

## ITHELL COLQUHOUN, CORNWALL, AND CELTIC IDENTITY

### An Interview with Dr Amy Hale



**WRSP:** Your PhD thesis in Folklore and Mythology, which you completed at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1998, was devoted to modern Celtic identity in Cornwall, a county (and, in some views, a nation) in the southwest of Britain. What was it about Cornwall that attracted your interest and brought you all the way over the Atlantic to conduct research?

**Dr Hale:** People are surprised to discover that my interest in Cornwall is not the result of having any Cornish ancestry. I don't have any that I know of. My interest started out as a series of intellectual and theoretical questions which eventually transitioned into an emotional connection. I had been interested in modern Celtic identities since high school. A lot of people interested in Celtic culture and history are drawn to the romance of the mythology and imagined pagan (and Pagan) pasts, but that was never my thing except for very briefly as a teen. I wanted to explore the core of what makes people so obsessed with the idea of "The Celts," although I wasn't sure what that meant or where my journey might take me.

I majored in Anthropology as an undergraduate and for my BA thesis I conducted independent research in Galway, Ireland looking at how Irish mythology was informing contemporary Irish identities on the eve of the coalescing of the European Union (this was in 1989-90). It was during this time that I realized that the stories so often told about the continuity and spread of Celtic peoples since the Bronze Age were fiction. The reality of the idea of the Celts is fragmented, modern and in many ways the result of a mix of colonialism and efforts at cultural taxonomies that frequently served political interests.

In 1994 I did exploratory fieldwork toward my PhD in Cornwall, staying with Cornish language speakers and cultural activists. Cornwall was a site of interest for me because there is still so much (mainly external) dissent about Cornwall's Celtic identity and the legitimacy of Cornish ethnicity. I was utterly blown away and very moved by the complexity of the cultural and political situation there. Likely because I'm an American I get a very different picture of the Cornish/English cultural dynamic that is invisible to many English people in particular. I ended up moving over in 1995 and stayed until 2001, finishing my PhD in 1998 and eventually working as Lecturer in Contemporary Celtic Studies for the Institute of Cornish Studies at the University of Exeter.

My interest continues to be in the political and economic circumstances under which Celtic identities coalesce, change, and develop. I still see Celtic cultures through the lens of the dynamics of colonialism and economic and cultural marginalization, and that is the context which informs my research. In my view Cornwall is still the most interesting place to explore the dynamic terrains of modern Celtic culture. It is never boring, and I don't think I will ever not have a connection with Cornwall and the Cornish people.

**WRSP:** You have also been one of the comparatively few scholars to have published research on modern Druidry, having an article on the subject in the *Cornish Studies* journal. Was Druidry part of the main theme of your thesis or a side project that spun out of it?

**Dr Hale:** Druidry has never been a primary subject of interest for me, but in the study of the development of modern Celtic identities you can't escape Druids, as Ronald Hutton's work [*Blood and Mistletoe: The History of the Druids in Britain*, 2009], so clearly shows. It's really unavoidable. Druids are the blank slate upon which all sorts of Celtic fantasies can be projected, whether it's the idea of an ancient pre-Christian priesthood of a nature-based religion, the politicized symbol of the shared cultural substrate of an imagined once unified Britain, or the missing link between a nativist, homegrown British Paganism and Christianity. Modern Druidic organizations, both spiritual and cultural, (by which I mean the *Gorseddau* of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany) have become important points of focus and networking for modern Celtic identities. This can take the form of promoting the use of Celtic language in the case of the *Gorseddau*, or the way in which many spiritual Druids focus on environmentalism, which has been widely believed to be a "Celtic" value. Even though these organizations differ widely in their aims, we can still compare them and see how people variously understand the idea of a Celtic cultural legacy.

**WRSP:** During the 2000s, you were involved in the *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* (JASM), which was co-founded by Alison Butler and Dave Evans and which was one of the first peer-reviewed journals to focus on esotericism and related topics. You contributed to the second issue and then co-edited the fifth (and final) issue of the journal; how did you get involved in this project? What was it like working on British esotericism when there really was little institutional framework for supporting such research topics?

