



The Rounwytha Way

In History and Modern Context

What has been termed The Way of the Rounwytha is locally referred to as the Camlad Rouning [1], or simply and most often as The Rouning, with those of this way known as Rounwytha. It is an aural pagan tradition found in a few rural areas of South Shropshire and Herefordshire together with a few enclaves in the marches areas of

Sir Faesyfed and Sir Drefaldwyn. According to the few extant adherents of this tradition, the numbers of people involved were never large - rarely exceeding a dozen people at any one time - with the tradition itself being an hereditary one, passed down from one person to another, often within the same family; and with this tradition said to be so old there are no stories relating to such events, although the consensus is it certainly pre-dates the arrival of the faith and the folk of 'the risen crist'.

This aural tradition is of 'pagan things and pagan ways' [2] and was primarily a tradition of women-folk who were for the most part either reclusive individuals or who lived in small cottages or on small farms with their 'extended' families.

The Rouning tradition was and is one centred on certain gifts, certain skills, and is distinct in many ways, for instance:

- i) There are no named deities or divinities or 'spirits'. No 'gods', no 'goddess'. No demons.
- ii) There are no spells or conjurations or spoken charms or curses; no 'secret scripts' and no 'secret teachings'; indeed no teachings at all.
- iii) There are no 'secret book(s)' or manuscripts; indeed, there are no writings.
- iv) There are no ritual or Occult or 'wiccan' or 'satanist' elements at all.
- v) There is no calendar, as calendars are usually understood, and thus no set dates/times for festivities or commemorations.
- vi) There are no oaths made, no pledges written or said.
- vii) There is no organization, no dogma, no codification of beliefs, no leader(s), no hierarchy, and no stages or grades of 'attainment'.

Four other distinctive features of this Way are perhaps worthy of note: (α) that there is no interest in, no concern with, matters beyond one's family, one's local area of dwelling, and beyond such problems of one's neighbours that they personally bring to one's attention because they may require some help or assistance; (β) that it is rooted in and nourished by a specific rural Marcher area of a specific country and cannot easily be transplanted elsewhere, as it most certainly cannot live - be lived - in any urban area; (γ) that men are the exception, women the rule; and (δ) that there is no conformity to conventional social/moral rôles but rather certain accepted practices.

(α) means that the external world beyond such boundaries is unremarked upon because there is little or no interest in it, certainly no desire to acquire 'news' concerning it, and certainly no desire, no need, to become 'involved in changing it'. It also means that there is no desire, no need, to 'expand the tradition', to recruit people elsewhere, with 'new recruits' thus being rare (a few per generation) and for the most part family members or locals or some acquired and trusted friend. (β) means that no transplantation elsewhere, of the traditional way, is sought or desired, and that if anyone do leave the area, their heart, their being is always there within the old Rounwytha boundaries with them unhappy, lost, unless until they find a similar place to dwell. (γ) means that the few men involved tend to be of a certain nature; possessed of a particular and sensitive/artistic character. (δ) means that women often tend to run/govern/provide for the family/farm; that relationships between two women - and between siblings and cousins - are not unusual, and if and when they occur are not

condemned and are not even remarked upon; and that there was/is no distinction of social class between those 'of the gift'.

The Gift of The Rounwytha

The main gift of a Rounwytha - what makes and marks a Rounwytha - is a particular and a natural sensitivity: to human beings, to Nature (and especially the land, the weather), to living-beings (especially animals) and to the heaven/Cosmos. A wordless, conceptless, feeling of connexions, and of the natural balance that we mortals, being unwise, have such a tendency to upset. An intuitive knowing of the wisdom of a natural propitiation: of us as mortals as living, as being balanced, between the earth and the heavens and thus not being separate from Nature. This is the knowing of such balance being necessary for good fortune, for good health, for good crops, and - importantly - of being natural and necessary for our immediate family and the extended family of our friends and neighbours who accept us as we are and thus are well-disposed toward us.

