan Seaburg; to both of these, for inspiration and further sources; to Hugh and Martha Whitehouse for information on the Densmores; to M for patience, astrology, dinner and faith; and above all Ronald Hutton, Professor of History at the University of Bristol, pioneer in bringing modern esoterica under academic scrutiny, imperilling his own reputation to show all the world that this stuff is important and these people do matter. Ronald not only read and commented on an earlier draft, but has been happy to share information and discuss ideas with me. This paper is the richer for his generous collaboration.

### *Early Days*

He was apparently born George Watson Reid, but even that's not certain. Nor's the time, or the place, or even the year of his birth. In 1889, he claimed to have been born on February 22 1850, at Dunvegan, on the Isle of Skye (anon 1889). That was five years before official registration began in Scotland, so this date can't be officially verified. It seems right astrologically: Sun conjunct Venus and Neptune, all in Pisces (mystical, charismatic), and Mercury in Aquarius (which would explain his whackiness) - but at the end of his life he was claiming to have been born in India, and was celebrating his birthday on October 7! (anon 1946a).

Even the year of his birth is controversial. Although in the 1940s he was claiming ages that tally with an 1850 birth-year, in 1926 he claimed to be a mere stripling of 72, ie born in 1854/5 (anon 1926a), and he might have been a lot younger than that. R Bruce Aubry, whose excellent biographical essay on Reid's early life I've followed slavishly, thinks that he might have been born at least a decade later (Aubry 1986:3), and, in the 1889 interview, Reid drew attention to the fact that he was "rather young-looking", which, he felt, counted against him as a potential union activist. Was he actually "rather young", and not just "rather young looking"? Did he choose to pile on the years in order to increase his shop-floor credibility? Who knows? But the Scottish registry does have a record of a George Watson Reid who was born to a nautical family from Anderston, Lanarkshire in 1862...

Wherever and whenever he was born, it seems that Reid did not have much of a childhood. "The fact that he was a motherless child dominated his life", claimed one obituarist (anon 1946a), and as 'Ayu Subhadra' the mystical Reid lamented his upbringing:

“To the motherless child but little joy is given in the day of growth... sorrow was his from the day of his earliest conscious thought”. He “was born amid ignorance and nourished with sorrow” (‘Subhadra’ 1910:160). The more prosaic and nautical Union journal *Seafaring* interview of 1889 says that Reid “went to the fishing” with his uncle at the age of 9, and on his death in 1874 joined the Royal Navy, where for twelve years he served on a variety of ships and in several sea-battles in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1886 he joined the Merchant Navy, and the following year joined the Coast Seamen’s Union in San Francisco. In 1888 he was working on the Glasgow docks, and “conceived the original idea of forming a Labour Federation which should comprise all such labourers and others in Glasgow as had no union of their own.” A host of branches were opened, but just before the new union could be registered Reid fell ill, and it “came to an untimely end” (anon 1889).

How much of this is ‘true’? Bruce Aubry suggests that the broad outline of this career, from fisherman to seaman to docker, is quite plausible; and there was a thriving union in San Francisco at that time. However, he’s found no evidence of his enlistment in the Royal Navy: not until July 1888 does Reid begin to appear on the public record, lecturing regularly over the next six months at open-air meetings of the Social Democratic Federation (Aubry 1986:2-4). At one of these, he caught the attention of two organisers from the National Amalgamated Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union, with whom he became quite friendly. They were also impressed by the role Reid played in that summer’s Clyde Seamen’s Strike, and recommended that he be sent to Hull as their delegate; hence the interview in the Union newspaper, *Seafaring* (anon 1889).

His task at Hull was to undermine a local union and replace it with a branch of the National one, so it is hardly surprising that his six-month stint was controversial. In June 1889, he was arrested, convicted and fined for assaulting a blacklegger, and replaced by a “more conciliatory” local leader (Aubry 1986:7). In the same month, just two months after *Seafaring* had published their flattering biography, Reid discovered that the paper was being produced by a non-unionised ‘rat-shop’ printer and rushed his complaint into the Social Democratic Federation’s newspaper, *Commonweal* (Aubry 1986:6). “I have every respect for Mr Reid as an earnest and indefatigable worker in the cause,” responded the editor of *Seafaring*, “but he needs to temper his zeal with judgement” (Aubry 1986:6). Soon afterward Reid set out for America, where he began to organise the Atlantic ports as an offshoot of the English Union.

## *To America*

To begin with all went very well. Not only were branches established in New York and Boston by the end of the year, but Reid had managed to persuade a group of New York dockers to establish the grandly-named, if short-lived, International Brotherhood of Dockside Labourers (Aubry 1986:9-13). Then, in the December issue of *Seafaring*, the National Union not only denied that he had any official connection, but also accused him of misusing the Hull union's funds (Aubry 1986:13-4). Reid rashly retaliated in the *American Coast Seamen's Journal*, by claiming that several branches were seceding from the National Union: "they had reason to" (Aubry 1986:16). The National Union leadership, in Aubry's words, "could not sit idly by and allow such dangerous news to be broadcast around the world of maritime trades unionism". Shortly afterwards, two "supposed members" of the Hull branch drew the attention of the Philadelphia Branch to the *Seafaring* denunciation, thereby forcing Reid's resignation. More "details" of Reid's alleged dishonesty in Hull were leaked in time for the New York Convention of April 14-17 1890, which resulted in his expulsion from the Union (Aubry 1986:17-19).

Was he guilty? Who knows? I like to think he wasn't. It seems unlikely that someone who'd just been drummed out of a Union in one place should seek to further its cause in another: Reid must surely have gone to America with some kind of mandate from his Union, however vague. Perhaps the best evidence in his defence is the lifelong respect that he retained for his closest colleague at that time: Hugh McGregor, who with Reid and the respected Samuel Gompers had been responsible for the handling of a \$500 loan. Over thirty years later McGregor was included in Reid's list of Great Universalists (Aubry 1986:12, 14, 19; Reid 1924a); he would hardly have been there had he been one of those who called for Reid's blood. Bruce Aubry draws attention to other power-struggles within the Union, and the somewhat machiavellian personality of its leader, J Havelock Wilson. Reid's stance on the 'rat-shop' affair suggests that some personal antipathy seems highly probable, and his headstrong propensity to rush his grievances into print did him no favours: the second time it happened Wilson had to throw enough dirt at him to bring a definitive and humiliating end to Reid's Union career.

This event may have shaken him profoundly, to judge from the substance of two very different hagiographies that Reid later created to account for his Union years. The first, produced for the benefit of his *Nature Cure* readers in 1906, claimed that he had been "badly wounded in battle", and subsequently "nearly eight years spent in doctors' hands has

left me a martyr to many weaknesses. According to the doctor – or should I say doctors in consultation – I had only a year to live at the most in 1891”. (A slightly different version has it that Sir William Broadbent (the Royal Physician, no less) had “after a careful examination” given Reid “at most three months to live”) (*TNC* 1906:2; 1907:164-5). The second version, reported by a journalist present at the 1932 Stonehenge solstice, has Reid beginning his career as a ship’s doctor; he travelled to China where he became a Buddhist, and ‘tramped as a beggar through Tibet’. In 1890 he served as medical officer to Chilean revolutionaries, where he was severely wounded; two years later he went to America in time to stand for the election (anon 1932).

What both versions have in common is a reference to wounding, and to some sort of crisis at the start of the 1890s. Neither hints even obliquely at Reid’s union activity. In view of the documented humiliation he underwent at that time, I’m inclined to think that these ‘wounds’ were mental rather than physical.

### ***Populist Socialist***

The manner of Reid’s going doesn’t seem to have affected either his standing in New York City or his desire to live there. Alan Seaburg (2004:537) claims that he must have become a naturalized American citizen in order to do what he did next, which was to stand for election in 1892 as the People’s Party (‘Populist’) Candidate for the 10<sup>th</sup> Congressional District of New York.

In later years, Reid claimed to have stood as a Socialist (“the first Socialist candidate for Congress” (anon 1932)). In fact, as Seaburg points out (2004:538), the American Socialist party was not established until 1901, but in 1892 the Populists were the next-best thing. The Party was a brand-new force, formally constituted in July of that year, and in the rousing words of their spokesman Ignatius Donnelly, they declared war on the rich:

“The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection, imported pauperized labor beats down their wages, a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down, and they are rapidly degenerating into European conditions. The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty...



[The Populists seek]... to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of “the plain people... We declare that this Republic can only endure as a free government while built upon the love of the whole people for each other and for the nation... we must be in fact, as we are in name, one united brotherhood of free men” (Donnelly 1892).

That last sentiment was very much in tune with Reid’s later Universalism; and had he not himself just tried to found an “International Brotherhood of Dockside Labourers”? But although the Populist presidential candidate won over a million votes, Populism was essentially a rural phenomenon, and the Party did not attract much support from urban workers. Like most East Coast candidates, Reid did not do very well: he received 287 votes, about 1% of the total cast (Seaburg 2004:539; anon, *nd*).

### ***Anarchy and Civilisation***

Reid’s foray into mainstream politics having proven to be little more successful than his union career, he may have decided to return to Britain at this point, since in 1893 the Proletarian Publishing Company of Clerkenwell published its one-and-only pamphlet: Reid’s *The Natural Basis of Civilization*.

This important, if florid, pamphlet finds Reid mediating Populism with Anarchism. Like the Populists, Reid inveighs against militarism and profiteering, both themes that were central to the Populist campaign. Even the anti-railroad hostility of Midwest farmers is there, in the form of a statistical analysis of British railway-company profiteering. Like the Populists, Reid believes that Government tramples on the rights of individuals, and gives “to the ruling few *all* that was taken from the many”. Political parties look after their own “while the starving workers look on with sullen silence” (Reid 1893:6, 8).

But Reid goes way beyond the Populists: “*the Government is responsible for every evil which curses and blights the happiness of the country, destroys the happiest of homes, and brutalizes and degrades the people*” (Reid 1893:8, original italics). Nor is the answer to be found in rampant individualism. “Under a state of voluntary or Anarchist Communism the rights of the individual will be respected. The human race is entirely communistic in its tendencies, and it is the falsity of individualistic doctrines, and workings, that has brought into existence the miseries and wrongs which to-day threaten the best interests of the commonweal” (Reid 1893:3).

## ***What Happened in the 1890s?***

Was *The Natural Basis* published at the time when Reid and his comrades were foretelling the end of London, a bunch of idealists “saturated with ideas” of the millennial variety? “We were all Socialists, with a sprinkling of freedom dreaming Anarchists, and had our own views regarding each others’ rostrum”, he recalled many years later. A group of them almost succeeded in going “Back to the Land”, setting up a community somewhere near London “where, in our dreams, life’s greatest example was to be given to the exploited and submerged” until the project itself submerged, broken on the reef of mortgage repayments (Reid 1927).

All this may have happened; there is a distinctly millennial feel to the *Natural Basis*; but, as one obituarist noticed despairingly, “[s]o many stories are told of his colourful career that many are difficult to believe” (anon 1946b). Between 1893 and 1906, the impecunious anarcho-activist acquired a wife and a son, an impressive middle name, an address in a well-heeled Sussex town, enough of a reputation as a Nature Cure practitioner to establish an Association and a magazine – and, probably, enough money to keep it afloat. Yet I have yet to find any direct documentary evidence for Reid’s activities during these thirteen years: I’m left with hagiography, inference and guesswork to fill in the gaps, and great fun it is too.

One version of ‘The *Nature Cure* Reid’ claims that he had borne up well to “the hardships of the field of war” during the Greco-Turkish War of 1896/7, and at some point after 1891 to have taken part in two exciting-sounding “scientific missions” to West Africa (*TNC* 1906:2). This was not the only time he claimed to have witnessed the Greco-Turkish War (see *TNL* 1913:240), so perhaps there was some ‘truth’ in that claim. A less exotic, but more bizarre, account of Reid’s doings at this time was allegedly penned by one Dr G Robertson of Aberdeen, in a sniffy article for a publication called *Science Notes*. The article was a lengthy indictment of *The Nature Cure*, which magazine obligingly reprinted it *in extenso*. Dr Robertson, who claimed Reid as “my old school-fellow and class-mate”, declared that Watson Reid’s work had led to much “bad feeling” amongst orthodox doctors in a string of Scottish towns and cities, and expressed himself concerned that “Naturopathy should be nipped in the bud before that exceedingly able writer and most efficient laboratory worker – but dangerous dreamer – who edits [*The Nature Cure*], is enable to repeat his success in other fields”. Reid, according to Robertson, had an elder brother, “less able” but nonetheless responsible for spreading anti-vaccination fever in Paisley and other

Scottish towns “about ten years ago”, ie around 1896. “The elder brother is a philosophical anarchist of the Herbert Spencer school, and has settled quietly in New York as the editor of a purely philosophical paper called THE EXPERIMENT, where he pleases his immediate friends and leaves his erstwhile colleagues and antagonists in peace” (*TNC* 1907:60).

Neither *Science Notes* nor Dr Robertson seems to have existed. I’ve found no evidence of a Reid involved in anti-vaccination agitation in Paisley, and THE EXPERIMENT has also proven elusive. In short, the article appears to have been an elaborate hoax, perhaps designed to reassure Reid’s readership, hostile to orthodox medicine, that the medical establishment was alarmed not just by the journal’s existence, but by the heavyweight credentials of its editor. “I don’t exactly know what Dr Robertson means by pillorying our editor and his brother together”, wrote the editor. My hunch is that the ‘brothers’ actually represent two sides of his own personality, with the New York philosopher perhaps representing an *alter ego* whom the Reid of 1906 regarded wistfully.

In his guise as Terror of the Scottish medics, Reid was at least acknowledging some fairly lengthy involvement with the world of Nature Cure. Quite what aspect of this noble art the good doctor made his speciality is unclear. He was remembered as a “clever osteopath” (anon 1946b) and claimed to have given the first talk on this subject in Britain (*TNC* 1908:44), but nutrition may have been his big thing, to judge from the title of a book he claimed to have written. “*Rational Dietetics*”, he told the world in 1909, “has had a circulation of 260,000 copies in America alone, and is now translated into most European languages” (*TNC* 1909, March insert). Not a single copy seems to have survived...

The later Reid was very keen to give the impression that he’d spent a lot of time in New York. “I never engaged in private practice in New York City”, the Editor of *TNC* wrote in reply to a question from a correspondent. “I was assistant to Dr Moncrieff there, but the greater part of my time was spent in Chamber Street Hospital, and in the St Luke’s Presbyterian Hospital” (*TNC* 1908:44). Both hospitals apparently existed; and so may Dr Moncrieff, mentioned many times by Reid although I’ve yet to find anything more about him. Or her. The Editor’s answer concluded with the line “I came here with Dr Densmore”, and here at last we’re on to something, or someone, who is a little less elusive.

There were in fact two ‘Doctor Densmores’, the husband-and-wife team of Emmet (1837-1911) and Helen (c1833-1904). In 1882, they set up a medical practice in New York, where they specialised in obesity and the cure of chronic disease. Helen was an early exponent of the Banting diet. No bread, no cereals, no pulses, no starch, plenty of fruit was the regime,

and they walked their talk. Charged with looking after his sick cousin's five children, Emmet banished their toothsome breakfasts and put them all on vegetable gruel, and for this they all not only loathed but remembered him many decades later (Compton 1901:38-39; Hugh L Whitehouse, *pers comm*).

In 1892, Emmet (some say Emmet and Helen jointly) published an influential book called *How Nature Cures*. They also had a house in London, in which city they set up a 'Natural Food Society' that produced a periodical called *Natural Food* between 1890 and 1896. This organisation seems to have been fronted by Helen: Israel Zangwill (1896) called her "the apostle of the new creed". Described as "a brilliant woman of determined will" (anon 1895), Helen had been a newspaper correspondent during the Civil War, and was the first woman to sit in the reporters' gallery of the House of Representatives." As part of an official inquiry, she crossed the Atlantic as a steerage passenger to get first-hand experience of what it was like for emigrants; and she led a prolonged and ultimately successful campaign to establish the innocence of Florence Maybrick, an American woman living in Britain who had been accused of poisoning her English husband (Compton 1901:38-39).

