

Ross Nichols: Founder of OBOD

Philip Peter Ross Nichols was born in Norfolk on 28 June 1902. He completed his MA in history at Oxford in the 'twenties, and began a career which allowed him to teach, publish both poetry and prose, paint and travel. He had always been a practising Christian, and worked for the Church in boys' clubs in the East End of London for many years.

Having worked as ballet critic for a provincial newspaper, he became principal of Carlisle & Gregson's, also known as 'Jimmy's', a private college which was known as a 'crammer's', and which had tutored, amongst others, Winston Churchill (before he was initiated into the Albion Lodge of the Ancient Order of Druids at Blenheim in 1908).



In 1952 the Forge Press published an impressive twin-volume edition of *The History and Practice of Magic* by Paul Christian. Ross edited and revised this nineteenth-century French work, which had been translated by his friends James Kirkup and Julian Shaw, and coordinated the supplementary articles and notes. His own published work, apart from numerous articles in historical, poetic and esoteric journals, consists of *Sassenach Stray* (1940), *Prose Chants Proems* (1941), *The Cosmic Shape* (1946) and *Seasons at War* (1947).

Ross, or Nuinn, as he was called in the Order, was an accomplished water-colour painter and had exhibited at the Royal Academy. In addition to his passions for history, writing and painting, he loved to travel, and having few family ties and an academic post with long vacations, was able to do so. On each visit he would make extensive historical enquiries, photograph and sketch archaeological remains and ancient monuments, and often write an account of his journey. We do not know of all his travels but we do know that he visited Egypt and Morocco, Bulgaria, Malta and Greece. He was a regular visitor to Ireland and was a good friend of his fellow Chief Druid, Paul Bouchet of the Order in France, whom he visited both officially and unofficially on several occasions. He also visited Wales and Scotland, and in particular Iona and the Hebridean islands.

He joined the Ancient Druid Order in 1954 and took the office of Scribe -ideally suited to his inquisitive nature and literary abilities. When his teacher, the Chosen Chief Robert MacGregor Reid, died in 1964, the Order split into two groupings, as had happened several times before in its history. A group of senior Druids disagreed with the election of MacGregor Reid's successor, Dr Thomas Maughan, and decided to form a reconstituted order with Ross as its Chief, and with the three grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid fully taught and recognized in a way that had not previously been done in the Order's modern cycle.

One of the major achievements of Ross Nichols as Chief of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids was to reintroduce the celebration of the fire ceremonies which had been abandoned from the repertoire of modern Druidry, so that the reconstituted Order celebrated not only the Spring and Autumn equinoxes and the Summer Solstice, but also the Winter Solstice and the four Celtic fire festivals of Imbolc and Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain.

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An Initiation ceremony on Glastonbury Tor, 1967

Another of his achievements was to reorganize the Order into the three grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid as it had always existed in the past. During the time of his chieftainship he organized ceremonies at Parliament Hill and at Glastonbury. One of Ross' greatest skills lay in his ability to gather people together. For each event he attracted not only those interested in the esoteric, but local council officials, local children who dressed as acolytes and assistants to the May Queen or the Queen of Summer or Autumn, carrying posies and flowers in their hair, visitors from other faiths, and poets and musicians who would perform within the Druid circle.

With such an active schedule of celebrations, combined with leading the Order and acting as principal at 'Jimmy's', Ross was well aware that he needed a place of retreat. He bought a few acres of woodland in Oxfordshire, and there he built two wooden huts and furnished them with camp beds and stoves. Whenever he felt the need, he would retire there either alone or with fellow Druids, and live a simple life of chopping wood, fetching water, walking in the forest and cooking by an open fire. Being interested in both the naturist and vegetarian movements, he was able to combine his natural instinct for simple living with the contemporary currents of thought that were translating these ideals into practical model of living.



By his hut at the place of retreat he created in the Oxfordshire woods.