This is the gift of knowing that some deeds be unwise because they upset the natural and very delicate balance that exists between us, our locality, our community, and Nature. This is the ancient knowing that pre-dates the separation of us - as an individual with individual desires, a name, and goals - from our dwelling with Nature. This is the knowing that the very land, as we ourselves, is alive, part of us and aware of us, affected by us: sleeping, dreaming, wakeful, joyful, sad, sick, hopeful, recovering, needful, just-being. That this living - of theirs, of that special unhuman kind - can aid or harm us, and (despite what many moderns have come to believe) is not composed of 'named' individual, characterful, spirits, or 'demons', or governed by some god or goddess, or whatever, whose 'names' we should or must know in order to 'control' them or 'propitiate' them or whatever.

Rather, there is a way of living, by the Rounwytha few, which balances, which makes/resumes/re-establishes the necessary fluxion of that-which-is through *we-who-so-dwell-here*, and thus which is/who are or who become the balance and so can pass that gift to aid, to heal, to mend, or possibly to harm what might so need such harm.

For this is the way - the gift - of also knowing the nature of the rotten: human, animal, land. Of the need, sometimes, to cleanse, perchance to cull. As when there was the knowing that a certain individual doing a certain deed was bad, rotten - and not because they had offended some named and powerful god or goddess, and not because such a deed contravened some law or decree said to be divinely inspired or laid down by some sovereign or by someone who claimed authority from some god or gods or 'government', but because such a deed signed that person as rotten, and who thus, like a rotten piece of meat eaten, might or most probably would cause sickness, or spread disease, among us, among the land. Hence why their removal - by exile or by cull - would end (cure) the sickness, restore the balance their rotten deeds and they themselves had caused to be upset, restoring thus the natural flow, and gifts, of Life: of health, fecundity, happiness, good fortune.

The Learning of a Rounwytha

The traditional learning of a young Rounwytha was simple; direct and personal. There was the knowledge aurally acquired quite young from an older Rounwytha - a mother or grandmother perhaps - concerning such obvious things as plants and herbs, cures for ailments, human and animal.

Then there was the wordless learning, the gift either acquired or (more usually) nurtured when somewhat older, by the two simple tasks. The first of which was to spend two whole seasons alone, in woods or hills: to learn to see, to hear, to listen, to sense earth below, sky above, and so be, become, quiet, nurturing, and still. The second, and later and last and when adjudged the season was aright, to spend one whole lunar month alone in some cave or cavern, with only candles or a lantern for light, little or nothing to do, with such meagre food and water as required regularly left by a trusted friend who you would have to trust to enter and bring you out at this last learning's lunar end, more or less for weather permits a few days either end.

Three Recent Examples

One aural recalling, recounted, and written here:

The first Rounwytha met was, in the late nineteen-seventies, in her eighth decade of mortal life, who lived alone not that far as the Raven flies from the Long Mynd in a small cottage set in a hollow with a small stream nearby and who owned some acres of the land around. She kept some chickens, geese, and cows, living mostly in one room in the cottage whose effective heating was from a range at one end of the room and on which she did what little cooking she did, mostly stews. No electricity, and neither did she need nor want any. Her only concession a cold water tap, installed only because her hand-pumped nearby well had finally gone beyond repair. In those days, a few local and mostly older people still on occasion sought her advice, bringing simple gifts in payment; a few candles, a bar of soap, perhaps the luxury of tea. Once a fortnight, more or less, and in her well-worn clothes, she might have to trundle along the lane, mostly walking beside her old rusty bicycle whose tattered baskets, front and rear, would convey her few purchases back from that nearest village store. And when as might be in Winter needed, a farmer red of face and about her age might bring her some bails of hay. No one knew why, or if they did they would not say, but I suspect it might recall some aspect of her youth as when, fair and comely, she did (as gossip so related down the pub) for several minutes paralyse a young man who had annoyed her, just by staring at him.

