

Notice I'm ingratiating myself already. Ladies and gentleman, I do not regard myself as the Ball Point Pendragon, nothing like a real Pendragon, but portable and disposable and always being handed round at official events in order to do these.

And I'm, as Eimear has so graciously said, a jobbing historian and this is a historic moment. So the obvious thing to do is explain why this is historic and the answer is not just because it is the final, formal transfer of chieftainship in OBOD, but it's the first time our order, in its 111 years of existence, has managed to do this peacefully, orderly and without a civil war or multiple betrayal. We can hardly look at ourselves in the mirror.

Not yet.

So let me now explain what I mean. Our order was founded in 1911 to '12. We're not exactly sure which because it emerges obscurely from the shadows, concealed behind the enormous bulk of a 6'8" Scotsman called George Watson MacGregor Reid who was about 90% muscle and 10% hot air.

Ladies and gentlemen, he was a great man but not a nice one. He was a thug, a bully, a charlatan and a braggart, who somehow managed to do wonderful things. He did three wonderful things. First, he established the first ever order of druids in Britain dedicated to spiritual matters as opposed to fundraising, the arts or general fellowship, and he called it the Universal Bond. It aimed to unite the spiritualities of the world, so to him druids were natural sisters and brothers and, of course, he had equality of the sexes in his order with Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and every other world faith.

And they walked their talk. Not only did they establish links with all these faiths, but 21 of them allegedly went out to the Sahara desert to stand shoulder to shoulder with a Muslim group of conscientious objectors and pacifists who were preaching against Western imperialism. And Western imperialism arrived with machine guns to take them out and it seems that those druids of the Universal Bond died alongside the Muslims in the Sahara, so we have a lineage of martyrs to which to look back, and that was MacGregor Reid's dream.

Second, he established the regular meeting of druids at Stonehenge, especially at the summer solstice, which we're carrying on to this day. And the third thing was he was a socialist firebrand. He had made his living on the Glasgow docks founding trade unions and beating up union-breaking vigilantes. And he married a rich lady, became a professional guru, but whereas members of his order numbered about 50 or 60 at the Stonehenge ceremonies, thousands of ordinary country people turned out to hear him preach socialism, standing on top of a round borrow at dusk, south of Stonehenge, predicting a world of equality, sorority, fraternity and justice. At last, the knowledge of justice and the love of it.

And amazingly, uniquely for a great druid chief, he had a son who loved druidry and was all set to inherit his father's order when his father at last passed on. What could possibly go wrong? Answer, everything. It's almost brilliant to see what George does. First, he leaves his wife for a younger and prettier woman. Second, when his son worries about this, he falls out with him permanently and disinherits him. Third, he loses interest in druidry but doesn't actually resign as chief, and incredibly the Universal Bond survives quietly because a very nice man called G.W. Smith rallies a remnant of the order, recruits and keeps them going at Stonehenge. And he invites the disinherited Robert, son of George Watson MacGregor Reid, to be one of his people and join them.

And quietly, as the old man gets older but doesn't resign, they carry on the order. And then at last, George Watson MacGregor Reid goes to the great punch up in the sky and Smith becomes chief, at which point Robert suddenly declares himself his father's legal heir and declares civil war on Smith and his friends. The result is several years in which rival branches of the order worship at Stonehenge in an atmosphere of mutual recrimination, insult and intense bitterness, which is only resolved when Smith,

polite and self-effacing as ever, decides the one thing he can do is die, solving the problem, and his lot join up with Robert's and peace finally breaks out.

And Robert is a great leader. He is another massive man physically, like his father. He could tower over a Stonehenge ceremony. When he appeared to lead one dressed in the white robes, crowds invariably shouted things like, "Here comes Moby Dick," but he was a great leader as well as a great figure of a human being. He scrapped politics but he kept the ecumenical side to reach out to other faiths, and he also reached out to the people. Under him, with him, our order, still called the Universal Bond, developed most of the rituals, the ceremonies that we still use now and composed others.

It began to hold ceremonies on Tower Hill in the middle of London at lunch time so the bankers could all see druids in action and learn from them. And they composed, in 1956, the chant or saying, "We swear by peace and love to stand," for the Tower Hill ceremony, and we have it still. And Roberts was in the pink of health, had two first-rate lieutenants working in harmony with him and each other, Thomas Maughan, a natural medic, and Ross Nichols, poet, writer, all round good'un. What could possibly go wrong?

Well, the answer is cholesterol. Robert MacGregor Reid suddenly keels over of a heart attack in the peak of health, suddenly dead without appointing a successor. And now to avert disaster, uniquely an election is held. This is something wisely we've never tried again because the two contenders, Thomas Maughan and Ross Nichols, and the result is almost a dead heat, resulting in the two men dividing the order between them in mutual recrimination, bitterness and creating a civil war which now lasts for several years after. Thomas Maughan keeping the title Universal Bond and Ross Nichols founding the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, which is the Universal Bond with a rebrand and a reboot.

And the results, apart from all the recrimination, rivalry and scrapping over who lost all the archive, finally ends in a status quo, a kind of rubbing along with a still certain amount of bickering. And there is Ross, an order that spans the generations, an order with the vision to pick up the new as well as preserving the best of the old, picks up being a slender school boy with a luxurious Afro hairdo called Philip Carr-Gomm... The camera does not lie. What could possibly...?

The answer is that, like his great mentor, Robert MacGregor Reid, Ross is taken completely unawares by his own death and dies without a successor or, indeed, any preparation for a future. And the order goes to sleep for 10 years until suddenly the spirit of Ross appears to Philip, very much alive in his mind, encourages him to refound the order and then the surviving members come to Philip and invite him to do the same thing. The result is probably the greatest druid order in the history of the modern world. That's coming from me so you'd better believe it.

Druid orders which function more as friendly societies and benefit clubs and insurance societies have got greater numbers in the 19th century, but there's never been a spiritual druid order dedicated to personal growth and to the meeting of this world and the other worlds that has achieved the success, the numbers and, as this gathering so clearly testifies, the sheer geographical reach of OBOD, and that's a testimony to the quality of our leadership. I wasn't there at the time, so I can say this with utter impartiality.

And now we come to this extraordinary turn of events, the completely unprecedented and, frankly, ladies and gentlemen, shockingly peaceful transfer. Just think of the 11 decades of crowded history that we are betraying in this moment. According to everything for which we've stood in the past, according to our entire record, Philip would be dead. It's now too late for him to do so. Eimear should then have declared herself chief, followed shortly afterwards by Damh the Bard establishing a rival group, and then the eldest daughter of Philip and Stephanie would count up to 2,000 and then proclaim herself the true

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chief, and we can then go back to our happy tradition having rival groups trying to hog the limelight at Stonehenge for decades.

But we haven't done it that way. As part of the magic that is OBOD, here we all are together. We've turned our back on the past and, frankly, since I spend so much time there, I recommend to you the best thing one can do with the past is turn one's back on about 98% of it. But we are making the future and we're making it wonderfully. It could be that what's just happened is that druidry has matured at last. It could be we even got sensible, but then I look at Adrian and my other esteemed colleagues and friends on this podium with me and say, "Maybe we haven't done it yet. Maybe we've even got the best of both worlds." Ladies and gentlemen, our chosen chiefs.