Reid and Densmore were very much on the same wavelength. Compare the following:

"'Tis natural to be perfect, and it is perfection to be natural. So it is perfection in *all* things we are striving to obtain – perfection in habits, perfection in diet, perfection in the sanitary condition of our houses, streets, and cities... To be perfect we must not starve, or eat of adulterated food, nor live in dingy unhealthy slums, nor abuse ourselves by practising anything which will in time prove detrimental to our health, nor live in a state of celibacy after maturity, nor work too long or too hard, or at dangerous or unhealthy callings – all these, and more, we must pledge ourselves before it is possible for us to enter a state of perfection" (Reid, *The Natural Basis of Civilization*, 1893 p1).

"Health is man's birthright. It is as natural to be well as to be born. All pathological conditions, all diseases and all tendencies to disease, are the result of the transgression of hygienic and physiological law. This is the science of health in a nut-shell" (Densmore, *The Curative Action of Regimen*, 1896 p.9).

How did they meet? Perhaps Reid was her patient. Perhaps he was a member of the Natural Health Society. Did they even meet at all? Reid was quite capable of making up a meeting; perhaps he simply came across the Densmores' books or publications. But several times he

made the claim that he “came here with Dr Densmore”, so perhaps he did. All that can be said for sure is that he later came to hold her name in reverence, and made her the mythical founding-president of his British Nature Cure Association; his naturopathic mentor.

### ***The Importance of Being Macgregor***

During his putative sojourn in New York, Reid was alleged to have come under the influence of the Utopian leader Thomas Lake Harris; or so his disciple Arthur Peacock claimed, presumably because Reid told him so. An early version had it that Reid attended meetings held at the Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity, where Harris had been a Minister, but it was shown that the dates didn’t tally. After leaving the pulpit, Harris was supposed to have held meetings elsewhere in New York, which Reid might have attended (Peacock 1948; cf Seaburg 2004:534).

Reid found a place for Lake Harris in the Universalist pantheon he devised in 1924 (Reid 1924a), so it is possible that he actually had met him. There are other possibilities too, as we shall see. What’s interesting here is the reference to Universalism. Reid, according to Peacock, claimed that he and the Densmores attended Divine Paternity; he also recalled meetings of Universalists in Christopher Street, New York (Peacock 1948). The Christopher Street Universalists crop up in a story published by Reid in 1913 (‘Macdonald’ 1913:382), so perhaps there’s something in this version of events. What’s certain is that Universalism still flourished in New York at this point, and that Reid was certainly open to Universalist ideas.

Universalism must rank as one of the most optimistic and upbeat varieties of nonconformism. The concept is simple: the universe, being divinely ordered, is therefore ultimately sane and beneficent. Good will triumph over evil; there is accordingly no room for hell; all will ultimately be saved; and furthermore, this is the basic Truth that underlies all religions. Universalism was first formalised in the mid-eighteenth century by a Pembrokeshire Dissenter called James Rely, but this pleasingly comprehensive and tolerant creed thereafter found itself squeezed between hellfire orthodoxies and scientific materialisms. By the late nineteenth century, Universalism had all but died out in Britain, although it retained a strong following in New England (Seaburg 2004:536-7, Hill 2003).

The evidence for Reid’s small-u universalism at this stage is to be found in *The Natural Basis of Civilization*. Here we learn that the world is essentially good:

“All we look upon is good until tampered with by selfishness and greed. Then Nature is good; and man to be good must be natural, and strive to find for himself “The Natural Basis of Civilisation” (Reid 1893:2)

All Utopias, all ideal worlds, all concepts of paradise, had this much in common: that they exist in all religions and every ideology. “The devout sun worshipper, the Indian mythologist, the fanatical Mohammedan, the patient Christian *all* look forward to some ideal state... Glorious expectations! What sublimity of conception! So the Socialist and Anarchist looks forward to his ideal state - his free state - his millennium - the exact counterpart of the Christian or Mohammedan or Indian ideal” (Reid 1893:10).

Reid may have discovered Universalism and T L Harris in the 1890s, or he may not. One other suggestion is that the idea came to him at one remove through Dr Edward Berridge, London homeopathic pioneer and a fervent admirer and biographer of T L Harris. Might he have counted as a ‘Universalist’? Berridge was listed by Reid in his 1924 pantheon of Universalists (Reid 1924a), and Reid’s acolyte Arthur Peacock was to claim that Berridge had kept the torch of “Universalist propaganda” alive in London (Peacock 1929). Was Reid an early convert? So many questions...

Berridge was also a prominent member of the famous Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the organisation that seems to lie behind so many occult and esoteric movements of the twentieth century; indeed, it was Berridge’s interest in T L Harris that had triggered off the chain reaction that led to the rift between Mathers and Aleister Crowley, and the break-up of the original GD (Colqhoun 1975:148-9).

George Watson Reid also had a Golden Dawn connection: obscure and perhaps very marginal, but it may well date from the 1890s. One of very few sure-fire Reidian facts of the period between 1893 and 1906 is that he acquired an extra middle-name, ‘Macgregor’. (His son Robert was also a ‘Macgregor’ in later life: if this name was given at birth, then his father was presumably using the name himself at the time, ie c.1899, but since I’ve yet to find a birth certificate for Robert I can’t confirm this either way).

‘Macgregor’ was a fine Scottish name, popular with latter-day Jacobites since the Clan Gregor had been proscribed after the 1745 Rebellion. It was perhaps an appropriate addition for a truculent Scotsman who wished to cover his plebeian traces, for whatever reason, and it may have found special favour in Reid’s eyes because it was similar to the name of Reid’s ally on the New York docks, Hugh McGregor. But Hugh was a ‘Mc’, and Reid chose to be ‘Mac’. Another explanation seems called for, and the most economical

explanation is one that throws some intriguing light onto Reid's later interest in the occult, since 'Macgregor' was also a name adopted or bestowed during the 1890s on at least four members of the Golden Dawn, three of whom at least were known to Reid.

The first of these was Samuel Liddell Mathers, the Golden Dawn's joint founder and leader. The second was Mathers' wife, Mina Bergson, the GD's first initiate, who took to signing her illustrations as "M Bergson Macgregor" (Rosher 1897). The third was Allan Bennett, who was (formally or informally) adopted by Mathers and initiated into the Golden Dawn in 1894 (Xristos 2001). To this inner family, this mini Clan MacGregor within the Golden Dawn, must be added no less a figure than Aleister Crowley, who claimed that Mathers had bestowed the name on him "[t]o assert an "astral link" - what you might call a bond of sympathy - between himself and me" (Vincey 1911).

That Reid should adopt the same name of his own volition at the same time seems too much of a coincidence; and yet, if he was similarly 'Macgregored' by Mathers, it would seem that he too must have enjoyed an "astral link" with the master. Ronald Hutton tells me that in Reid's *The Message of the Paths* manuscript (Reid *nd2*), he actually describes Mathers as "Our teacher and friend of many dream paths", and in *The Yellow Dragon*, a story which Reid published in 1913, Mathers is lavishly praised for his translation of the Kaballah. He was "the great leader of thought who has done so much to make the book known to English readers. A learned Scotsman who has settled in Paris, whose life is given to the elevation of his kind" ('Macdonald' 1913:387). With the eye of faith, a close link between Mathers and Reid might be deduced, and one which was probably forged during the 1890s since that's the decade in which the others got Macgregored.

Why, though, should the magus of the Golden Dawn choose to forge an "astral link" with someone who, it seems, was not even a member of the Order (Imuhtuk, *nd*)? Why did Mathers choose Reid? And why 'Macgregor'? The answer to the second question may answer the first, for Mathers was a very committed Scot. Although humbly born in London, he convinced himself, according to J W Brodie-Innes (1919), that he was descended from the infant son of Alastair Macgregor of Glenstrae, born posthumously after his father was murdered in 1603: 'Mo-Athair's' [Mathers] allegedly means "The Posthumous". Obvious, really. He was a Jacobite, a "Celt of the Celts", ready to "pick a quarrel on a point of punctilio, a real, or even a fancied, slight to his clan or nation", prone to wearing Highland dress both indoors and out; his wife's first name he Gaelicised from 'Mina' to 'Moina'. Perhaps significantly, Crowley claims that Mathers bestowed the name on him when he took on a house in the Highlands (Vincey 1911). Is it not possible that this somewhat

unconvincing Scotsman was greatly impressed by the genuine one? Was Mathers drawn to Reid simply because he was Scottish?

The remaining question here is how, and why, Reid was drawn to Mathers; and here the figure of Helen Densmore may well have played a key role. Densmore was actively involved in contemporary spiritual exploration: like many of her radical peers – the women’s rights campaigners, the food and health reformers, she saw no sharp break between the body and the soul. She had been a close friend of Madame Blavatsky, and was an active champion against her detractors and a member of the Theosophical Society: “I know of no more earnest elevated body of people, intent in searching after Spiritual truth than the members of the various Theosophical societies whom it has been my good fortune to meet, and these societies are the direct result of Madame Blavatsky’s efforts” (Densmore 1888a and b). In June 1898, she was one of the American delegates to the International Congress of Spiritualists in London, and her own Natural Food Society was said to be dedicated to “working for the higher life” (Zangwill 1896). Mathers, too, was a member of the Theosophical Society, a vegetarian, anti-vivisectionist, and a keen supporter of women’s rights; and like Densmore, he was acquainted with Madame Blavatsky. They moved in similar circles, and it would not have been surprising if they had met. Could it have been Densmore that first encouraged Reid to become interested in esoterica? And could it have been through her that he came to meet Mathers?

It must be stressed that all this is pure speculation. I’ve yet to find proof positive that Reid met either of them. He may simply have read Densmore’s writings and been impressed by them; and, as Ronald Hutton points out (*pers comm*), it is quite possible that Reid “only actually encountered Mathers in dreams, so the link between them was a psychic one rather than a straightforward relationship”. At this stage, all that can certainly be said about the matter of Macgregor is that when Reid re-emerges into documented history after 1906, he is hardly ever without it; and out of respect for his own self-image I shall adopt it hereinafter.

## ***The Nature Cure***

When did Macgregor Reid return to Britain for good? He may indeed have “come over with Dr Densmore” as he claimed, but the Densmores’ own movements give little away since they had a house in London anyway and were regularly crossing the Atlantic. It was in 1902, however, that Macgregor Reid later claimed Helen Densmore had presided over the first meeting of the British Nature Cure Association (anon 1929b), and in later years he



maintained that he had returned in 1901 (anon 1946b). This would also tally with his 1908 claim to have been editing a (untraceable) magazine called *The Dietetic Guide* ‘for six years’ (*Nature Cure Annual*: xiii).

There was a curious tale, recorded by Reid’s son Robert in 1955, that his father’s Druidic organisation had been preceded by “a Lodge called Harmony” that met in Kensington, West London, and “established a Community in Praed Street Paddington, actually an independent church, with social services to the public. This was closed down and is now the Golden Domes News Cinema” (Reid 1955). Ithell Colquhoun, almost certainly quoting Robert, claims that Reid senior used to “convene his sympathisers” in this building (Colquhoun 1975:124). Now Reid junior was every bit as inventive as his father, and this whole episode could have been imaginary. However, the London Street Directory shows that there was not only a News Cinema in Praed St (albeit not called the “Golden Domes”), but that this had indeed replaced a chapel (closed in 1910), which had also been the only religious building in the street. Perhaps, then, there is a grain of truth in Robert’s claim. Perhaps his father had been involved with a group who rented this Baptist chapel in its latter years, and ran it as some kind of “independent church”. It may be significant that the Densmores’ London house was in South Kensington (Densmore 1892). Somewhere, members of Helen Densmore’s Natural Food Society met to toil “for the higher life”: could this have been in Praed St?

Not until September 1906, however, do we finally get a firm hold of our elusive hero, not merely ‘Macgregor’ but sometimes (not often) double-barrelling it to Macgregor-Reid, increasingly prone to styling himself ‘Doctor’, affluently ensconced in a villa in the affluent Sussex town of Burgess Hill, and about to launch a magazine called *The Nature Cure*.

Why Sussex? It’s clear from the magazine that Macgregor Reid had already developed a range of contacts in Brighton, and this includes one ‘Nurse Maude Reid’ who may have been his sister-in-law. She can’t have been his wife, since his daughter Marion’s birth certificate, issued in July 1907, gives her mother’s name as Mary Elizabeth Macgregor Reid, formerly Wood. In other words, Macgregor Reid may have had a ‘real’, biological brother who was already established in Sussex, who may perhaps have paved the way for his brother’s arrival. Why Burgess Hill? An ‘Answers to Correspondents’ item in *TNC* indicates that Reid had lived in lodgings for a year (*TNC* 1907:7), which may suggest that he went there to work for someone else. On Marion’s birth certificate he describes himself as a ‘Public Analyst’, but from September 1906 it is clear that most of his energy was going into the production of *The Nature Cure*.

The magazine was issued monthly (more or less) for almost three years. It had fairly lavish production values, especially for the time: high-quality paper, colour cover, photographs. At one point Macgregor Reid estimated that the magazine needed to sell 50,000 copies (*TNC* 1906:11) but it is unlikely that sales were ever more than a tiny fraction of that. The Editor regularly pointed out that he was giving his time for nothing, and was clearly hoping that the magazine would start to become profitable, but it is apparent that the magazine was being massively subsidized by somebody; and that somebody was probably Macgregor Reid himself.

Where did the money come from? A later Chief Druid was under the impression that he invented and patented the health-drink Sanatogen, but Seaburg's investigations have demonstrated otherwise (Seaburg 2004:542). He used *The Nature Cure* to advertise his own services (eg *TNC* 1907:7), so it is clear that he was at least trying to earn a living; but as the magazine grew more and more eccentric it looks more and more like a hobby that was being supported from some other source of income. Perhaps he married well: I know nothing about his wife beyond her name. Or perhaps, like those too-prosperous ex-colonials who turn up in Sherlock Holmes stories, living comfortably but fearfully in Home Counties mansions, Macgregor Reid truly had a shady past, and was now living off gains ill-gotten during those thirteen silent years...

*The Nature Cure* was pitched at "all Food Reformers, Vegetarians, Temperance Enthusiasts, Anti-Vivisectionists, Anti-Vaccinists and believers in Simple Life ideals" (*Nature Cure Annual* 1907-8:xiii): a pretty neat synopsis of contemporary alternative society. The 'Simple Life' allusion is to the work of Edward Carpenter of Sheffield, doyen of the New Life Fellowship, whose *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* meant more to many socialists than *Das Kapital*. Macgregor Reid's relationship with Carpenter is obscure, but real enough. His connection with the New Life Fellowship is confirmed by the publication of a lecture he'd delivered to them in the 15 Feb 1907 issue of *TNC* (1907:33-8), and Sheffield proved a fertile recruiting-ground for BNCA supporters.

The magazine carried regular features by Nature Cure veterans such as Richard Metcalfe, proprietor of the London Hydropathic Establishment at Richmond Hill and author of several books on Nature Cure; and Mrs A S Hunter, formerly proprietor of the famous Bridge of Allan Hydropathic Institution in Scotland, whom Reid as 'that hardest of workers and best of women' (*TNC* 1906:5). There were articles on various institutions, medical topics and subjects likely to interest readers, such as a tour round Letchworth Garden City. There were regular and highly flattering biographies of the various worthies involved in the

movement, well-illustrated with photographs; and there were Macgregor Reid's own editorials, self-indulgent and increasingly eccentric but always witty.

*The Nature Cure* was intended to cater for the membership of the British Nature Cure Association & Health & Pleasure League, whose first "Executive Council Meeting" was held in January 1907. Six Vice Presidents were appointed (the President was chosen in May): of these, two were writers and two were closely connected with hydropathic institutions. The Corresponding Secretary was also Organiser of the Ladies' Committee, and John Shaw, Business Manager of *The Nature Cure*, was appointed General Secretary & Treasurer (*TNC* 1907:13, 185-6).