The second meet, also in those late seventies times: a young woman, home-schooled, quiet but giggly, dwelling with her grandmother not that far from where an edge of Wenlock Edge ended to potter down to level to seep

to be land that came to edge a certain river. Not that tidy of hair, body, dress, but pretty still, she would spend some hours some days a-cleaning; walking narrow lanes upward to where that surfeit of houses grew, plentiful with shops, bedevilled by cars. So she would, in several houses, clean, and well, with mood mostly cheery, such few lapses of no account. For she had this gift, this skill, you see as when that frail almost bed-bound lady whose house was one she cleaned would sit before her and she would pass her hands around, above, the knees, not touching, and the elder - happy, smiling - would walk away, no pain for weeks to come. Once and long ago, or so that story go, when young some village boys tried to taunt her for her dress and manner, she thumped them all so hard neither they, nor any, ever dared, again.

The third, some thirty years later, more or less. A married women - broad, strong - and two young children, who ran farm with husband; eighty ancestral acres some would say though no one knew for sure. Mostly dairy, but some beef. And chickens, a few pigs, three dogs, horses, and that motley barnful gaggle: gently-fiercely (and mostly) rat-killing cats, though two were rather lazy. She herself, that lady, slow of walk, and slow to smile but when she did it was as if the Sun had broke that gloom of day. She just had this way, with animals and men, you see; no words needed, required. She felt good, calming, just to be near; but no desire there within as men know and so need desire, at least while sap be rising and they winnowing with the wind. So sometimes the few who knew and, being trusted, might bring to her some life sick, injured, or which ailed. Child, pet, animal of house, field, barn, farm, it made no difference. She saying nothing, only smiling, touching, was left some gift. Often - and enough - the ailing, or that sickness, left; and if - when - not, the bringers cast no hurt nor blame for that was just the way they knew it was. That ring of gifts, given, taken, reaped, harvested, sown. Buried, born, and grown.

One interesting thing - possibly - is all that three could not drive a motor vehicle, and did not want to. One, possibly because in her youth they were new fangled, unreliable, things; and a horse and cart did all was needed, and better. Another, possibly because she loved horses, owned horses, and people came to her. The third, because 'they confused her', she felt uncomfortable shut away, moving so unnaturally fast; no sky above, no trees, no bush nor field around; no earth to touch with feet still often blessed by being bare...

Perhaps I in person might add a fourth. A rather wealthy lady of a quite large house of well-established many-acred gardens. Musical, patroness of the Arts, graduate of a certain ancient English university, who had some second house in Shrewsbury. She also - as her daughter - so many locals came to for assistance, help, advice...

No Deities, No Calendar

Since there are/were no deities, and nothing was named, there were no ceremonies needed to evoke/invoke/pray-to or feast/remember them and no 'special days' to do these and similar silly things.

But one duty which some Rounwytha-kind sometimes undertook was to suggest when certain celebrations or commemorations or tasks might propitiously take place. For example, a good period to sow crops; a good day to celebrate a successful gathering-in; a good - a needed - season to sow some human gift of blood.

There was no given, static, calendar - solar or lunar - to guide the Rounwytha about the onset of such occasions. No division of life into years, months, weeks, or even days of fixed number of hours. No calculations. No 'astronomically aligned stones'; no sacred knowledge.

The day began at Dawn; night began at dusk and ended at Dawn. There was no 'week' since there were no 'special days' - such as a Sunday - to be reckoned and no given, set aside, 'days of rest'. Work was done until it was completed, or daylight ended and then begun again next daylight, weather permitting. There were no months; just the flow, the changing, of seasons. A time to sow; a time to nurture; a time to reap. A time when animals might need fodder and when they might again have fresh grass in pasture or meadow. A time for living, to rest, to work, to sleep, to smile, to breed to laugh to die.

