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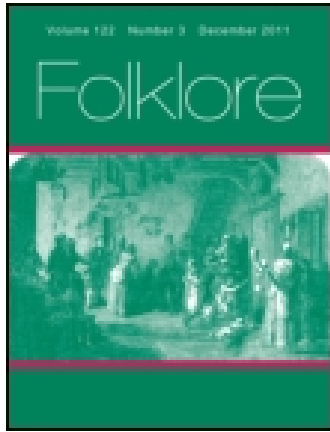
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Glastonbury and the Grail Legend

Mary A. Berkeley ^a

^a Cranbourne, Salisbury

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COLLECTANEA.

GLASTONBURY AND THE GRAIL LEGEND.

THE publication of Miss Weston's new volume of Arthurian research *From Ritual to Romance*, and the summing up of her conclusions represented therein, seem to proclaim the time ripe for a consideration of the Grail Legend in its special connection with the Glastonbury neighbourhood. Miss Weston's theory that the curious details of the Grail pageant arise from actual incidents of long-forgotten ritual—or more properly, ritual forgotten only by the general public—has forced on us the question: is it possible now to point to any place in England as having been at one time an important centre of these rites, and, if so, have we any reason to conclude that Glastonbury might have been, in remote ages, such a centre?

It has so long been the fashion to treat the Glastonbury element in the story as spurious, as a piece of flagrant dishonesty on the part of monks who had adopted a particular legend to serve their own ends, that some little courage is required to suggest a new theory; but there are certain curious and interesting details which it might be profitable to discuss, and it seems to me strange that local legends and evidence of all kinds have been systematically overlooked.

The question is such a vast one that it cannot be fully discussed, and it is hard to know where to begin; but one must, I think, leave out the Christian or pseudo-Christian aspects of the legend altogether—at any rate for the present. It might be convenient to start with the fact that local tradition and old writers give the place three names:—Ynyswytrin, the Glassy Island; Avalon, the Island of Apples; and Glaestingaburgh, or Glastonbury, the last being the Saxon designation, said

sometimes to be a rough translation of Ynyswytrin, sometimes to mean the town or home of an ancient deity called Glaest, one of the sons of Cunedda. Whatever may be the true one of these two explanations there can be little doubt that Avalon and Ynyswytrin were synonymous terms for one place, and that whether or no that place were Glastonbury, they were so understood. It will be remembered how Chrestien de Troyes says of Maheloas de l'Isle de Voirre that he "*de l'isle d'Avalon fu sire*," showing that at least the connection was clear in his own mind, l'Isle de Voirre being surely the Glassy Island, Ynyswytrin? This Maheloas has been identified with the Melwas of the Æstiva Regio, that Maelgwn who is said to have taken Arthur's Queen to Glastonbury. I only quote this to show how mediaeval writers may possibly have thought of Glastonbury. The name Avalon may be called, perhaps, a much disputed word. Written sometimes "Avallon," it is now derived from the Welsh word for "apple," now from the name of the god Avallach, who is vaguely said to have dwelt there; but we know that Avallach, though a subaquatic deity, was "he of the apple-tree," so that these two theories should not exclude each other. Mr. Waite's statement in *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail* (p. 442) is of interest here:—

"The Druidic secret was symbolized by the term *Afalon*, which means the Apple Orchard."

May we not conjecture that Avalon, Avallon, or Afalon was a sacred name given to the Island by the priests, and that the other name, Ynyswytrin, was the one used by the ordinary inhabitants of the place who were outside the knowledge of the mysteries? Avallach would, of course, be the god of such a locality, and this is perhaps slightly confirmed by the use of "Avalon" as one of the many names for the Celtic Other Country.

Your readers will remember the papers that formerly appeared in this organ on "The European Sky and Tree God" by Mr. Cook—papers which connected the apple-tree of Avallach with the various magic trees of Irish legend and with the Breaking of the Branch in the Grove of Nemi. Glastonbury tradition now has but one sacred tree, the Holy Thorn of St. Joseph, which

has completely ousted the apples of Avallach excepting in a very vague and general way. We know the Thorn as the symbol of Urien, and it is significant that the old English poem of *Ywain and Gawain* should mention the magic tree of Ywain's fountain-challenge as a thorn-tree! Is there not here some close link between Glastonbury Thorn, the Apple of Avallach, and those other trees in the same category cited by Mr. Cook?