For a while, things seem to have gone pretty well for both magazine and association. Macgregor Reid & Shaw set up a limited-liability company to run the magazine; and in November 1906, just two months after the launch, *The Nature Cure* announced that it was moving from Burgess Hill to 57 Fleet St in London (*TNC* 1906:8). The Association itself spawned branches in Sheffield (April 1907) and Bournemouth (October 1907: *TNC* 1907:74-5, 117). The Sheffield branch was established a month after Macgregor Reid had delivered three lectures on 'simplicitarianism' in the city, and clearly owed much of its impetus to Carpenter's legacy: the local BNCA Secretary, D W Drury, was a colleague of Carpenter's "and had assisted in his slum work in Sheffield" (*TNC* 1907:117, 186-7). (The term 'simplicitarianism' was clearly chosen to invoke the cause of Carpenter, but it failed to catch on. Next year's term was "Naturism", not to be understood in the more narrow sense it has today; although Macgregor Reid was a believer in the healthful effects of nudism, and on one occasion dreamed of buying a tract of land somewhere cheap and remote, upon which "an opportunity be given to all to go back to Nature for a given period, at as low a rate as possible" (*TNC* 1907:169-74).)

Macgregor Reid & Shaw produced one edition of a *Nature Cure Annual*, which appeared in the autumn of 1907, and the organisation was apparently employing three people (*TNC* 1908:650), but it could not keep pace with Macgregor Reid's aspirations for the movement. Hugely idealistic schemes for grand Naturopathic establishments and alternative communities were regularly launched, all of which, he hoped, would tempt the pounds from his readers' pockets. The money was not forthcoming; indeed, he failed to find the £100 he needed to buy a horse-drawn Caravan that would "carry the Gospel of the Simple Life into the highways and byways" (*TNC* 1907:118-9, 230). This suggests that the magazine's readership was both small and none too wealthy; and that, as a business venture, it was probably doomed. It's probably significant that the Business Manager pulled out in the

summer of 1908, when the Company was taken over by “members and friends of the BNCA” (TNC 1908:600).

### *Oahspe and Umvali*

As time went on, the magazine grew more and more eccentric, its prosaic health-care articles larded or replaced with flights of literary imagination and, increasingly, esoterica, most of which seems to have come from the pen of the Editor.

In the first issue of *The Nature Cure*, Macgregor Reid claimed that “his God is too big and too good to belong to any church” (TNC 1906:15). Over the next three years, however, the BNCA itself began to take on some of the attributes of one. Nature Cure was more than just a way of life, and the BNCA’s mission did not stop at death. Its aims were

“To give the weaklings what none else can give

A healing pow’r, to teach the young to live

As mankind should. To ope the blinded eye

To help the strong to live, strengthen the weak to die” (TNC 1906:10-11).

As editor of *The Nature Cure*, Macgregor Reid believed that he had become “a peculiar mixture of clergyman, philosophic teacher, health advisor and dietetic guide” (TNC 1907:11); singularly well-equipped, in fact, to lead a spiritual order of his own. In 1907, soon after his successful trip to Sheffield, Macgregor Reid wrote of “the Simplicitarian Church” (*Nature Cure Annual*:xiii) whose soon-to-be-launched “official organ” was to be a journal called *The New Life*. A magazine of this name finally appeared some five years later, but in the meantime *The Nature Cure* sufficed admirably. “*The Nature Cure* is engaged in the search for good in all”, explained an advert, “believing that what is sought for will ever be found, and its ideals are based upon the good teachings of the whole world”. A list of good teachings then followed, from Confucius and Christ via Ruskin to Walt Whitman (*Nature Cure Annual* 1907-8:xiii).

Esoteric topics were well covered from the start. The fifth issue opened with a six-page illustrated article on ‘The Mahatma’, the death-defying Sri Agamya Guru Paramahansa, then visiting London from India, with whom Macgregor Reid was extremely impressed (TNC 1907:1-6).

In July and August 1907, *TNC* readers were treated to a taste of “The Teachings of Capilya”, whose ‘twelve virtues’ were spelt out in the eleventh chapter “of the Book of the Arc of Bon in the Bible called Oahspe” (*TNC* 1907:235, 263-4). *Oahspe: A Kosmon Bible in the Words of Jehovih and his Angel Embassadors* [sic] was written, ‘channelled’ might be a better word, by a dentist called John Ballou Newbrough and published in 1882. Very long (890 pages), often highly inaccessible, *Oahspe*’s King-James-Bible style has been likened to the Book of Mormon. J B Hare describes it as “a hallucinogenic reworking of cosmology and ancient history” (Hare, *nd*).

The *Oahspe* ‘Faithists’, as they were called, had a ‘Kosmon Church’ in Balham, near Clapham Common, to which Macgregor Reid directed *TNC* readers: “you will discover a few things among them, among which will be sincerity, desire to know, and spirituality” (*TNC* 1908:636). From this it seems that Macgregor Reid himself may have flirted with ‘Faithism’, but he was not one to sit for long in someone else’s congregation. In April 1908 a large advert appeared in *TNC*, announcing

To All Lovers of Health and Wisdom

Important Notice

The Holy Book of

UMVALI

The Mental Guide to Health, Hope, Happiness and Holiness

The Holy Book of UMVALI containing the amalgamated teachings of the Universal Brotherhood, who worship within the Temple of Light and Love will lead to the awakening of many whose souls are asleep

‘UMVALI’ was revealed in the next issue as the initial letters of the first six words of the Invocation, *viz.*, Universal Majesty, Verity and Love Infinite (*TNC* 1908: 347, 440). In April, readers had been promised a serialisation of UMVALI starting in July, but events seem to have overtaken the editor’s pen, for the June issue opens with a full-page picture of another religious leader, Bhikku Annanda Metteya, a Buddhist monk on a six-month proselytising tour of England. This Bhikku was none other than Allan Bennett, the first Englishman to be ordained a Buddhist; once Allan Bennett ‘Macgregor’ of the *Golden Dawn*. Whether or not Macgregor Reid had known him in that connection, he was now totally captivated by Bennett, “certainly the most remarkable man who has ever appeared in our midst”. He was invited to the BNCA premises in Fleet St, and when he left London to

head East again Macgregor Reid chaired a farewell meeting at Battersea Town Hall on 27 September, attended by almost 1000 people (*TNC* 1908:530-1, 584, 651).

### ***The Call of Clapham***

Perhaps as a consequence of the runaway success of this meeting, the BNCA began to hold regular Sunday evening meetings of their own at Battersea Town Hall (*TNC* 1908:585, 652). They had been holding open-air meetings on nearby Clapham Common throughout the summer (*TNC* 1908:414, 490), which at that time was a great centre for political and religious meetings. Here idealists of all persuasions came to preach, to harangue, sometimes to clash: a dynamic hotbed of change, or the hope of it: one social reformer expressed himself inspired by “a great idea of the new world being created in this part of London” (quoted in Smith & Wilson 2002:13-14).

These meetings were very successful. “Much good seed is being sown in the Clapham district”, he wrote, and the following spring he suggested that “we were called spiritually to Clapham”:

“We cannot leave Clapham, there the good work must be continued, and the Ways and Means Committee must do all they can to get a centre of Naturism established in the Clapham district... the life of the movement has become transferred to South London” (*TNC* 1908:650; 1909:27).

Once more events overtook him. The Christmas 1908 *TNC* praised “our sister, Mrs Emily Cox-Davies”, who had taken it on her own initiative to spread “the word of peace and health that we have to give” to the people of Leamington Spa, in Warwickshire. The following April and May, at her invitation, Macgregor Reid gave lectures which she had organised at the town’s Assembly Rooms. Undaunted by the relatively poor turnout, she took over the lease of a hall in Priory Terrace. This building is first listed in the 1908 Street Directory as a Spiritualist Church: a designation which, perhaps significantly, it still retained in 1912. The ‘Leamington Naturists’, however, renamed it St Francis’s Hall, and fitted it up “as a healing, and also as an educational centre”. The choice of dedication was not accidental. The Rev. Horatio Grimley, Rector of Norton in Suffolk and a founder-member of the BNCA, had published a short text on *St Francis and his Friends* the previous year, in which he declared that “the modern St Francis would be the apostle of

simplicity". This prompted Macgregor Reid to call Francis "the Saint of the Simple Life", but he himself chose to describe the Leamington establishment, not in Christian terms but as "The first Temple of the Sankhya" ((*TNC* 1908:37, 83;*TNC* 1909:198, 233, 367-8; Spennell's Street Directory; Grimley 1908:265).

St Francis's Hall was opened on 25 July 1909. It was a high point in the life of Macgregor Reid's eclectic movement, but unfortunately the opening was not described in *The Nature Cure*, for the simple reason that the "Midsummer Double Issue" was the last issue to be published. Why did the magazine fold? There's no hint of collapse in the pages of that last issue, which was as lavishly produced as ever. It doesn't seem that money was the problem, and with the opening of the Leamington centre there was every reason to keep the journal going. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that Macgregor Reid simply became too engulfed by the scale of the mystical experience he was then undergoing to be willing to attend to the time-consuming and prosaic duties of producing a monthly magazine. With no-one else to take it over, *The Nature Cure* seems to have simply petered out.

The BNCA similarly seems to have disappeared as a formal entity. In the absence of any surviving Reidian journalism between 1909 and 1912 it is not possible to follow the Association's evolution in any detail; but at some point before the summer of 1913 it had effectively mutated into the South London Temple of the Universal Bond, installed at 57 Cavendish Road, Clapham Park. This was a large villa south of the Common, built in the 1870s and belonging to an earlier phase of development to the meaner streets of terrace houses which subsequently crept up to meet it. In 1910, the London Street Directory shows it to have been the residence of a doctor-surgeon, but according to the electoral roll there was no-one living there in 1911 or 1912. In 1913, the place was occupied by a Mrs Catherine Louise Grant, who, together with various other Grants remained there until after the place was bombed in 1944, when she was described as the 'caretaker' (cf Seaburg 2004:531). Macgregor Reid was officially described in a drainage plan of 1926 as the owner (Ainsworth, *pers comm.*), and it is reasonable to assume that he bought the place in 1913. How he paid for it is one of Universalism's many mysteries.

57 Cavendish Road became the centre of Universalism, and retained that position thereafter. This was a bit unfortunate for Mrs Cox-Davies and her Leamington venture, from 1913 described both in *The New Life* (p. 328) and in Spennell's Street Directories as "the Universalist Church". Indeed, the Bond now seems to have been undergoing an embarrassment of premises. A letter from 'CHG' of Bristol in *The New Life* urged that "all of our strength be centred upon one Temple", and advised against the creation of other

centres in small towns: “I think it would be wise to try and preserve the Temple at Leamington Spa as a memento of the re-starting of the open movement, but only as a branch meeting place...” (*TNL* 1913:272). The Leamington Street Directories indicate that the Universalist Church survived under that name until 1916, but thereafter the building was simply designated as a “meeting house”. This probably implies that the Leamington Universalists ceased to use it, but individual members retained their connection for many years (Turrell 1942, anon 1950).

## ***Insight Vast***

Between 1908 and 1912, Macgregor Reid went through a process of profound mystical transformation. His esoteric eclecticism, evident in his choice of the name ‘Macgregor’ and his editorial enthusiasm for other gurus, was supplemented by personal revelation and eventually codified into a creed of which he was the focus.

The catalyst may have been the visit of Allan Bennett, for during the first two of those years they communicated upon Buddhist matters: until recently, twenty letters from Bennett to Macgregor Reid survived in the Warburg Institute. Four manuscripts in Macgregor Reid’s handwriting, preserved in the same Institution, also date from this period, including commentaries on the Book of Revelation, on the Book of Concealed Mystery from the Jewish Kabbalah; and one called *The Message of the Paths that Lead unto the Path called Beautiful*.

This last is an early draft of *The Path that is Light*, easily Macgregor Reid’s most comprehensive appearance in print, lavishly published in 1910 under the new imprint of The Tribune Publishing Company, based at the BNCA’s address in Fleet Street. His *nom-de-plume* was Ayu Subhadra, a wandering sinner who found redemption and enlightenment amongst the Buddhists of Tibet:

“Ayu Subhadra has been drawn through the turbulent waters of change and has received the blessing and the power that has blossomed within the valleys of the Himalayas.

He has wandered and fallen much, and has been as weak as any of his brethren; so much so, that he has sorrowed much because of his own bad deeds.

Nevertheless, the evil tide has cleansed thought, and fitted him for the greater path. Unto him then is henceforth only good, since all things can only lead to betterment, and as



betterment is extended over every field of existence, the day of the greatest good is ever drawing near.

Educated within the sacred precincts of the Sankya Temple, he has been led as the brethren within the Holy Place at Shagmur believe, and having garnered knowledge from all sources, he... [is now] blessed with much power, with much wisdom, and with Insight Vast. Through the blessings he has become a healer of the sick, a peace-maker, and a light-giver” (‘Subhadra’ 1910:145).

*The Path that is Light* is no mere compilation of religious ideals, but a sacred text in its own right. Ayu Subhadra was “the Chosen Servant of the Holy Brotherhood of the Elect”, required to transmit “the ideals of Universalist Theosophical Belief, as compiled and taught by Kapilya, the Holy Messenger”. Universalism “guides away from all sorrow and hunger, preaches against idolatry, and builds up the power and the joy of Islam in the leading of human thought towards Simple Life Ideals of Universal Brotherhood. All of its fruits are grown upon trees that are known. It has nothing new. It loves and venerates the Old, because Truth is old, and Truth is God” (‘Subhadra’ 1910:143, 156).

As might be expected from one named after the living Buddha’s last disciple, the *alumnus* of a mythical Tibetan monastery and the admirer of a flesh-and-blood Buddhist monk, *The Path* has a fairly heavy ‘Buddhist’ emphasis, but other influences are apparent. Kapilya, the Holy Messenger, sounds like a very close relative of the Oahspe ‘Capilya’, whose virtues had already graced the pages of *The Nature Cure*, and there are some striking but superficial resemblances to the creed of Madame Blavatsky, who, like Macgregor Reid, saw herself as a ‘Chosen Servant’, and had had similarly transformational encounters during an ill-authenticated trip to Tibet a generation earlier.

How literally was *The Path* to be taken? Who knows? It certainly came to serve as the foundation-stone for what might be called ‘Clapham Universalism’, which was hereafter the defining force in Macgregor Reid’s life.

### ***The Preserver of the Bond***

In 1912 (probably!), from new offices at 281 High Holborn, the Tribune Publishing Company began to publish *The New Life*, “A Magazine devoted to the Spiritual Illumination of all Mankind” (TNL 1913:328). The magazine was set to come out eight times a year, but how many issues were produced is a mystery. Scraps of later issues have

survived amongst the 'Druid' papers of the Office of Works; otherwise the only precious fragment to have made it into this century seems to be the photocopy in the OBOD library, comprising a large part of the issue dated July 1913 and most of the one before it, pages 227-402 to be precise. Not much, but from this homeopathic sample much useful information can yet be gleaned.

*The New Life* is *The Nature Cure* with the Nature Cure taken out. No more tedious articles about hydropathic establishments, no more flattery of ungrateful businessmen, no more tedious health tips – nothing, in short, to bridle the fancies of its editor.

The first of the two surviving issues, which dates from the early summer of 1913, has a heavy emphasis on politics, and particularly the oppression of Islamic peoples in the Balkans and North Africa. Islam was emerging as a *cause célèbre* amongst the anti-imperialist Left in Britain, particularly after the Young Turks' *coup* in 1908, which held out the promise of profound social reform within the once-reviled Ottoman Empire. *The New Life*'s zeal reflects the influence of Charles Rosher, Macgregor Reid's editorial colleague, once a Golden Dawn member and former house-mate of Allan Bennett. Rosher, an artist, had worked for the reforming Sultan of Morocco before he was deposed in 1908. Disgusted by the French takeover, he wrote an impassioned tract called *Light for John Bull on the Moroccan Question*, published in 1911, in which he correctly accused the British Government of standing by and doing nothing in the wake of the 1904 Entente Cordiale with France. The following year Rosher produced another broadside, this time aimed at the genocidal war the Italians were waging against the Senussi of what is now Libya. *The Red Oasis: A Record of the Massacres perpetuated in Tripoli by the Italian Army* published details and photographs by way of evidence, and concluded that "there is no such thing as 'Christian Civilization'. I believe that Christianity and Modern Civilisation are opposed and irreconcilable" (Rosher 1912:32).