**Dr Hale:** In many ways I think my work with JASM helped to realign my career more toward the study of esotericism and away from a professional alignment with Celtic Studies, which in the United States is a rather limiting and restrictive field mostly focused on medieval literature and philology. I became involved when the late Dave Evans, who was a close friend at the time, was having trouble managing the editorship. I offered to help, and Susan Johnston Graf and I took over the editing duties for the final issue. JASM was a very ambitious project, working to include scholarship on

modern practice as well as including an empirical and historical approach, which at the time characterized much of the European scholarship on the esoteric. I am sad that it couldn't be sustained and I think there could be a lot of promise in another journal project of this kind, although *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* comes close. JASM also generated a lively research network for a while and the online discussion used to be very vibrant when there were fewer opportunities for that sort of interaction. Although it still technically exists as a mailing list, it has become greatly diminished.

I would really love to see more institutional support in the United Kingdom for solid academic work on esotericism and Pagan topics. It's not that it isn't out there, but there is no journal or organization that reflects British approaches in the way that I feel JASM did. I have always believed that British scholarship is quite creative and innovative and, in many ways, pushes boundaries that American programs just don't. Some of the approaches you find in British universities, Cultural Studies for example, would lend themselves well to the study of esotericism. A solid British institutional presence would genuinely enrich the field. I know this likely sounds odd coming from an American scholar, but I still feel that the UK in many ways remains my scholarly and professional home base.

**WRSP:** Where does your interest in modern Paganism and occultism come from? Was this an interest you had had since childhood or something that emerged while you were engaged in your PhD research?

**Dr Hale:** It was absolutely an interest from my youth but I had never anticipated that it would become such a central part of my wider research profile. But as I noted with Druidry, you can't really look closely at modern Celtic identities and not end up dealing with Paganism and the occult.

Sure, I was a weird kid and interested in witchcraft at a very young age. I had friends, but like many young people who are drawn to esoteric topics, I was certainly an eccentric child and I spent much of my free time seeking out wooded areas on my bike, having imaginative adventures. I discovered the occult in high school when I started leveraging my eccentricities to more productive social ends. I was a walking cliché, with wild blonde Stevie Nicks hair, listening to a ridiculous amount of Led Zeppelin. My mom bought me Aleister Crowley's *Magick in Theory and Practice* when I was sixteen. I don't think she knew what she was buying, to be honest, but she wanted to support my interests. I was raised in a very confirmed and explicitly atheist household, but my parents were also tolerant, inquisitive, and smart. They provided a critical framework for me around religion and spirituality that I retain to this day.

This was around the same time that I started becoming obsessed with all things romantically Celtic, and I got a hold of some esoteric Arthuriana from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were republished in the mid-1980s. Those became a huge focus of interest at the time. In fact, I still have a huge soft spot for all the weird contexts of esoteric Arthuriana and would love to do a major project on them one day. I didn't focus on Paganism academically in my undergraduate curriculum to any degree, but it so deeply intersects with some of the ways that historical ideas of the Celts have informed modern Cornwall that Paganism became an integral part of my PhD research. As time went on, Paganism and the occult became more strongly featured in my work in general. Now I'm the co-chair of the Contemporary Pagan Studies unit of the American Academy of Religion, but I suspect that is less because of my research history and more because I am a sucker with some slick administrative talents.

**WRSP:** Your new book, *Ithell Colquhoun: Genius of the Fern Loved Gully* (Strange Attractor, 2020) explores the Surrealist artist and occultist who spent much of her life in Cornwall. Can you tell us a little about who she was and how you came to be fascinated by her story?

**Dr Hale:** Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) was a British Surrealist artist and occultist, and I firmly believe she was one of the most prolific and engaged woman occult practitioners of the twentieth century. She was a visual artist whose archives contain over five thousand paintings and drawings. She was a novelist, essayist, and poet who wrote early Earth Mysteries-style travelogues on sacred sites in Cornwall and Ireland in the 1950s. She moved to Cornwall part-time in the 1940s, full-time in 1959, and Cornwall was a central part of her own engagement with her own romantic Celtic Spirituality. Unusually, though, she also had a great deal of respect for Cornish culture and the Cornish language, and while she was not really a Cornish activist she advocated for some level of autonomy for Cornwall and the preservation of Cornish culture.