Sir John Rhys identified Urien, Brân, and Uther Pendragon as different aspects of the beheaded god, "the half-dead king." Mr. Nutt has shown how the story of the Voyage of Bran became the story of the Voyage of St. Joseph. It is needless to retrace this ground; but some curious local ghost stories found at Glastonbury are worth quoting in this connection. Before doing so, however, it may be well to describe the geographical aspect of the place very briefly. Glastonbury, roughly speaking, consists of a valley surrounded by three hills, rising from a perfectly flat plain, which is land reclaimed from the sea and from marsh saltings. The chief hill, Glastonbury Tor, is the dominant feature of the landscape in this part of Somerset, and rises some seven hundred feet above sea-level. It is conical in shape, but so strangely formed that it looks quite different from every direction, so that it would be a worthy home for a deity of such shape-shifting powers as either Avallach, Urien-Brân, or the Grail King of the Romances. Its northern spur is called Chalice Hill, and is the traditional hiding-place of the Grail. A long spur to the South West is Weary All Hill, where St. Joseph is said to have planted the Thorn. The ruins of the great Abbey are deep in the hollow of the valley.

At the dissolution of the Abbey, Richard Whiting or Whytyng, the last Abbot of Glastonbury, was hanged, drawn, quartered and beheaded on Tor Hill, in the company of two of his monks, one of them being his Prior, John Thorne. One would naturally suppose that any ghost story connected with these unfortunate people would be localized on the Tor; but no. *Vox populi* has assigned a definite place of unrest for Abbot Whiting, and it is not here. Up the side of Chalice Hill runs a little lane known as "Dod Lane," which ends abruptly at a five-barred

gate into a field, and on this gate is said to lean a headless man "in full canonicals"—Abbot Richard, in fact! The word "Dod" is said to be a corruption of "dead," and the name is supposed to have been given from this circumstance, although the more prosaic believe the lane to have been called after a "Miss Dod" who lived hard by. "Miss Dod" does not seem to be a very convincing personality, and the lane may well have been so called long before her day—whenever that may have been. As to the "full canonicals," I think that I am, under the circumstances, entitled to pass them over as an added gloss merely.

The second story concerns the Abbey Church itself. A corner of the ruins, towards the East end and some way from the outer wall of the original Church, is known as the "haunted corner" because the listener at a certain hole in the masonry can hear St. Dunstan working at his forge. A sound like the noise of a blow-pipe is audible, and is, of course, caused by the wind. I am not absolutely certain of my reference, but either Warner or Collinson, in writing of Glastonbury, mentions that "the head of an abbot is sometimes seen there," and is thought to be St. Dunstan. There can be no reason for connecting this saint with a bodiless head, and one would sooner expect it to be the head of the mutilated Richard Whiting; but the fact that the "haunted corner" is the traditional site of the forge (and it was not within the limits of the Church in Dunstan's day) seems to point to the more famous legend of the saint's conflict with the devil whilst working at his forge, and to imply that Dunstan may have thrown his tongs in the face of some apparition that he fancied he saw. The Glastonbury folk appear to be retelling very ancient legends with new names—one is reminded of the process pointed out by Mr. Baring Gould, when the "White Lady," traceable to Freyja, becomes associated in the popular mind with some local celebrity. The bodiless head and the headless body probably belonged in far away times to the god Urien-Brân, the "half-dead King." Possibly all stories of headless apparitions can be traced to this origin. The third ghost story rather confirms this; for it is rumoured that Prior Thorne "walks" in the upper part of the

town, and presages a death in the family of the beholder—why is never explained. It is most likely something to do with his name, which is that of the symbol of the death-god.