Not just the colonial wars in North Africa, but also the aggressive expansion of the Christian states of Serbia and Montenegro at the expense of Islamic Albania caused great concern. Rosher was involved with the Albanian Committee, an influential group of concerned individuals and politicians; and he set up The Occidental, Oriental and African Society, which though short-lived included some notable colonial radicals among its members.

Rosher's impassioned pleas on behalf of the Islamic underdog clearly found favour with Macgregor Reid, who encouraged him to expound at length on all these topics. Reports and appeals from the Albanian Committee were printed verbatim, and the Senussi resistance to

the Italian army was chronicled in depth. Here and there Macgregor Reid added his own observations; and sometimes found himself getting quite carried away. A photograph of a desert township is thus captioned “The Sacred Desert Home. Libyan Headquarters of the Universal Bond, or ‘Unity’ ”, within whose walls were said to lie the bones of twenty members of the Universal Bond... (TNL 1913:276, 344).

It’s no surprise to find that the Buddhistic Universalism of *The Path that is Light* now gave way to a much more Islamic kind of Universalism at this point - or, more accurately, its Universalist offshoot: the heresy of Babism, which began in Iran, where in 1844 Ali Muhammad Shirazi declared himself to be “the Bab”, a promised Messiah. The Bab had already made a cameo appearance in *The Path that is Light*. Kapilya, whose message ‘Ayu Subhadra’ was disseminating, was said to have “passed over in the city of Baghdad in 1846”, and although the historical Bab did not die until 1850 Kapilya was duly credited with having established Babism, “the thought which made itself so powerful in Persia and in Turkey”: Kapilya and the Bab were one (‘Subhadra’ 1910:154 and title page).

It’s possible that Macgregor Reid first came across followers of the Bab, or at least the Bahá’ís, in America, where some reports claimed that 3000 converts or more had been made by 1900 (Browne 1918:148-9), but it’s altogether more likely that his interest was fostered by Rosher. This assertion is based on the fact that Macgregor Reid chose to favour the cause of Mirza Yahya Subh-i Azal Nuri over that of his brother Baha’u’llah. In a nutshell: after the Bab was executed by the Persian authorities in 1850, these two brothers bitterly disputed the leadership of the Babi movement. The rights and wrongs of their relative claims are still passionately debated in cyberspace; suffice to say that there was schism, and much violence, and the Ottoman authorities, to keep the peace, exiled the former to Cyprus and the latter to Akka (Acre). Baha’u’llah was vastly more successful at making converts, and established the Bahá’í faith. Mirza Yahya concentrated on political intrigue and reform, and his followers, the Azalis, played a significant role in Iran’s Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 (Cole 1992, 1994). He had an influential English champion in the person of Edward Granville Browne, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge and responsible for introducing Babism to the West. Impressed with Mirza Yahya’s reforming streak, Browne lobbied constantly and successfully on behalf of the Iranian revolutionaries (Ross 1926: xii), and argued the case for other Arab causes too: his letters to *The Times* in protest at the French invasion of Morocco were quoted in Rosher’s *Light for John Bull*.

It is easy to see how Macgregor Reid might have found in Browne's Azali Babis an irresistible combination of spiritual zeal and political reform: all the more so, perhaps, since Mirza Yahya had just died, in June 1912, thereby allowing Reid to suggest that he might be considered as his spiritual heir. "The successor of Mirza Yaha [*sic*] is with us", *The New Life* claimed. "The headquarters are wherever he is"; and readers were urged "to contribute to the Printing Fund as well as their means will permit, so that the Word and its Message may be spread abroad, according to the wish of the preserver of the Bond, the beloved Mirza Yaha" (*TNL* 1913:250, 328).

Although, as the natural successor to Mirza Yahya, Macgregor Reid could not be of the Bahá'í persuasion, he nonetheless wanted it to be known that there were no hard feelings: "the schism came for some unknown purpose, and what is must be best"; he was likewise proud to acknowledge that "our movement is an outgrowth of Islam, which we never forget" (*TNL* 1913:250). Generally, however, Macgregor Reid went to some pains to accentuate the differences between his brand of Universalism and creeds that came a bit too close for comfort. 'Pharseeism' and Christianity were both in decay; the message of the Bond was "more direct and comprehensive" than that of the Theosophists, and the Buddhist Society of Great Britain, formed in 1908 for Allan Bennett, had already lost its way (*TNL* 1913:250).

One other esoteric influence was dealt with more obliquely: the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The organisation had by 1913 splintered into a smattering of factions, and it is not certain that Macgregor Reid had ever been a member, but 'the Ritual of the Golden Dawn' was to feature in later Stonehenge services; and perhaps under the influence of ex-GD member Charles Rosher, *The New Life* invited "GDL" members to attend Universal Bond meetings (*TNL* 1913:328). Some parts of the magazine were certainly dripping with arcana. The fictionalised allusion to Mathers has already been mentioned, and Macgregor Reid included great undigestible chunks of his own commentary on *The Book of Concealed Mystery* for the edification of his readers (*TNL* 1913: 347-374).

More interesting are the references to Aleister Crowley. Macgregor Reid was an admirer of Crowley, and once wrote a rather good little poem praising Crowley for being different (see end). *The New Life* carried full-page adverts for his *Book 4*, published under the name of Frater Perdurabo; together with a book review and what seems to be an oblique defence of his recently-slandered character, under the rubric "A-A" (Crowley's esoteric order at that point was called Argenteum Astrum): "we are concerned with the quality of the gold that is found, and not with the character of the mine" (*TNL* 1913:227, 250, 281). Nonetheless, the

“A-A” reference appeared in the context of all the creeds from which Universalism so clearly differed. The message might be right for some, as with any of the other faiths, but it was not to be confused with the real thing.

### ***The Most Ancient Faith***

One creed alone won Macgregor Reid’s whole-hearted approval, perhaps because it had no living exponents; and that was Druidism.

Celts and Druids were already very much in vogue, particularly amongst rebels and mystics. Much reviled by mid-nineteenth century Anglophiles, the Celts were subsequently adopted by wave after wave of writers, anthropologists, romancers, freedom-fighters both political and cultural. By the end of the Edwardian era, the public perception of both Celts and primitives had been transformed. Poetic and mystical, in touch with nature, the ancient world and deeper truths than those of modern civilisation, Celticism came to function as a kind of ‘liberation theology’ for those unhappy with mainstream values.

Druidism was widely understood to be the Celtic *credo*, and as a ‘Celt’, Macgregor Reid may have considered Druidical wisdom to be his birthright. It certainly dovetailed perfectly with his feisty form of Universalism, since it was seen as the ancient universal religion. The significance of “the great Bab movement”, Macgregor Reid claimed, lay in the fact that it was “the living succession of the Ancient Druid Faith” (*TNL* 1913: 250).

These first Universalists, “the Ancient Druids, the Buddhists of another age”, had left their mark upon the land in the form of their ancient monuments; and thus it was that “the Round Towers of Ireland and of Scotland, the cromlechs and burrows [*sic*], and silent stones of the Ancient Faith in many parts are again brought to our attention” (*TNL* 1913: 335). Of these, Stonehenge was the greatest, and for the midsummer solstice of 1912 Macgregor Reid took the Universal Bond to the Stones to celebrate.

### ***On the Druid Path***

Stonehenge had been convincingly linked with Druidism in the public mind ever since the Ancient Order of Druids had held a major ceremony at the Stones in August 1905. This well-established Friendly Society was at its zenith then, and its leaders were fascinated by the forms of Druidic mythology. Between 650 and 700 Brothers turned up, complete with white robes, sickles and ‘Father Christmas’ beards (“a Druid without his beard is like a

peacock without his tail”, as one observer put it: anon 1905, Chippindale 1983:172-3). The Ancient Order’s visit inspired emulation. One observer of the Stonehenge solstice in 1907 commented on a current trend amongst solstice visitors “to greet the rising sun in garments of daring design, and of a pattern which would, in all likelihood strike terror into the shades of the original Druidic worthies they are supposed to personate” (Bradley 1907:268).

The 1912 trip was probably not Macgregor Reid’s first visit to Stonehenge. His son Robert claimed many years later that they’d been there in 1909 (anon 1959), and although of itself this statement can carry no more weight than any other Reidian utterance, there are three bits of circumstantial evidence that might support it. Firstly, it’s curious that the 1909 ‘Midsummer Double Issue’ of *The Nature Cure* found Macgregor Reid not only lauding the ancient teachers of the British Isles, but obliquely claiming the succession: “Since the philosophers of Silbury Hill, Avebury Plain and Stonehenge have in turn passed away, there has been a loss of the light that had spread itself over these shores. The light is still with us – aye, it is even within us – and now that Naturist teachers are at work, the day of true healthfulness is not far off” (TNC 1909:367-8). This was published at the start of July, only a fortnight after the solstice.

Secondly, London had been full of Druids just before the 1909 solstice. For four days, from June 15 – 18, the Welsh National Eisteddfod was held in the city. Its events were highly colourful and very Druidical, including a procession of the Gorsedd of Bards to Kensington Gardens, led by a London brass band. The event was very well publicised: the prestigious *Illustrated London News* for June 19 carried a huge picture of the Gorsedd ritual on its front cover. All in all, the London Eisteddfod would have been very hard to miss, and if Reid was already tempted by the Druidic attractions of the Stonehenge solstice then this may have been a potent reminder.

The third shred of evidence is that Reid’s good friend John Barry O’Callaghan had just died, in May. O’Callaghan was later claimed as Reid’s predecessor as Druidic ‘Chosen Chief’, and according to *The New Life*, he was a regular visitor to Stonehenge. He was also a passionate Irish Nationalist, and it is interesting to note that Reid took pains to stress the Irish origins of Druidry: “There is no doubt but that Ireland was the centre of the Ancient Faith... all religious idealism has come from the early root which sprouted within the soil of Old Ireland” (TNL 1913: 250). Might Macgregor Reid have chosen the Stonehenge solstice as an appropriate place and time to remember his recently-departed friend and fellow-‘Celt’?

## *The Sun Worshippers*

If Macgregor Reid father and son did indeed go to Stonehenge for the 1909 solstice, they may have found some folk already clad in Druid garb. They may have gone toggled up themselves, for Reid was fond of dressing up. He might have gone again the next year, and the next, perhaps refining or rehearsing his big idea: who knows. It's frustrating that for these three crucial years the local papers, usually so fulsome in their descriptions of the solstice, failed to cover it at all.

If Reid's Universalists did visit in those years I'm inclined to see those trips as informal rehearsals for the Universal Bond's first recorded appearance *début* in 1912. Under the headline 'Sun-worship at Stonehenge', the *Salisbury Journal* for June 29 carried an account, 'communicated' to the newspaper by an unknown though well-informed source who was probably Macgregor Reid himself, of two services held on the Sunday after the solstice by the Universal Bond of the Sons of Men. Participants included Ayu Subhadra, "the messenger from Tibet, with his little flock", and one Kelkhusbru J. Turnbull BA, "a Persian gentleman". The verbatim account of the 'Confession of Faith' is truly Universalist in style:

"I believe in the existence of Divine Purpose within all that is. That there is no order or wrong within Nature; That Nature is the reflected Majesty of The Powers, and of The Almighty Power that lies beyond the All.. I believe... [i]n the purposed evolution of all things towards the better and the best, I believe in the Ultimate Growth of All Things into good..." (anon 1912).



They did not go dressed as Druids. A series of photographs of the Stonehenge ritual reveal a distinctly Oriental feel to Universalist *couture* at this point, particularly in the matter of turbans: this was a long way removed from the white robes, beards and sickles of the AOD.

*The Dastur (Reid) leads his Universalists through the central trilithon (probably 1912)*

Evidently pleased with the way things went, Macgregor Reid returned the following year, although this time with just one follower; but it seems that the 1912 service had angered Sir Edmund Antrobus, the landlord. Antrobus was notoriously irascible. When he'd inherited Stonehenge from his father in 1901, he promptly tried to blackmail the Government into buying it for a huge sum. The Government refused, so Antrobus enclosed the monument and began to charge for admission. A consortium of local and national amenity groups tried to challenge his right to do so in the High Court, but lost, on the grounds that a landowner had every right to exclude the public from his private property (Walker 1987:71-3, Chippindale 1978).

Antrobus thereafter expected total control over everything that went on behind his fence. The AOD event of 1905 was one thing, especially since it was held partly in his honour: he had that day been initiated into the Order (Chippindale 1983:172-3); but he was not about to tolerate the right of just anyone to turn up and hold a service at the Stones. On the day before the 1913 solstice, Macgregor Reid (now in the guise of the Dastur Tuatha de Dinaan: *Dastur*, 'High Priest', from the Parsi Zoroastrians, *Tuatha di Danaan* from Irish mythology) was informed "that 'no political or religious meetings' would be tolerated by the state-recognised possessor, Sir Edmund Antrobus". Speaking "as the direct successor of the Chief Druids who have been", Macgregor Reid announced his intention to return the next day and hold the service anyway. He did so, and the caretaker, backed by several policemen, refused to let him in unless he promised to abide by Antrobus' rule. "This he absolutely refused to do", but he bought his tickets and more or less forced his way through.

The service was duly held, and afterwards he addressed a sympathetic audience, a gathering "of a composite character, and it was pleasing to see the military element predominating. The soldiers lay upon the mossy embankment looking towards the Dastur Tuatha as he told the story of our Druid sires... Truly it was an inspiring meeting, and the spirit guardians of the Sacred Circle rejoiced as the words of the message were wafted outwards from the gathering". But back at the wicket gate, he brought down 'the Kara' on the landlord's head: "In grief and sorrow I call down the curse of Almighty God, and of his Spirit Messengers, that the weak may be liberated from the molestation of the tyrannical...*Response is sure*" (TNL 1913:272, 275, 335-338).





*“Before the Surrender Stone (Mahayoni). The Appeal unto The Great Mother is raised by the contrite heart”: Reid, George Catchlove and onlookers, Stonehenge 1913*

Ten Universalists made the solstice pilgrimage in 1914, when Zoroastrianism was the flavour of the day: the *Devizes & Wilts Gazette* correspondent was told that some of Macgregor Reid’s party “claimed descent from ancient fire worshippers in India, followers of Zoroastrianism”, and Zoroastrianism was the topic upon which Macgregor Reid lectured the multitudes after the solstice ceremony (anon 1914a).

But Antrobus this time was determined that his will was not to be flouted. When Macgregor Reid began to recite “the prayers of the sun worshippers”, all ten Universalists, including Macgregor Reid, George Catchlove and two ‘ladies’, were forcibly removed by the police. Once outside, Macgregor Reid re-opened old wounds by declaring to the crowd that Antrobus had had no right to enclose the site, and demanded his money back. The accounts vary somewhat between newspapers, but one version has it that a crowd of “about 400 men and youths” either urged the Universalists to rush the gate or endeavoured to do so themselves, “and threatened to pull down the fence” until restrained by the police (anon 1914 a, b, c).

Macgregor Reid apparently made no attempt to hold a service at the 1915 solstice, contenting himself with advising people on the best place to stand to see the sunrise. Another Universalist, however, was marched out from the circle for standing in the wrong place, and this was enough to trigger Reid into delivering “a series of emphatic protests” concerning access to the site. Sir Edmund Antrobus had died the previous February; the ‘Kara’ had been fulfilled. Thus emboldened, Macgregor Reid declared that “no man had a right to stand between God and man. The promise of their Order shall be carried out, and ‘the remnant shall be saved’ ... I am called the Last of the Druids”, he continued, “but I shall not be the last, for you cannot destroy truth and justice” (anon 1915a).

This trivial incident was well reported, particularly in the local papers, who by now were becoming aware that Macgregor Reid provided good copy. Not everyone was amused, however; and this year's episode made 'The Londoner' in the London *Evening News* "intolerably angry". This "brawling party of cranks", these "suburban dervishes" were unacceptable in time of war. Their "silliness touches sacrilege": "at the back of my mind I have a fancy that the grey and ancient stones are the heart of the England for which we are offering such sacrifice in battle". Stonehenge was coming up for auction, and the columnist concluded by hoping that the new owner would find a way of keeping out "the whole tribe of squabbling cranks" (anon 1915a, b, 'Londoner' 1915).