Those still part of the land know that what in northern climes is called Spring does not begin on what has been termed the Spring Equinox nor on any specific day, whether that day be marked by some fixed calendar, solar or lunar. Instead, the arrival of Spring is a flow that occurs over a number of days - sometimes a week or two weeks or more - and which days are marked by the changes in the land, the fields, the air, and by the behaviour of wildlife, birds, and insects. This arrival varies from year to year and from location to location, and usually now occurs, in the land of England, from what the solar calendar now in common use names late February to what the same calendar names early or even middle March. Thus someone who knows their locality - who belongs to it - will know and feel the changes which occur in Nature during the season when the days are becoming longer and the weather somewhat warmer with the Sun rising higher in the sky in relation to Winter. They will thus know, will feel, will sense, when the occasion - the time - is right to do certain things, such as planting.

Furthermore, for such people, mid-Summer (and especially the sunrise on some particular day) is irrelevant. What is relevant is the work, the tasks to do, the life to lead, and the coming Autumn, which again will be sensed, known, and which again will vary from year to year and locality to locality; and while this onset of Autumn might be indicated - intimated - by the appearance in the night sky of certain stars, such as the evening rising of the bright star Sirius, that was all they were and are: intimations; one sign among many.

In terms of unfixed celebrations, consider, for example, the ancient celebration - the gathering, remembrance, and Autumnal feast - that the Rounwytha tradition simply called The Gathering. This also varied from year to year and from locality to locality, its occurrence determined by when what had to be gathered-in and prepared and stored in readiness for the coming days of Winter had been gathered-in and prepared and stored. The day of its occurring being to some extent dependant on the weather, on the health and time and numbers of those so gathering in the harvest and storing produce, and on such important matters as what crops were grown, what fruits were available, what livestock were kept, and what fuels were available ready to be stored for the needed fires of the coming colder season.

Hence the date of The Gathering would vary from year to year and locality to locality, and sometimes be toward what is now termed October and sometimes toward the end of what is now termed September, or somewhere inbetween. On the day of The Gathering there would probably be a feast - a celebration of the bounty which Nature, the earth and the heavens, had provided - and also and importantly a remembering; a remembering of those no longer there as they had been the previous year (and not there for whatever reason, such as death from illness or old age) and a remembering of those long-departed, such as one's own ancestors. Thus there was, as with most such celebrations, a natural balance born from remembrance and respect for the past and from hope and anticipation; here, hope and anticipation of the new warmer fertile seasons to arrive after the coming darkness of what would most probably be another bleak cold and dark season of snow, frost, and ice. For The Gathering also heralded that season when some form of almost daily heating in family dwellings would most probably be required.

As for a communal or family bonfire, it was simply practical, not symbolic, of whatever. Just a cheery presence (most people in northern climes love a good bonfire), a focus for the celebration (and such dancing as invariably occurred during such pagan festivities), a source of warmth and light, and a place where offerings of harvested produce and other gifts could be placed, such offerings and such gifts - as was a common folk tradition throughout the world - being to ancestors, to land and sky, as well as to the always unnamed spirits, sprites, and perhaps those unnamed guardians of sacred natural places.

The Rounwytha Way

It will possibly thus be understood that the old Rounwytha way was a way of living, an attitude to life; a manner of doing things, and of not doing certain other things. Their measuring of the changes around them, in them, in other life, was in terms of fluxions, of how living things slowly flux in their own way from birth toward dying. Thus, for the Rounwytha, their life would not be apportioned out in years, but by how many Summers they had seen; how many Gatherings they could remember.

And yet, even now, this olden way wyrdfully, of necessity, lives on. In a few.

[A Camlad Rounerer]

Footnotes

[1] The spelling of such dialect words as rouning, rounwytha, and so on, is an approximation based on what they sound like when spoken. Since the tradition was and is an aural one, there are no writings, with many adherents - even in recent memory - being unable (or unwilling to learn) to read and write.

[2] Pagan in both the historical sense of that term and in the later usage of that term: paganus, someone who belongs to a rural community and whose traditions, ethos, and ways, are not those of the religion of 'the risen crist'.

Image credit:

The Day's Consecration, a painting by Richard Moul