Studying Colquhoun was a natural for me as her work and interests were a perfect intersection of my own. She is emblematic of the spiritual seeker who comes to Cornwall for spiritual reasons, but she also had a nascent understanding of the political sensibilities that drive ethnic Celtic political movements. A lot of this was likely inspired in her by the work of W. B. Yeats who shared these conceptual traits in his life and work. The complexity of her work is utterly boggling and she still keeps me busy.

**WRSP:** There seems to have been a growth in interest in the connections between art and occultism over the past decade, a topic that you have explored in several of your publications. What do you see as the importance of this area of research and what potential does it offer?

**Dr Hale:** I think the strong focus on art that we have seen in scholarship about the occult in the past decade or so has helped to provide an accessible introduction to scholarship about esotericism. Art is tangible. It provides a way to demonstrate how esoteric and occult principles are used in a way that people can see and maybe even have a personal response to. In a way literature provides similar points of discussion. What is changing is that in the past decade we are seeing a movement away from a discussion of esoteric symbolism in the arts to the role of practice and worldview of the artist. Scholars are no longer fixated on tracing the freaky social networks and “weird” interests of the artist, which was a dominant approach in the past. We are now looking at how their art becomes a vehicle for spiritual practice, and how esoteric ideas shape and inform a wider body of work. Art becomes a way to discuss practice without jumping straight into ritual, which frankly some scholars still find a challenge to talk about. It’s been a safe gateway subject and as such a very popular topic. Also, let’s be honest, the occult has produced a lot of art and literature! Not all of it is great, but some certainly is.

I do have some concern, though, that the topic is in danger of being played out. There have been a lot of books and conferences devoted to it and I think that while there will always be productive inquiry in this area, as a field I’d like to see us branch out a bit. I’d love to see more focus on topics like place and space, aesthetic and style, intersections with science and medicine and, yes, ritual. Having said that, I am still finding interesting and productive angles in my work with contemporary artists especially in terms of performance, space and reception, which feature in some upcoming publications.

**WRSP:** Another of the topics that you have published on is the intersection of the modern Pagan and Earth Mysteries milieus with right-wing politics, especially in forms that have been influenced by Traditionalism. How did you come to pursue this line of enquiry and what has been the response from within the Pagan and esoteric communities?

**Dr Hale:** Again, this focus emerged from the double-headed beast that is the study of contemporary Celtic identities. A huge core of my work is about how people construct and perform their identities in various contexts, and this led me early on in my graduate career into a deep dive into the relationship between folklore and nationalism, which as many people know, isn't the prettiest of tales. Nativist spiritualities ride the ethnonationalism line pretty tightly, so the right-wing element has always been a historical feature of them. Ithell Colquhoun was a Traditionalist, as was W. B. Yeats, and these two were hardly alone in their understanding and embrace of ethnicized spiritual identity. However, Traditionalism as a discrete and historical philosophical movement is still not particularly well known. I suggest Mark Sedgwick's *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (2004) for a good introduction.

During my early research into Colquhoun, I noticed similar right-wing, nativist tendencies in both the writings of John Michell (1933–2009, a prolific and highly influential Earth Mysteries writer) and in a lot of the rhetoric around the Archangel Michael in British New Age and Earth Mysteries culture and I wrote articles on both those topics. A decade ago, a lot of people thought I was making a mountain out of a molehill, and some people got genuinely upset with my research into John Michell and the way he has been claimed and refashioned by the radical right. I lost friends over that one. But the political landscape has changed so much since then, that people are now very hungry to understand what the relationship between Paganism, occultism, and the radical right is, and how it got that way. The seeds have been there all along, but because a lot of Pagans, especially in the United States, see themselves as progressive they are deeply unsettled by right-wing applications of their values. In fact, many of these values are just as legitimately emblematic of conservative values, such as environmental preservation or a love of folk culture. While I know the nature of my research interests in nativist-inspired spiritualities will always have me encountering the radical right to some degree, it's a topic that I need to take a break from every now and then. Working with contemporary artists has proved to be a restorative balm for the soul because the political research is pretty dark.