The new owner proved to be one Cecil Chubb, who bought Stonehenge at auction in October; and despite the *Evening News* he allowed the Universal Bond to hold their services. Indeed, his three-year ownership of the site proved to be the Bond's Golden Age. In 1916, four services were held, including "the Ritual of the Golden Dawn" at sunrise and an evening service attended by "fully a thousand people", at which Macgregor Reid preached on the subject of 'The Unity of Truth'. The previous evening, Macgregor Reid preached to an audience which the *Salisbury Times* put at 5-600, in which he explained that all religions had grown from Druidism, "this one root of religious life" that "seeks to call man back to Nature, so that he can look through Nature, to Nature's God." Druidism did not require people to leave their existing faiths: all "right service", of whatever faith, would lead through "a knowledge of God to the Brotherhood of Man" (anon 1916).

I have found no record of a Druid presence in 1917, but in 1918 Macgregor Reid told a "large congregation" that although "as children of God all are part of one great faith", Druidism was nonetheless more wholesome than the religions of "Canterbury and Rome". "Faith in the Druid God will make homes sacred, make houses replace barracks, and make wars cease. The present churches were powerless to stop the war" (anon 1918). Although all religions were one, some were apparently becoming more so than others.

### ***A Mecca of Celtic Idealism***

In 1918, Cecil Chubb gave Stonehenge to the nation, and the Druids had great hopes that at last they would be free to hold their services without being beholden to anyone. The Office of Works, however, resolved to retain both the admission charge and Antrobus's former caretaker, both of which were anathema to the Druids, and the following June, someone

was apparently writing to the local papers urging that the Druids' rights to celebrate the solstice should be curtailed.

At about this time the Druids began to call themselves *An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas*, "The Universal Druid Brotherhood", hereinafter ADUB; an appropriately Gaelic title for a Macgregor-led clan. ADUB now wrote to the (Welsh) Prime Minister, Lloyd George, requesting permission to hold their services and hoping that his influence "may be extended to the maintenance of peace within our little Mecca of Celtic idealism at Stonehenge" (Ireland 1919). Charles Peers, the Inspector of Ancient Monuments and responsible for Stonehenge, agreed to let "these curious persons" carry on as before, "as they do no harm to the stones, nor outrage conventional public decency." Not, however, as of right: the power to include or to exclude now rested firmly with the civil servants; and that summer (1919), the caretaker prevented the Druids from holding an extra service on another day. In this he was supported by Peers: "They have no claim to be treated as other than ordinary members of the public" (Peers 1919a and b).

Although Peers and his staff were scrupulously correct in their dealings with the Bond, they were not prepared to exempt them from payment on religious grounds, even though – as they were regularly reminded – places of worship were freely open to the public. It may not be coincidental that Peers was implementing a policy which, as principal architect of the 1913 Ancient Monuments Act, he had largely devised; a policy that specifically differentiated between 'buildings' (classed as 'living') and 'ruins' (classed as 'dead'): "Buildings which are in use are still adding to their history; they are alive. Buildings which are in ruin are dead; their history is ended" (quoted in Emerick 1998). Keith Emerick (*ibid*) has explored some of the repercussions of this classification on interwar heritage management; for present purposes, it is clear that Peers could have few sympathies with any contemporary religious use of a site whose 'history has ended'.

Next year, when Thomas Ireland asked for permission to hold services not just on the Solstice but on two further days as well, Peers instructed his staff to refuse: "Some limit must be set to this absurd and degrading nonsense" (Peers 1920a). When Ireland complained, Peers endorsed his letter with a memo to his subordinate: "it might be as well to inform these people that if attempts to take more than is granted are made, we may have to reconsider the concessions already given" (Peers 1920b).

In the event, they were eventually given permission for the extra days, but were still required to pay the entrance fee. The Bond responded by refusing to hold their service at Stonehenge at all, using instead a site at nearby Normanton Gorse they later called 'the

Double Circle', belonging to Lady Glenconner. Here, in the rain, Macgregor Reid "made some strong remarks on the action of the Government in refusing to allow them inside Stonehenge", and gave a lecture which, according to the *Salisbury Times*, was "listened to very attentively by a good number" (anon 1920; Ireland 1921a).

In 1921, a tirade of letters from Thomas Ireland, in which the influence of Macgregor Reid is very apparent, led to a flurry of correspondence between the Office of Works and Downing Street, in which, once again, the Government agreed to let the Druids use the Stones but insisted on payment. Once again, the Druids made a point of refusing to pay for access to what they considered to be a place of worship: "You persist in regarding Cathoir Ghall as a Circus or Museum", wrote Ireland to the First Commissioner, lamenting the fact that things had not changed for the better since the Government had taken control of Stonehenge: "Tyranny, greater than that of the private citizen, is a great factor of State Control" (Ireland 1921b). Insult was added to injury at the 1922 solstice, when a group of soldiers from the Larkhill base performed a mock-ceremony in white sheets and Father Christmas beards, allegedly with the connivance of the caretaker. The Druids were ferociously indignant at this 'burlesque', and refused to hold their solstice service there the following year. "Pass this word along to the People", said the handbill they produced, "and demand that all Ancient Rights of the People shall be respected. Judge between the Druids and all who stand within the Coward's Castle" (*Salisbury Journal* 3 June 1922; ADUB 1922).

## ***Rakings and Diggings***

Meanwhile, the Office of Works was sanctioning the removal of half the site in the name of archaeology. When Stonehenge was enclosed by Sir Edward Antrobus in 1901, the countryside access campaigner Lord Eversley lamented that the effect was "to rob it of its peculiar character – a strange relic of the twilight of the world, standing untouched through countless centuries – and to convert it into an antiquarian's specimen" (Eversley 1910). This is precisely what Stonehenge became in the early 1920s. In 1919-20, the Office of Works financed a programme of selective restoration to their new acquisition. They called in the Society of Antiquaries to appoint an 'expert antiquary' to supervise the operation. The Antiquaries, however, had more ambitious plans. The President, Sir Arthur Evans, was nearing the end of his term; he had had, in Chippindale's words (1983:179), "a frustrating five year-term of office" because of the war. "The Stonehenge restoration gave him a

chance to make his mark with ‘a new outlet for the Society’s energies’; the small excavations required by the Office of Works would only be preliminaries to a grander scheme, ‘an eventual exploration of the whole monument within and including the circular bank and ditch’.” In 1920, the Office of Works decided that the urgent work had been done, and suspended their operations. The Antiquaries’ chosen excavator, however, Colonel Hawley, was “empowered” to continue excavating the site, which he did, usually alone, for the next six years. Chippindale says frankly that the Hawley years were “a disaster”. By 1926, half the site had been dug away, and yet the monument remained as mysterious as ever (Chippindale 1983:179-183).

Hawley, although he once wrote privately to the Office of Works suggesting that all ceremonies should be stopped (Hawley 1922), seems to have maintained good personal relations with the Druids (Ap Llywellyn 1924), but they were upset by the wholesale destruction his excavations were causing, which Macgregor Reid described as “desecration” (anon 1920). In a long letter to Lord Crawford, President of the Society of Antiquaries, he declared that

“all the rakings and diggings of the Archaeologists have taught us nothing about Stonehenge, and all the promises of today will but lead us to the carefully planned assumptions and suppositions with which the Archaeologists have tried to make a position for themselves. Archaeologists cannot explain Stonehenge. They do not know its message. The Druid Universalists are established in the life and light of its message. There is nothing to be discovered, and it is time that the disfigurement of Stonehenge ceased. The pleasure of a few Archaeologists should not be permitted to disfigure that which is so sacred to others as well as to the Druids. The prolonged excavations of Colonel Hawley have led to what? ... Archaeologists having discovered nothing definite regarding Stonehenge, now seek to establish an authority based upon assumption - this we Druids object to...” (Reid 1924a)

In the context of Hawley’s work, they could see little reason why they should not bury the ashes of their dead at the monument (as they claimed to have been doing for years); and in the summer of 1924 they requested permission to do so. The first Labour Government had just been elected, “after every Druid vote had been cast for Labour”, as Macgregor Reid proudly announced. It is conceivable that he knew that the new First Commissioner, Fred Jowett, a veteran of the Morris, Carpenter and Blatchford school of socialism, might be

sympathetic; at any rate, permission was granted, “provided that no danger is done to the monument” (Ireland 1924a; cf Jowett 1925).

The reaction was immediate: it became a minor *cause célèbre*, entangled in anti-Government politics, and fanned by the fact that it happened during August, at the height of the newspapers’ ‘silly season’. The protest seems to have been orchestrated by the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, a particularly vigorous and vigilant organisation. The WANHS Annual Meeting was fortuitously held that month, and resolved to send “an emphatic protest” to the Minister. G H Engleheart, a scathing critic of the ‘sunrise’ theory of Stonehenge, declared that the Druids’ request was “an almost unbelievable outrage on a national monument that ought to be absolutely sacrosanct”. He was seconded by Frank Stevens, Curator of the Salisbury Museum, and author of the official guide to Stonehenge: “the prestige of British archaeology was at stake in this matter. What would their friends on the Continent say if they allowed this monument, absolutely unrivalled in the world, to become the scratching-ground or burial-place of a rather obscure sect of which they knew nothing?” (WANHS 1924).

But Jowett decided to stick by his decision. The WANHS immediately got on to their local MP, who wrote to him saying that “The WANHS are very much troubled about the answer you gave... The people of Wiltshire are very much concerned...” (Bonwick 1924). The Antiquaries were particularly worried about the impact on Hawley’s excavations. “The very idea of burials, even on a modest scale, taking place within the area seemed to militate against the whole scheme of research”, Lord Crawford told the Fellows a year later. If the Government had acquiesced, “what I look upon as the most important archaeological work in Europe, with the possible exception of Knossos, would have been brought to an abrupt conclusion” (Crawford & Balcarres 1925:224-5). On 26 August, he wrote to Jowett saying that ‘my society is much exercised on the subject’, and offered to deal diplomatically with the Druids rather than put Jowett on the spot - while at the same time urging him to “take action” if they failed to co-operate (Crawford & Balcarres 1924a). His letter in the *Times* (August 29) was indeed a model of diplomacy: “The Druid movement cannot fail to affront public opinion by exercising the rights just conferred on them. They will earn gratitude by waiving this privilege...” (Crawford & Balcarres 1924b). The previous day’s issue had carried a similar letter from the veteran Boyd Dawkins, as president of the Royal Archaeological Institute; and a long leader on 29 August, in which the ‘Thunderer’ clearly indicated where authority ought to lie:

“archaeological opinion clearly looks upon the Druids’ projected action as an intrusion and a trespass... No wonder the Wiltshire archaeologists are up in arms. They know the stones better than Whitehall; their county may be said to be the birthplace of English field archaeology, and it is their voice, rather than that of an extraneous sect, which ought to carry the day” (anon 1924a, Dawkins 1924).

There was more sympathy for the Druids down-market, or, more accurately, less sympathy for the archaeologists, tellingly caricatured by D Wyndham Lewis in the *Daily Mail* (then the foremost tabloid): “Nobody with an ear for music can have failed to be aware within the last few days of the grunts of rage issuing from archaeologists all over the country... At the thought of handing over a national monument for such purposes archaeologists are up on their hind legs as one; and (like very aged sheep) they are terrible in their anger and greatly to be feared...” (Lewis 1924).

Most papers were as incensed as the Wiltshire archaeologists, however. The *Daily News* (29 August 1924) said that it was “the sort of silly thing one would expect this sort of society to want to do”. ‘The Londoner’ in the *Evening News*, who had castigated the Druids nine years earlier, was particularly scathing, declaring Stonehenge to be “a temple and a holy place for us English who are not Druids of the Clapham sect, whose souls are offended by the thought of this ancient circle of stones being made a chapel for the rites of nonsense, its earth a common grave-yard for the feeble-witted” (‘Londoner’ 1924).

On September 5, Jowett capitulated, writing to Macgregor Reid withdrawing his permission, explaining frankly that he was doing so “in view of the protests of the archaeologists and the strong public feeling on the matter” (Jowett 1924). The *Manchester Guardian* (13 September 1924) declared itself satisfied. “In the ordinary run of things it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than to induce a public department to own to a mistake... It is to be supposed that when permission was sought Mr Jowett took the Latter-Day Druids at their own pretentious valuation; but having done so with more amiability than research, he was quickly corrected by people of authority.”

Meanwhile, of course, Colonel Hawley at the site itself was pursuing his one-man excavation, with the approval of ‘people of authority’. Thomas Ireland replied bitterly to Jowett: “you are in favour of *Government by Clamour*... Druids have done more for Stonehenge than all the archaeologists put together. They talk and accomplish nothing” (Ireland 1924b). Macgregor Reid wrote to Ramsey MacDonald, the Prime Minister, offering to meet the archaeologists in public debate, “so that the people may have an

opportunity of deciding between the religious claims of the Druids and their astronomic teachings, and the arbitrary conclusions and assertions of the archaeologists... are Druids to be classed as inferior, and Archaeologists as superior? Or, are both sections of the community to be regarded as possessing equal rights?" (Reid 1924b)

The following solstice (1925), the Druids were in militant mood. There was a record crowd at the Stones (the police estimate was 3000), and according to the caretaker's report, Macgregor Reid went round the perimeter fence inciting people to tear it down, while his son Robert picked a squabble with the man on the turnstile, and called out " 'Come on People'. The crowd then rushed the Big Gate, and burst it open, and also tore down the wire above the Sunstone". About a thousand people got in without paying (Smith 1925).

### ***An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas***

The beginnings of structural organisation came to Druid Universalism at around the time that the order devised its swanky Gaelic name. A somewhat garish and portentous letterhead was devised, prominently featuring a Stonehenge trilithon as a door to greater things. 'The Bab' means, literally, 'The Gate'; given Reid's earlier Babist sympathies, perhaps the trilithon was seen as Babism's literal embodiment.

A model trilithon certainly featured amongst the temple's artefacts when the *Daily Chronicle* reporter came to visit in 1924, together with "a little gilded statue of Buddha" (anon 1924b). The 1919 electoral roll for 57 Cavendish Road, Clapham, lists Macgregor Reid for the first time, together with his son Robert and Mrs Maude Reid, who I think was probably his sister-in-law. The implication here is that both of them had lost their respective spouses, perhaps not long before, and the death of one, or both, may have been the catalyst for leaving Sussex. It must have been a big house, since the caretaker continued to live there as well.

The Temple occupied the two large downstairs rooms. The *Chronicle* journalist found that the one "which would ordinarily be used as a dining room" contained the trilithon, the other, "the drawing-room" being used for "ordinary services". This room was dominated by "the London shrine, a handsome carved oak table bearing the date 1643, and with the signs of the Zodiac carved on it". This shrine came to feature quite considerably in ADUB hagiography. It was first mentioned in *The New Life* in 1913: "The shrine of The Ancient Faith is now in our possession" (TNL 1913: 335), and although to some that word 'now' might imply a relatively recent acquisition, to Reid, and especially to his followers, its



existence somehow served as proof that the Order had been in existence since 1643 at least. In 1931, a 'Mystic Message' was said to have been found "in a secret part of the shrine", which had belonged "to the Neo-Druids, or Rosicrucian Order, as organised by Roger Bacon and the Druid lodges of his time" (anon 1931b); and, as we shall see, the tale was further elaborated by Arthur Peacock for the benefit of transatlantic Universalists thereafter.



*The Shrine of the Druid Universalists, allegedly dated 1643  
(note the zodiac figures around the central panel)*

## ***People***

The Temple functioned as a seminary as well as a place of worship. In addition to the three weekly services (two on Sundays), an assortment of weekly classes was held on a wide range of subjects that included politics, economics, psychology, world religions, the occult, mysticism, yogi [sic], and medicine (Seaburg 2004:544). It was a heady and exciting brew, and Macgregor Reid found some true disciples from the back-streets of Clapham. It seems that most of the Clapham congregation were happy to be Druids for the day, for when some American Universalists tried to visit the Clapham church around the 1930 solstice they

found the doors locked, and were told that the congregation was away "to a summer Assembly down Stonehenge way" (Seaburg 2004:548).

Three names in particular stand out: Macgregor Reid's son Robert, Arthur Peacock and George W. Smith - more on all of these below. The first important member, in point of time, was probably George Catchlove, a schoolmaster from Deauville Road, a vegetarian, 'food reformer' and "a regular enthusiast regarding camp-open-air-life". He was the Church's Secretary, or 'Corresponding Councillor', in 1913, and died shortly before 1919 (TNL 1913:277; Ap Llywellyn 1924). He was succeeded by the shadowy figure of Thomas Ireland, later also Minister at the Clapham church (Seaburg 2004:544) and assistant in Macgregor Reid's later ventures. He drops from the record after 1930, and I've yet to find any independent testimony to his existence. Much fiery oratory was issued in his name during the 1920s, and a lot of it reads suspiciously like Reid's; you can't help wondering whether 'Thomas Ireland' was just another alias for Macgregor Reid himself.

In the early days, the hierarchy included a 'Chief Arch' of indeterminate function. Walter Rodway was one, a Hammersmith grocer, allegedly initiated in 1918, although he died not long afterwards: it was his ashes, together with those of George Catchlove, that were at the centre of the 1924 burial dispute (Nichols 1990:108). His successor was Valentine Haig, linked explicitly with the 'Berashith Lodge' (ie the Cavendish Road church), first so-called in 1923. Two years later the title was dropped, and Haig became a simple Secretary (anon 1923, Haig 1925).

'Berashith' is the first word in the Bible: it is the Hebrew word for 'in the beginning', appropriate perhaps for a congregation led by one who considered himself up on the Kabbala. Its use here emphasised the primacy of the Clapham church, although the first Universalist temple had been in Leamington. The Leamington connection remained alive throughout the 1920s. Members came regularly to the Stonehenge solstice (eg anon 1931a), and indeed some of the correspondence with the Office of Works, though signed by Reid or Peacock, bore the address of Leamington hairdresser and ADUB member J A Steer. Perhaps in recognition of this, the Leamington group were given the lodge-name 'Gairdeachas' (Scots Gaelic for 'Joy' or 'Rejoicing') sometime before 1932 (anon 1932).

Other ADUB members included Arthur Thomas Ap Llywellyn of Kingston-on-Thames, described as "a Councillor within the life and light of ADUB", who wrote a lengthy letter to the *Salisbury Journal* during the burials dispute (Ap Llywellyn 1924), and there were female Druids too: two women were present at the 1914 solstice, a woman was involved in

the scrap at the Stonehenge turnstile in 1925, and another is found selling the *Druid Journal* in 1930, but their names were not recorded.

Perhaps the most eccentric of the ADUB Druids, apart from Macgregor Reid himself, was a Stonehenge local: John Soul, Amesbury grocer and a bitter opponent both of the Stonehenge fence and its custodian, whose job he felt he could do better. Soul may also have been initiated in 1918 (Nicholls 1990:109), and acted as *agent provocateur* throughout ADUB's various confrontations with authority. Soul published two short guides to Amesbury (1923, 1926), and in 1927 produced a 42-page compilation entitled *Stonehenge and the Ancient Mysteries*, whose 'philosophy of Joy' has a distinctly Universalist flavour. In the recollection of Amesbury councillor and peace activist, Austin Underwood, Soul's presence was an important feature of the solstice atmosphere at this date: "John Soul in his topi, his white twill trousers tucked into puttees, a haversack slung over his shoulder and his shepherd's crook and oak twig with leaves in his hand, was certainly a central figure" (Underwood 1962; Smith 1922).

How many Druid Universalists were there in total? In the late 1940s, after the Church had been bombed, the 'basic membership' of the Universalist congregation was put at 37, with an extra 100 on a mailing list (Seaburg 2004:552). These figures tally with the Stonehenge custodians' headcounts: 34 Druids took part in the solstice ceremony in 1928, and 52 the following year (Anderson 1928, 1929), when the Druids were reported as arriving in 'two motor coaches' (anon 1929a).

An average 'Druid population', during the 1920s, of around 50 seems about right, but there were many other sympathisers. Some were quite influential; notably Pamela Tennant, Lady Glenconner from 1911 to 1922, thereafter Lady Grey until her death in 1928, who lived at Wilsford Manor near Stonehenge (her first husband was Liberal MP for Salisbury until he was 'booted upstairs'). Pamela was mystically inclined, an admirer of "the noble teaching of the Universal Church", which she saw as an authentic source of "lofty" Druidism (Grey 1923:115-7). She was present at the 1915 solstice service (anon 1915a) and helped the Druids in a practical fashion not only by allowing them to camp on her land from 1913 onwards (*TNL* 1913: 337), but by giving them the right to hold their services at the 'Double Circle' at Normanton Gorse during their various tussles with temporal authority (anon 1943).

Furthermore, since Druid Universalism did not require its adherents to formally subscribe to anything; it was not necessary to be conscious of being a Druid Universalist in order to be one. In Macgregor Reid's words, "Where the old ideas are taught it is sufficient for us to

say, ‘Here lies the ancient message in another guise’ (Macgregor Reid nd1 f.70). This convenient arrangement not only allowed Macgregor Reid to augment the Universalist population at will when importuned for statistics by journalists, but also to invoke all the great names of the socialist canon as founding fathers. The Druid order, which he brazenly claimed to have been meeting at the Stones since “the days of the Digger movement”, was at different times said to have included Gerard Winstanley, John Lilburne, John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, Robert Owen, Tom Paine, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Crane, William Morris, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Eliphaz Levi, Gerald Massey, the Buddhist Edwin Arnold and the theosophist Colonel Henry Olcott and a host of lesser luminaries, as well as writers on Druidry such as John Aubrey, William Stukeley, William Blake, John Toland and Godfrey Higgins. James Rely, generally known as the first formal Universalist, was by Reid described as “the Druid who restored the movement, and gave to it the name of Universalism” (Reid 1924a; ADUB 1925; anon 1950; anon 1923).

### ***The Tribes of Clapham Common***

From this catalogue of radical idealists, a list of ‘Chosen Chiefs’ was eventually elaborated by Macgregor Reid’s son Robert; but the only one to achieve that distinction during Reid senior’s own lifetime was his immediate ‘predecessor’ John Barry O’Callaghan (described as “the late Chosen Chief” in 1929: anon 1929c:13). O’Callaghan was a civil engineer, an Irishman fervently loyal to the former Home Rule leader Charles Stuart Parnell, and a close personal friend of Macgregor Reid; on his death in 1909, Reid published a four-page black-bordered obituary in *The Nature Cure*. He was a Simplicitarian, an anti-vivisectionist, a one-time Roman Catholic who ended his days as an “unabridged Universalist”; but what seemed to have impressed Macgregor Reid the most about his friend’s career was his role as social reformer. He was “The Founder of the Ideal of an Equitably Governed State”, President of the Rational Reform League and “the originator of the most equitable system of taxation yet evolved” (*TNC* 1909:96-7, 228-232). At first sight, this might seem to be a somewhat curious credential for a latter-day Druid chieftain, but to Macgregor Reid fiscal reform was inseparable from more esoteric matters. “Political economy... is the application of morals to business. Eliminate the moral element, and political economy becomes the science of dust and ashes; all the heart of affairs scorched out of them” (*TNL* 1913:281). In *The New Life*, space was found to print lengthy book reviews and articles about the nature of ‘the Body Economic’ and its relationship to higher things. “Religious advancement must

go hand in hand with economic advancement. The one cannot be separated from the other” (TNL 1913:334-5).

The huge and equal emphasis that Macgregor Reid thus placed on social and spiritual reform were the qualities that distinguished not just the Universalists of old, but could also be used to identify positive movements in the world today. This is why he supported the Azali Babis, and the Senussi; and, for a few brief years, the British Labour Party too. Towards the end of the Great War, Macgregor Reid began regularly preaching Socialism on Clapham Common, apparently under the banner of the “Commonwealth and Free State League”. “Huge crowds” came to hear him, summoned from a bright red Daimler in which he toured the streets, banging “a huge dinner gong” (anon 1946b).

In 1918 the Labour Party was formally constituted, and the CFSL morphed into Clapham Labour Party, with Reid as Chairman, of course. The party’s prestige grew enormously when he led the opposition to a film about ‘Bolshevism’. Macgregor Reid, having apparently seen it in the House of Commons, turned up at the Majestic Cinema in Clapham High Street to voice his opposition. A huge crowd gathered, and at the request of the police Reid took them away to a protest meeting, an event that was remembered as having done much to consolidate the Labour Party’s position in Clapham (anon 1946b, Smith 1945). The film in question was probably Harley Knoles’ “Bolshevism on Trial”, produced in 1919 and a peculiarly blatant bit of propaganda: “a powerful argument in controverting the dream-talk of the Socialists” according to *Moving Picture World* (Sinclair 1919). Yet Macgregor Reid had little truck with Communism of the Marxist kind. He had a particularly satisfying mutual antipathy with Alfred Wall, who had been elected to Wandsworth Council as a Communist member in 1918. Peacock remembered “many verbal combats” between them; and on one occasion, having outwitted the machinations of his opponents on Clapham Common, Reid taunted them with the cry “What came ye to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” (anon 1946b, Peacock 1945:15-16).

Macgregor Reid, it was generally agreed, “did splendid pioneer work in Clapham”, as the Labour Party branch secretary recalled in 1946; he “did much towards putting the Clapham Labour Party on the map” (anon 1946a). Those words were chosen carefully, for he was a very controversial figure, and a special inquiry had been set up twenty years earlier which forced him to resign.

There was a lot of overlap between the Clapham Universalists and the Clapham Labour Party. Smith and Peacock were both Druids and Socialists, and they were not the only ones, but Smith was later to recall that Macgregor Reid “made enemies in the Labour movement

because he would insist on carrying forward his religious views” (anon 1946b). In 1924, the ‘Stonehenge burial’ issue had brought national notoriety for the local party chairman, and this may have made him an obvious scapegoat when things began to go wrong for Labour.

In May 1926, the General Strike collapsed, although the miners held out until the end of the year. Macgregor Reid used his solstice platform to tell the six hundred people who’d walked across Salisbury Plain to the Double Circle to hear him that the miners “were lied against by the press”, and railed against ‘progress’ that he claimed was increasing poverty: “the great struggle for what they called progress threw more men and women into the army of the unemployed, made hunger abound more than ever - and still they talk of progress” (anon 1926a).

Back in Clapham, recrimination was rife amongst the socialist groups on the Common. A Conservative commentator gloated on their plight that September: “On Sunday last on Clapham Common Socialist speakers took up different platforms - the Clapham Labour Party, Battersea Trades and Labour Council, the Communist Party, the Minority Movement, the Non-Party Socialist League, Social Democratic Federation or League, Socialist Party of Great Britain. They all collected money for the miners, and attacked each other publicly in villainous language” (*Conservative Notes* 1926).

Macgregor Reid was the biggest culprit on that particular day. “Thieves, swindlers and scoundrels”, he called the Clapham Independent Labour Party and the Hyndman Club, and to prevent the autocratic Reid from alienating any more such “old and trusted” socialists, Balham and Tooting Labour Party held a special meeting – which resolved, “in the name of decency and purity in Labour politics”, to urge the National Labour Party to “make a close inquiry into the conduct and management of the Clapham Labour Party”. Reid’s son Robert retorted that the other side had started the row, but an Inquiry was duly held at the end of November, which Macgregor Reid declined to attend, having conveniently booked himself a political lecture-tour around Scotland (“all indoor meetings, and easy to one who has laboured against the many tribes on Clapham Common”). The Labour headquarters insisted on imposing a constitution on the local party, and on January 18, Macgregor Reid resigned, taking half the local party with him (CLP 1926-7, Peacock 1945:16-17).

### ***The Relentless Rule of the Druids***

Meanwhile, the Universal Bond continued to draw the crowds to Stonehenge. In addition to the dawn ritual inside the Stones, their evening services at the Double Circle attracted

people in surprising numbers: 1000 in 1928, 2000 in 1929 and 1930 (anon 1928a, 1929a, 1930).

There were rumours that the Druids had been banned after the troubles of 1925 (anon 1928a), and it's true enough that civil servants toyed with the idea of raising the cost of admission on solstice night, "in view of the disorderly conduct of the Druids", but decided against it. In August 1925 they did resolve to "bear in mind their attitude next year", but next year the Druids stayed away. When in June 1928 Robert Macgregor Reid wrote asking for permission to hold a service June 1928, he specifically states that "we did not seek this permission for the last two years" (anon 1925c, Reid 1928, DMH 1925).

Perhaps their exile was self-imposed, and the Druids chose not to risk another confrontation with the authorities. At any event, they celebrated the 1926 and 1927 solstices at the Double Circle, in 1926 declaring that "the Druids had been driven from Stonehenge not because they had done wrong, but because monetary considerations were deemed to be of greater significance than all else" (anon 1926a). Six hundred people made the trek to Normanton Gorse to attend the 1926 service, reported by the *Salisbury Journal* under the headline "Chief Druid predicts troublesome future." Macgregor Reid, described as "well known in London journalistic circles as a reviewer of medical and scientific books", accorded the journalist a special interview, in which he declared that "The truth of antiquity is the only truth we can think of. The further back we go the nearer we shall be to God. Therefore Stonehenge is for us the cradle of British religion" (anon 1926a).

The corollary to that was that the people of antiquity were also closer to God. The trouble was that this went in the face of conventional notions both of primitive peoples and of the ancient Druids. Macgregor Reid went to some lengths to put people right, in 1920 telling his solstice audience that, contrary to popular opinion, human sacrifice had not been practiced at Stonehenge since "the earliest trained priests were vegetarian and would not take animal life" (anon 1920). In 1925, before the fence came down, Macgregor Reid told "the biggest crowd within living memory" that "Men told them that their forefathers were savages. When they said that they lied. The men who raised these stones possessed information greater than the majority of our people possessed to-day. He asked them not to believe that we were descended from mere barbarians" (anon 1925b).

He failed to convince the Christians, however, still in the grip of sentiments such as those embodied in the title of Beth Coombe Harris's evangelistic novel *In The Grip of the Druids* (1937). In his introduction, Engineer-Admiral Emdin chose to emphasise "the darkness that

covered our land, and the gross darkness [of] our people, under the relentless rule of the Druids” (Emdin 1937).

It may have been to combat sentiments such as these that ADUB rituals at Stonehenge in the 1920s began to acquire a distinctly Christian flavour, far removed from the multicultural Universalism of the early days. They wore ‘surplices’, and held services which began and ended with stirring ‘Druid hymns’ such as *Abide With Me*, to the accompaniment of the Amesbury Band of the British Legion (of which John Soul was a member) (Underwood 1962). As the folklorist George Long observed in 1930, “[t]he rites closely resemble Christian services, even to the use of bread as well as wine in the ‘Sacrament’ ” (Long 1930:141n).

Nothing they could do was going to allay the more fearful of their Christian critics, however; and things got quite heated at the 1931 solstice, when a band of Christian evangelists began singing Sankey hymns during the service. Although the *Druid Journal* claimed that “the platform of Jesus was as near to that of Druidism as it possibly could be”, the Chief Druid was forced to defend his creed against accusations of ‘heathenism’ and ‘paganism’: “The Pagan is a lover of the country, of nature, of the beauty of life, and all who love nature are paganistic”, he declared. “Druidism inculcates a love of Nature in all, and, like the poet, strives to ‘look up through nature unto nature’s God” (anon 1931a, anon 1931b).

### ***Information control***

Although the newspapers reported no more trouble, in 1930, a retired Army major wrote to the Office of Works, essentially to inform on Macgregor Reid, whom he claimed was still inciting visitors to tear down the fences, amongst other things: “he spoke against the Church and religion and upheld the Soviet Government... His general speaking was communistic and anti-Government... Although one or two present argued with him there were others who shook him by the hand as evidence of their appreciation of what he said” (Wheatley 1930).