**WRSP:** You operate as an independent scholar and have run classes helping PhD students consider options other than professional academia. What do you see as the role of the independent scholar in research, especially when it comes to the study of modern Paganism and occultism?

**Dr Hale:** Permit me to jump on my soapbox a minute about the phrase "independent scholar." I'm still not really comfortable with the term. In academic circles it generally means someone is non-affiliated with an academic institution, but not having an academic affiliation comes with its own problems when operating in academic settings. It carries a stigma. We all know it, and no one likes to talk about it. People quietly wonder what is wrong with you. Independent scholars are extremely under supported. I can't apply for major grants. I can't be a research lead. I struggle for access to research libraries and academic publications. For many people conferences are outside their reach. Some colleagues won't consider you for collaboration. For people seeking academic jobs it's almost impossible to stay competitive.

I taught for fifteen years, and when I became a higher ed consultant I had to drop all my affiliations as a condition of the job. Then I retired from that job to focus on my writing and now I'm truly an

“independent scholar” because I’m not anything else, but I’m not sure this is the best label for everyone. I believe strongly that we should be encouraging people to pursue other careers outside academia while still being part of scholarly conversations and production if they so choose, and people should be supported in this choice. If those non-academic careers remain invisible to the scholarly community because people are labelled as “independent scholars” it doesn’t help to support or legitimize other career paths, which is something we all need to be doing. Not everyone wants to be part of the professoriate or work in a university.

I think it would be great if our academically employed colleagues would help create better conditions for non-affiliated scholars to feel valued, and support greater access to research collections and professional libraries. It would also be great if more institutions would allow the non-affiliated to apply for grants! In small and marginal fields like Pagan Studies, Celtic Studies, or the study of esotericism, there may well be even more scholars without an academic home who would benefit from collegiality and support. While I would like to say that independent scholars can have a role of providing critique or innovation because they are not constrained by the needs of academic production, I think for many this is not the case because they don’t have the luxury to work outside such a rigidly defined system or to take chances with their work.

Jumping down off the soapbox, though, those of us who are genuinely comfortable as scholars not working within academic institutions do have enormous potential to become public scholars, take on creative projects, and be innovative in the research questions we take on. I want people to read my work! I can write about what I like for whatever publishers I choose and my work is more creative than it has ever been. I personally am very happy with where I am at this stage in my career, but I also admit I’m very privileged.

**WRSP:** Have you got any projects on the horizon that we should be keeping an eye out for?

**Dr Hale:** Absolutely! I am quite thrilled about a collection coming out with Palgrave that I edited, *Essays on Women in Western Esotericism: Beyond Seeresses and Sea Priestesses*. No publication date yet, but likely late 2021, early 2022. I have a piece on the occult performance art of Barry William Hale coming out in a summer edition of the journal *Correspondences*, which I’m pretty excited about. I’m also working on an edition of Ithell Colquhoun’s magical essays, and returning to a big work on Cornwall. There’s a lot going on and I’m pretty excited about it.

**WRSP:** Dr Hale, thank you for taking part in this interview; I look forward to reading your future endeavors!

**Dr Hale, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!**

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

**Dr Amy Hale** is an anthropologist and folklorist based in Atlanta, Georgia whose work focuses on esotericism, Celtic identities, and Cornwall. She is the author of *Ithell Colquhoun: Genius of the Fern Loved Gully* (Strange Attractor, 2020) and co-editor of *New Directions in Celtic Studies* (University of Exeter Press, 2000) and *Inside Merlin’s Cave: A Cornish Arthurian Reader* (Francis Boutle Press,

2000). Her articles have appeared in such journals as *Cornish Studies* and *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*. She is the former editor of the *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* and now sits on the editorial board of both *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* and the Black Mirror Research Network. She is currently co-chair of the Contemporary Pagan Studies unit in the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

\*\*\*\*\*

**WRSP Interviewer:**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White**