The Office of Works did not take any action over this part of the Major’s allegations, but they were concerned over his claim that “Certain pamphlets were being sold within Stonehenge by a girl and a man who were evidently his associates”. The pamphlet in question was *The New Life*, now revamped as *The New Life & Druid Journal* and sporting a rather stylish, arts-and-craftsy trilithon on the front cover. Inquiries were duly made of the



(new) custodian, who reported that “there was nothing to take exception to in it” (Burgess 1930). Further complaints were received the next year from ‘local residents’, however, perhaps involved in the protest Christian service that was held at this solstice. Sensing trouble, Arthur Peacock, editor of the *Journal*, sent a courteous letter to the Office of Works asking for formal permission to sell the *Journal* as they had been doing. He was refused: “none but official publications can be sold at ancient monuments in their custody”. It does not seem that any slight was intended; nine years earlier, Peers had turned down a similar request from the WANHS; but the Druids felt strongly that the official guide-book was biased against them. “It is only just and fair that if Mr Stevens’ book which gives the anti-Druid view is on sale at the turnstile, then on the day of our Service, at least, copies of the *Druid Journal* might be placed with the caretaker, and then made available to enquirers who might wish to have them”, wrote Peacock (Peacock 1932; anon 1932; cf Peers 1923).

To Reid, this was the last straw. Not only had they had been “forced to beg from an authority of the Earth to worship in their own temple”, but “The ideas contained in the guide book to Stonehenge issued by the Government brought shame to every man and woman who understood aught about this great question” (anon 1932). This was the last solstice they’d hold at Stonehenge, he declared, and announced plans to build a new temple at the ‘Double Circle’: a scheme for which, he claimed, he had already raised £4000. This utterance was designed to upset everyone, particularly in view of the contemporary National Trust campaign to have all visible buildings in the Stonehenge landscape removed. “[T]o erect it within sight of genuine Stonehenge is a proposition of atrociously bad taste,” opined the *Wiltshire Gazette* (30 June 1932).

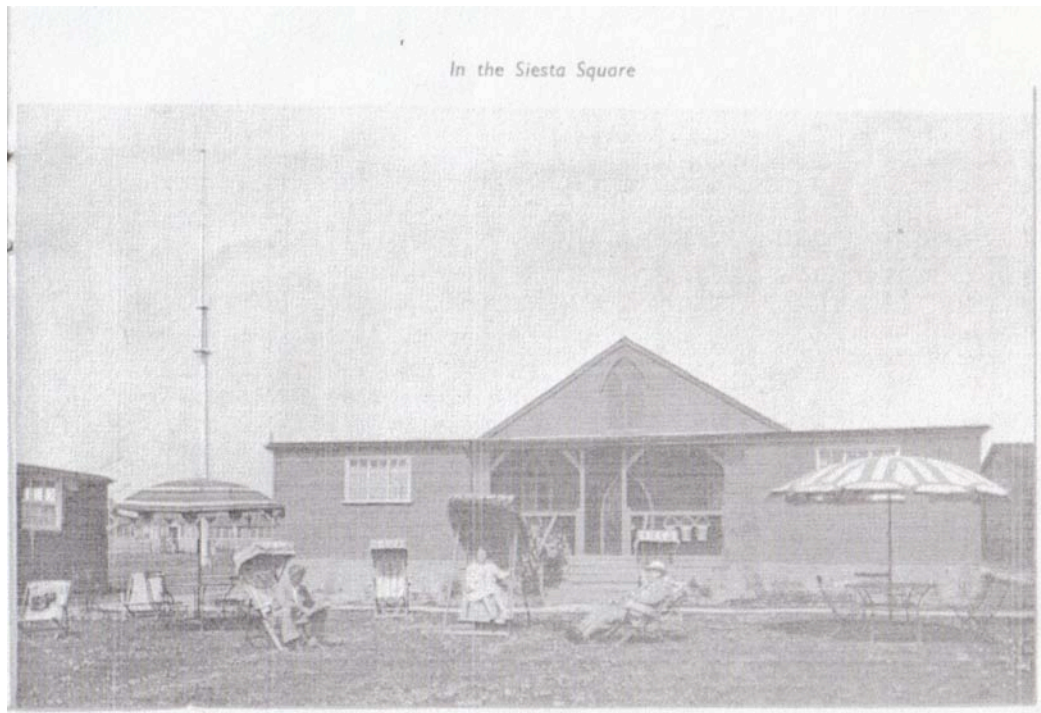
No more was heard of the scheme, but the Universal Bond duly stayed away from the Stones for the rest of the decade. As if to compensate, the AOD and other Druidical groups held ceremonies regularly at other times of the summer, but to many, the Druids had become synonymous with the Stonehenge solstice, and at least one observer attributed the steady decline in the number of people attending the solstice during the 1930s, in part at least, to the Druids’ non-attendance (‘Hob Nob’ 1939).

## ***Royhill Retirement***

Reid by any reckoning was by now getting on a bit, ample excuse for taking it easy in the matter of confrontation with Christians or officialdom; but it seems that the real reason for his non-attendance at the Stones after 1932 was that he had found something even more absorbing to take his time and energy.

This was his old calling of Nature Cure, which had enjoyed quite a revival during the 1920s. A brand-new Nature Cure Association had been set up, in 1920, and in 1927 Stanley Lief launched a highly-successful magazine called *Health for All*. Reid rose to the challenge by resurrecting both the British Nature Cure Association and the *Nature Cure Magazine*, but like their predecessors these ventures were short-lived. Lief opened the first Health Farm at Champneys (near Tring, in Hertfordshire) at some point in the 1920s, which may have served as catalyst for Reid's next venture: the hundred-acre Royhill Nature Camp at Blackboys, near Lewes in Sussex, only a few miles from his old home at Burgess Hill. How he raised the money to buy the place is once again a mystery, but it took plenty of building work to get the site ready, much of which was apparently done by Reid's new wife, Alice Biffin.

Royhill was described as "a communal settlement ...where men and women in the vanguard movement of politics and religion might come for rest and recuperation" (Peacock 1945:108-9, anon 1946a). A leaflet produced in 1937, when the camp was in its prime, reveals that visitors to this "self-contained Joy Land" were, as far as possible, fed from food grown on the estate. There were sixty bedrooms, a large dining hall, and a social hall, and other facilities included a "Therapeutic Room", offering a variety of "Baths... ordinary, as well as pine Spray, Scotch Douche, vichy Spray, and Medicated Vapour Baths for the alleviation of pain and the removal of Uric Acid from the system. Regular treatment for Arthritis, Neuritis, Digestive Disorders, and other complaints can be obtained" (Royhill 1937). It was, however, "not a massive and ornate Centre, just a simple Country Holiday Retreat". Photographs suggest that facilities were pretty Spartan. Today, legend has it that the camp was built to house Spanish Civil War refugees, which seems apt enough (Ali 2001)!



Reid claimed that Royhill was not only financially successful before the war, but that it had helped to subsidise the Clapham church as well (Turrell 1942). There was a price for such astuteness; and although Alan Seaburg (2004:553-4) suggests that “Royhill was obviously MacGregor-Reid's views on natural healthful living put into practice”, in fact the regime at Royhill seems to have been a pragmatic compromise between principle and profit. Although Reid was a vegetarian, the standard fare was meat-based. His mentor Helen Densmore had described smoking as “unphysiological, poisonous, and the direct cause of many serious ailments” (Densmore 1888b); but at Royhill, the leaflet claimed, “the chief brands of Cigarettes are stocked, but the Canteen will obtain any brand required that is not stocked... ask for it and it will come to you”. Nudism, which in 1907 he had described as “a something lost that must be regained” (TNC 1907:169-74), seems to have been specifically banned: “Bathing costumes are used by those making use of the Sun-Bathing Field.”

**N.B. Part of Royhill is now a Youth Hostel:**

<http://www.yha.org.uk/hostel/hostelpages/120.html>



In 1939, Macgregor Reid and his wife moved to Royhill permanently, but in the same year the British Army requisitioned it for military use, to his loud protests. They were able to go on living there, but “the beauty of the place is destroyed”, as he wrote to Will Bromley in April 1942 (Reid 1942). The camp re-opened for the 1946 season, and the little chapel was rededicated as the “Royhill Universalist Church” on 27 July 1946; three weeks later, on August 12, he died.

## Excursus: What Happened Next

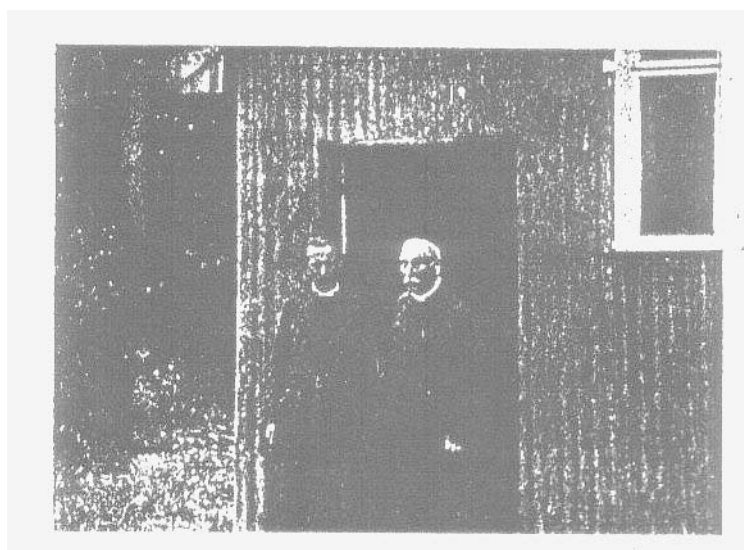
After Reid’s *de facto* retirement, his ‘spiritual empire’ divided naturally into two. He had two devoted followers ready to take up the succession, and one once-devoted son who, it seems, was cut out of everything.

### *The Universalist Church*

In 1932, the Universalists were “reorganised” (anon 1946b). “An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas” became simply “the Universalist Church”, and its Druidic aspects were quietly dropped. This may well have been at the instigation of Reid’s favourite, Arthur

Peacock, who ended his days as a Unitarian minister, yet as editor of *The Druid Journal* in 1931 had found himself having to explain the Druid position to their Christian critics.

Born in Camberwell in 1905, Peacock left school at eleven and went to work in a ‘collar shop’ near Clapham Common for an eccentric Welshman called Hugh Harries. Towards the end of the Great War, Harries decided to join the local Labour Party, and took Peacock with him to visit Macgregor Reid at Cavendish Road (Peacock 1945:12-13). Peacock was totally enraptured: he became a lifelong socialist, editor of the once-famous socialist journal, *The Clarion*, from 1927 to 1931 (finding time to edit the *Druid Journal* on the side), and thereafter Secretary- Manager of the National Trade Union Club (Peacock 1945, cf Seaburg 2004:543-6). He was also a devoted Universalist, Macgregor Reid’s assistant in all things. He held various offices in the Clapham Church: deputy-organist, organist, ‘warden’, and without doubt played a central role in the ‘reorganisation’.



*Peacock (left) and Reid outside the Royhill chapel  
shortly before Reid’s death in 1946*

In 1929, he began to explore the wider world of Universalism by writing to the Universalist Publishing House in Boston, USA, asking for a list of publications (Seaburg 2004:547). The letter was forwarded to Roger Etz, the Executive Secretary of the Universalist General Convention, who replied to Peacock with equal curiosity since the Americans had had no knowledge of any surviving congregations in Britain (Etz 1929). Peacock’s reply, dated 15 April 1929, shows him to have been a faithful student of his master: it’s a wonderful farrago, a long list of British congregations that, albeit declared as decayed or dead, probably never existed (Peacock 1929).

Although in theory Reid remained in control, Peacock steadily took on more and more of the running of the Church, in 1937 becoming Assistant Minister and, in the same year, Minister (Seaburg 2004:544). The war, however, put paid to much of the congregation, and also to the revenues from Royhill that were apparently helping to subsidise the Church. Peacock therefore began to write to the Americans once more, this time in pursuit of dollars, and developed a remarkable line in brazen assertion about the Church's history, or more particularly, its fittings. Bob Cummins, General Superintendent of the Universalist Church of America was thus informed, late in 1941, that

"In the Church there is preserved still the Shrine which belonged to the Universalists of the Commonwealth days (1643) and we have, too, altar table [*sic*] and the Church furnishings which have been preserved in the Movement for several centuries. In addition, we have the interior decoration and glass stained windows for which the great Victorian artists [*sic*] and brother of our Faith, William Morris, was responsible" (Peacock 1941).

Thomas Turrell, an American Universalist living in Birmingham, was told that the 1643 shrine had been

"presented to them by one Gerard Winstanley... Sir Edwin Arnold, of 'The Light of Asia' gave them certain bronzes; while two fine cardinal chairs of 1642 were property of the Pembroke Family (Vesey's). Members of the Pre-Raphaelites were associated with them – personally known to Dr Macgregor Reid; Burne-Jones decorated their windows etc etc" (Turrell 1942).

In October 1942, Peacock confirmed to Cummins that it was indeed the shrine of Gerard Winstanley that they had preserved in the temple (Peacock 1942a), but when William H. Spooner visited the Church the following year he was told that the altar had been made for the Earl of Pembroke (Seaburg 2004:531). It must have been very confusing for all concerned.

The purpose of the exercise, of course, was to wow those rich Americans with the depth and richness of the Church's cultural heritage, and to persuade them to lavish dollars on it. They were hoping "that a Universalist of means – if not the Church at large" might take over the mortgage (£4000); "Also, 1000 dollars a year (at present value) would carry them" (Turrell 1942). The very letterhead was changed to read "The Universalist Church (British

Circle), to aid in “strengthening the bonds of unity between us”, as Peacock put it (Peacock 1942b). All to no avail, alas. In Seaburg’s words (2004:551), “the American Universalist denomination was poorer than the poorest of mice in a country vicarage - anywhere in England, Wales, or Scotland. In truth, they lacked adequate funds to finance their own church programs. As a result, the British Circle was pinning their hopes on an illusion”.

In August 1944, the Church in Cavendish Road was bombed. No-one was hurt, but the building was too far damaged to make repair a viable option. Peacock turned his immediate attention to getting the Royhill chapel opened, and after Macgregor Reid’s death struggled for two decades to keep his legacy alive. Royhill became a centre for ecumenical idealism (meetings were held by such groups as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Unitarian Young Peoples League, the Ethical Union, the Student Movement for World Government, and the International Vegetarian Union), but the building became increasingly dilapidated; it was sold in 1957. The Church met in various buildings in central London, until Peacock eventually took himself, and presumably whatever was left of the Universalist congregation, into the Unitarian church (Seaburg 2004:552, 555-557).

### ***Interregnum: The Druid Hermeticists***

Macgregor Reid’s Druidic mantle was inherited by George W Smith, who was as proud as Peacock to proclaim his debt to Reid: “He was the most remarkable man I have ever met. He was very learned and I am only too proud to say he taught me all I know, both of the Druid movement and of the Socialist movement” (anon 1946b). Smith first came across Macgregor Reid when he came out of the Army in 1919; he promptly joined the Clapham Labour Party, and served on the Executive as Secretary for South Ward until 1930 (Smith 1945). He was thus not only a near-contemporary of Peacock, but perhaps his mirror-image, in that he clearly relished Reid’s mystical side while Peacock was uncomfortable with it.

At some date before 1938, Smith became the General Secretary of the Ancient Order of Druid Hermeticists. According to Ithell Colquhoun, biographer of S L M Mathers and a conscientious historian, the AODH was a descendant of the Irish branch of the Hermetic Society, founded by one-time Golden Dawn member AE (George Russell) in Dublin and subsequently led by P G Bowen. Bowen’s own disciple and editor, one Mrs E A Ansell, went to London in 1926 and continued his teaching “under the title of the *Ancient Order of Druid Hermeticists*”, which was amalgamated with An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas twenty years later” (Colquhoun 1975:119-20). I’ve yet to find any other evidence to

connect Bowen or Ansell with the AODH, however, and it seems likely that this particular story was a smokescreen put up by Robert Macgregor Reid, one of Colquhoun's informants, who was anxious to eradicate all trace of the Smith 'interregnum'. More on this anon!

In 1938, Smith wrote to the Office of Works requesting permission to celebrate at Stonehenge, and also played a major part in producing the Order's journal, called *The Pendragon*, the first issue of which appeared at Midsummer 1938. The timing suggests that it was designed for distribution at Stonehenge, like the *Druid Journal* before it; and the following year, when he applied for permission on behalf of the AODH's Grand Council, the letterhead bore the same winged-sun symbol that Macgregor Reid had used for *The New Life* twenty-five years earlier (Smith 1938, 1939). Here however the similarities begin to fade; for the simple reason that Smith, perhaps faced with the indifference or disinterest of George Reid, had found another elderly, eccentric guru for the cause.

This was William George Hooper, born c. 1865, who at one time had been considered a physicist of note: his *Aether and Gravitation*, published in 1903, won him a Fellowship of the Royal Astronomical Society. Hooper had been a practicing Christian, a volunteer worker for the YMCA and an active member of the Brotherhood Movement, a sort-of working-class equivalent to the Rotary Club. Shocked by what he saw in France during the Great War, he vowed thereafter to "work, teach and live for peace and fellowship, based on eternal and cosmic principles of Divine Wisdom and Divine Love". In 1920 he joined the Brotherhood of Healers, a Christian-based faith-healing network founded by the eccentric Brother James Macbeth Bain, hymn-writer and barefoot advocate; and established a 'New Age' centre at Highcliffe on Sea near Bournemouth, a well-heeled strip of Southern England that became something of a centre for occult and mystical activity between the wars (Hooper 1935:9, 37; 1941:17-20).

Hooper's world-view was central to the AODH. It is apparent that he contributed much of the material and possibly most of the ideas to be found in the first edition of *The Pendragon*, and also, from what can be gleaned from Ithell Colquhoun's paraphrasing, in later editions too (none seem to have survived). At the age of 81, he was elected 'President of the Festival' for the 1946 Stonehenge solstice, and after his death Smith presided over a 'solemn service' at the Stones in 1948 (refs).

Smith's Stonehenge speeches, reported in the local press as reliably as Reid's had been, are an interesting fusion of Hooper and Reid. Celebrating the 'Rites of Caevron' at the Double Circle in 1943, to an audience of over 200, he claimed that



“The Druids’ inspiration, passing from out of the deepest antiquity, causes the Druid to dedicate his power to the unseen, to the spirit of beauty, of wisdom and of universal love. Thus inspired, the Druid sees the coming of a New Age...when men will have lost that terrible prerogative we have so long used for cruelty and wrong towards those who are weaker than himself” (anon 1943)

The 1943 service was not held at the Stones themselves because Smith’s party had apparently once more declined to pay the Office of Works entry fee. In 1946, he requested - and was granted - permission to use the Stones for what was described as the Festival of the Summer Solstice, and the following year arranged to hold a memorial service to Reid on the afternoon of June 22, at which the BBC was present (anon 1946c, Smith 1946, 1947). He was making changes, seeking to open the organisation up, endeavouring to underpin the Druids’ cause with the symptoms of a more conventional organisation. New lodge names appeared, and at the 1948 solstice, he announced that “the combined Order intends to embark on widespread teaching of pure Druid science and philosophy throughout the British Isles” (anon 1948).

### ***Restoration: Robert Macgregor Reid***

George Smith clearly had the blessings of George Macgregor Reid in his endeavours: he had both the letterhead and the seal, as he told the Office of Works (Smith 1951). He and Peacock between them had inherited Macgregor Reid’s mission. Unfortunately, Macgregor Reid had a son, Robert, who was none too impressed with the way things had turned out. His father’s faithful and devoted follower for much of his life, at some point they fell out, perhaps when his father remarried. Robert apparently sought Peacock’s job as Minister in 1937, and in his father’s eyes took his rejection badly. “Poor boy, he knows all, but acts like one who knows little”, wrote Reid senior to his friend Will Bromley of Detroit in 1942. “He could not do the work of Mr Peacock and had no reason to be jealous of his election” (Reid 1942). Relations between father and son continued to deteriorate, and in October 1945 Macgregor Reid senior made a new Will, in which he not only left all his “papers, mss and books to my successor in the Ministry of The Universalist Church, Arthur Peacock”, but left everything else to his new wife.

Robert was left with nothing. He may have tried to repossess the altar from Peacock, since years later he told Ithell Colquhoun that it was “in the possession of a Unitarian minister unwilling to surrender it” (Colquhoun 1975:129), but he didn’t get it. He didn’t even have the right to call himself Chosen Chief. Although Smith himself was careful to call himself ‘Secretary’, the title of Chief was bestowed on him by Macgregor Reid senior because he considered his son “to lack both philosophic depth and leadership” (Nichols 1991:109). It seems that some of his father’s former Druids considered that he’d been hard done by. Robert had obviously taken part in AODH activities, since in 1947 he resigned from it; and he took several members with him (Smith 1952, anon 1950). Someone close to Robert later said that he had been given “a Mandate to carry on the Druid order” by one Harry Chadwick, “the last extant member” of Macgregor Reid’s Universal Bond Council (anon 1950), and a meeting was duly held at Leamington in November 1949, which confirmed Robert Macgregor Reid as Chosen Chief (anon 1950).

Smith and his party refused to acknowledge the ‘coup’, and for several years thereafter two groups of Druids, both claiming the legitimacy bestowed by George Watson’s precedent, were petitioning the Office of Works for the right to hold the dawn service at the Stonehenge solstice. In 1953, officials of the Office of Works debated the issue, and in the end they found for ‘the older group’, by which they meant the one led by the well-known name of Macgregor Reid (Smith 1951, Smith 1952, Pith 1953, Office of Works 1953).

### ***Disinformation***

Both groups continued to hold services, however; and Ronald Hutton suggests that Smith’s party was in the ascendant until their leader’s health collapsed in 1954. Thereafter, Robert had a clear field, and did his best to eradicate all trace of the Smith ‘inter-regnum’ by spreading disinformation. A list of ‘Chosen Chiefs’ was compiled that not only established a long lineage for the Order but, just as importantly, suggested that Robert had inherited the mantle directly from his father in 1946. He had the ear of the occultist Ithell Colquhoun, who had access to various copies of Smith’s *The Pendragon* that have since disappeared, but nonetheless adopted Robert’s version of events for her *Sword of Wisdom*.

Ross Nichols gave the tale a new twist. Nichols, a member of Robert’s order who later formed the Order of Bards Ovates & Druids, joined the Druids after Smith had left the field and was presumably paraphrasing Robert’s version of events when he claimed that George, in his later life, had perverted the cause of true Druidry by turning it into a religion: “he discovered and adopted a certain Universalist Church, arguing that it and Druidry were in

effect united”. It was this new and “peculiar religious direction” that had led him to designate Smith as his successor, thus causing the split: “Those who wanted philosophic Druidry, as it had earlier been, would not follow a leader who identified it with any religion, however universal” (Nichols 1990:109).

This astonishing inversion of events must have been sweet vengeance for a son who had been comprehensively cut out from his father’s life. No less satisfying would have been the ‘occultification’ of George Reid. Robert’s interest in matters occult seems to have blossomed fairly late, perhaps after he was passed over as Minister in favour of Arthur Peacock in 1937; and he let it be believed that he had “at some stage... received ordination from a Nonconformist source” (Nichols 1990:109). After his father’s death, he claimed with conviction not only that George had been a member of the Golden Dawn, but also that “the Druid Order is the survivor of the Golden Dawn” (Colquhoun 1975:117)!

If there can be said to have been a philosophical dimension to the dynastic quarrel between Robert and the AODH of Hooper and Smith, it probably revolved around the issue of occultism. The AODH, according to the surviving issue of *The Pendragon*, set out to avoid “the multiform mental vagaries promulgated under the guise of ‘occultism’”; its aim was to “offer a synthesis of Religion, Science and Philosophy, in such a practical manner as will render its application to every day life and action”, and it lamented the fact that occult societies were “seemingly fearful to expose their teachings to the light of day, and all refusing to unite on the broad platform of the social uplift of the people” (anon 1938; Smith 1938b). This was very similar to the philosophy of Reid senior, at least in theory. Smith sought to put it into practice, to “embark on widespread teaching” that would spread Druidic values far and wide. This seems to have been the last straw for Robert, whose departure from the AODH was apparently prompted by this attempt to make Druidism “easy for all to obtain by a correspondence course through the post” (anon 1950). Occultism prevailed with the ascendancy of Robert. By 1956, not only had the correspondence course ‘lapsed’ but even initiates had to fend for themselves: “one picked up what one could at meetings, and there was not even a recommended course of reading”, as Colquhoun remembered (1975:128), and it was to be many years before Druidic lore was to be made available to the masses.

## Conclusion

### *A Godlike Mentality*

Macgregor Reid was pugnacious, quick-tempered, foolish, high-handed and autocratic. He was not at all a team player, and found it hard to cope when his organisations threatened to become successful. He was also very charismatic, and capable of inspiring lasting loyalty. Henry Chelley was perhaps exaggerating just a trifle when he said that Reid “combined in himself a godlike mentality verging upon genius”, but many others would have agreed with Thomas Turrell’s assertion that “I, frankly, feel better for having known dear old Dr Macgregor” (Turrell 1942, Taylor 1951:16).

“To officials we may seem just so many cranks”, Macgregor Reid told the Prime Minister, “but there is that in the life of *An Druidh Uileach Braithreachas* which makes thinking men and women of all its members” (Reid 1924b). What is a ‘crank’ but someone who is out of their time? Ahead of it, maybe. Druidry in 2005 has become truly ‘Universalist’. Around eight thousand people have enrolled for distance learning courses with the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, spanning all five continents (G W Smith would have been delighted!) Its form has changed and goes on changing, but in its substance much remains of Macgregor Reid’s teaching: the emphasis on living in harmony with the natural world, but also the “liberal and socialist ideals that advocate freedom and justice for the underprivileged” that the current Chief Druid of OBOD is proud to recognise in the Druid tradition (Carr-Gomm, nd). His great-nephew Jamie Reid continues the tradition. The pioneer punk artist calls himself a “socialist Druid... In many ways, political change can only come through spiritual change and I was brought up with that feeling. The two are intertwined” (Cabut 2004). One of his works is called “Universal Majesty, Verity and Love Infinite”.

But perhaps Macgregor Reid’s greatest legacy lies in the transformation of Stonehenge into the icon of the counter-culture. Reidian Druidry at the start of the 1960s was believed by police and archaeologists alike to have contributed in a big way to the Stonehenge atmosphere from which the famous Festival grew (Stout 2003), and Reid’s stropiness over access rights during the 1910s and 20s was echoed by the motley crew of hippies, punks, idealists and nihilists during the 1970s and 1980s. As early as 1913, Macgregor Reid was hoping to “re-organise the old British Festival during the week of the Summer Solstice so that the old *Cursos* on Salisbury Plain may once again re-echo with the voice of British

hope and idealism.” (TNL 1913:338). What would he have made of the great Festival that Thatcher smashed? As “one has laboured against the many tribes on Clapham Common” he might have quite enjoyed it. And in my mind’s eye I can see him fulminating at the security guards policing the controlled gathering we’re allowed today.

## ***Creating Reality***

Macgregor Reid not only became a legend in his own lifetime; his life became a legend in his lifetime, a sailor’s yarn that warped to every wind that blew. He was the most fantastic fabulator, consistently re-inventing his own past - and that of those around him - with a delightful lack of guile. In his thoughtful analysis of this aspect of Reid’s character, Bruce Aubry suggests that “Reid had to adjust his perception of truth and falsehood, in order to survive as ‘a man alone’, without wealth or education”, unlike more fortunate Union colleagues who married well or got cushy jobs (Aubry 1986:1). But he did enjoy quite a decent living in the end, however he came by it; so there must have been a bit more to it than that. It is interesting, too, that his greatest admirers, Arthur Peacock and G W Smith, were well aware that there were several versions of the ‘truth’ about Reid, or rather, about the detail of his life, yet they not only failed to qualify these ‘truth claims’ when they made them, but also actively contributed to the legends themselves. They thus created a corporate sense of ‘Druidic truth’, establishing a tradition duly continued by Robert Macgregor Reid and, later still, Ross Nichols (anon 1946a,b; Peacock 1945; Carr-Gomm 2002).

*Question:* How much of Reid’s outpourings are we meant to take seriously? *Answer:* All the stuff that matters. You don’t have to see him as the divinely-appointed successor of Kapilya or Mirza Yahya to make sense of a ‘universal bond’ between all religions and all peoples. You don’t have to see him as a Senussi warlord to share his anger about a brutal and unnecessary invasion of an Arab country, or his shame at the treatment of Islam. You don’t have to believe that an organised Bond had been worshipping unhindered at Stonehenge since 1643 to share his disgust and indignation that such a place could be turned into a no-go zone at the whim of temporal authority.

There are definitely different *orders* of Druidic truths. The Universal Bond was consistently socialist, consistently universalist, consistently ‘naturist’, or ‘simplicitarian’, and consistently preached the importance of Stonehenge as the great temple of antiquity. Even the biggest and most blatant porkies – Druidic continuity at Stonehenge since 1643, for instance - were only told in order to add weight to the deeper truths, the ones that

mattered. Sometimes it seems as though Reid was quite deliberately playing with his public, changing details from year to year. In 1925, *Salisbury Journal* readers learned that this was the Chosen Chief's 36<sup>th</sup> Stonehenge solstice, implying that he had been attending since 1889; the following year, he claimed to be 72 years old (ie born in 1854-5), and to have been coming annually since the age of 17 (ie 1871: anon 1925b, anon 1926a). The inference is that these details are really not important. Historical detail thus becomes mere adornment: there is something appropriately 'bardic' about the way statements that the orthodox might regard as 'truth claims' were used, almost casually, like colour in a narrative whose basic truth did not depend upon these claims being accepted.

Such details are frustrating precisely to people like me, trying to apply academic norms of truth-production to teasing out the facts of his life. Frustrating, but incredibly invigorating and constantly challenging; and I've begun to realise that it's the whole *process* of grappling with Reidian truths that I find so exhilarating and compelling. How much weight should I attach to any particular nugget of information? Every little working theory I produce he challenges.

Macgregor Reid demands *engagement* if you're to winkle out the meaning. It is as if creating low-level mystery forces you to dig deeper. You've got to work out for yourself what is important and what is not, for mysticism requires an engagement with the process of truth-making that is considerably more intense and sophisticated than the simple consumption of words on a page. Michel Foucault (1997:74) describes mysticism as something that developed as *resistance* to the authority of written scripture; he even calls it "one of the first great forms of revolt in the West".

Knowledge is not something you can consume at second-hand; it has to be experienced, lived- and Macgregor Reid certainly lived out his fantasy. In his remarkable biography of a modern Druid, Arthur Pendragon, leader of the Loyal Arthurian Warband, co-authored with the King himself, C J Stone describes him as

"Living his life not only as a fantasy, but as a fantastical adventure story, a tale told to him by his imagination, and then lived out in reality... Living his life according to his own rules. Turning symbolism and ritual into reality. Seizing life on the mythological level and making it his own." (Pendragon & Stone 2003:172-3).

I think this is what Macgregor Reid was doing. Living out his total, personal, resistance to other peoples' expectations of how small and normal a human life's ought to be.

“The world may hate, -  
But what of that?  
The Spirit Sings.

The world may jeer –  
But what of that?  
Wisdom hath wings.

The world may frown; -  
But what of that?  
To heav’n thought springs.

The world may cry  
Against the soul;  
Which gladness brings

Yet we shall hear  
The Spirit songs  
That wisdom sings

(Reid, whenever)



*Reid at Stonehenge in the 1920s*

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*TNC: The Nature Cure*

*TNL: The New Life*

WANHSS: Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Scrapbook, Devizes Museum, Wiltshire.

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## THE AUTHOR

Adam Stout's pleasantly chaotic meander through life has included stints as a cowman, Green Party activist, environmental campaigner, psychogeographer, local historian and writer, hedge-hobo and lost-it mystic, festival organiser and full-time four-year old. At the age of 38 he took himself off to university to study archaeology, got lots of gold stars and a three-year Government grant to investigate the relationship between 'fringe' and 'mainstream' views of the ancient past, and the fragile nature of 'truth' in such matters. Latter-day Stonehenge druidry was one of the topics he looked at, from which developed an enduring fascination for George Watson Macgregor Reid, whose zany and forceful personality, and unique utterances put Druidic mysticism at the heart of the Stonehenge solstice.

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