The story of St. Joseph planting the staff which blossomed into the miraculous Thorn does not appear until fairly late in the Middle Ages, yet it can hardly be called "mediaeval" with any truth, for its elements are Celtic. It is not found in William of Malmesbury, who relates, however, a somewhat similar legend concerning the local saint, Benignus, or Beneen, an Irish disciple of St. Patrick. This youth, seeking a hermitage, asked his master for instructions and was bidden by Patrick to travel till his staff took root and grew, and this happened on the outskirts of Glastonbury, where Benignus consequently remained until his death. We have in these two legends the completion of the collection of stories made by Mr. Cook and Professor Brown in their articles on Owain and on the Sky-god, although in these cases the stories are both mutilated and inverted. Joseph and Benignus plant trees instead of breaking branches; but in either case the tree grows from the staff of the saint, and these two authorities have pointed out that frequently the Broken Branch is symbolized as the staff or spear of the hero, henceforward associated with him always. Then, too, the hero who breaks the bough and challenges and defeats the Guardian, must rule in his place. Whatever may be the truth about the Glastonbury Legend, one cannot deny that both Joseph of Arimathea and Benignus of Ireland represent strangers challenging and conquering the local rulers and supplanting them in all the might of Christianity.

Avalach is, of course, the same as the Norse sea-god Amloði, who gave his name to Amroth in S. Wales. His country and apple-tree are, in the nature of things, submarine. This might be a valid objection to his home being localized at Glastonbury or anywhere else, however sure we may be that this place represents the "Avalon" of the Celts; but one or two things should be remembered. The vanished seas and swamps all round Glastonbury once made of what is now an inland valley a veritable island, probably none too easy of access. Various place-names in the neighbourhood, such as Godney, Athelney,

Middlezoy, Western Zoyland and Nythe, recall this long past condition of things; and the flat fields surrounding the Tor are still called the "Meres" or "seas." In ancient times they were called the "Hazy Seas," from the thick fogs which arose there, and which do still arise over the reclaimed land; so that Avalon might well have been thought of as a hidden "island-valley" disappearing periodically into the surrounding water—no unfitting dwelling-place for a god of the sea. And if it be objected that Avalon was merely the unlocalized name of the Celtic "Happy Otherworld," there is still an answer. Glastonbury, as the reputed dwelling-place of gods and the centre of uncanny rites, may well, hidden as it was behind its fogs, have gained the reputation of being "otherworldly." We know how many of the islands off our coasts had this reputation. We are familiar with the tales of fishermen who have been called upon to row the invisible newly dead to places where their spirits might find rest. The late Canon Scott Holmes records how the dead were ferried across the Hazy Sea to Tor Hill, the gate of the Otherworld, or, as we might say, to the "inner Avalon." Who can wonder if, to the dwellers on the surrounding islands and opposite coasts Ynyswytrin or Avalon seemed to be a place not of this earth? Brân himself, son of Leir of the Infinite Waters, was of the tribes of the sea, and of the same clan as Avallach or Amloði. It is possible that the two may have been alike in nature and in worship, and that the thorn of Brân flourished side by side with the apple of Avallach, perhaps supplanting it in importance.

The salient features of stories of the Owain type are, of course, the challenge of the stranger at the well, ford or bridge, the defeat of the Guardian, and his absolute supplanting by the conqueror who takes his place until put out of it himself. The analogy of this story to the ritual of the Priest-king of Nemi is now familiar; but there is one very striking example which I have not seen catalogued—the Arthurian story of Balin and Balan. These are, as we know, Northumbrian heroes, equated by Sir John Rhys with Belinus and Brennus, or Beli and Brân, thus linking up their history with Ba'al-worship. But there is no indication that their adventures, such as we know them,

take place in their own country—on the contrary, we are led to suppose that the brothers are far from their home. Their troubles are brought about by the Lady of the Lake and the Lady Lile of Avelion, and these two women are the same as the Modron daughter of Avallach of Welsh mythology. Thus we have at the outset a connection with Avalon, and we are further told that in the place of their death Merlin builds the Perilous Bridge and institutes the *Lit Merveil* of the later romances. This *Lit Merveil*, kept at Castle Corbenic, is indubitably the same as the Bed of Ba'al in the great temple of Borsippa; and when Sir John Rhys identified Corbenic miscopied from *Caer Vannawg* as Glastonbury Tor, the Castle on the Pointed Hill, it may be that he put into our hands a master-key. We have established Corbenic, home of the Grail and the *Lit Merveil* or Bed of Ba'al as a temple of Life Cults, and the two theories united point to Glastonbury Tor as the former site of such a temple. Allowing the undoubted Ba'al-worship and Phoenician influence in Ireland and Cornwall, it is not hard to believe that this particular religion was one of the many cults of a kindred nature that once held sway over Glastonbury or Avalon, especially when we know that the village of Pilton, some miles distant, was a notable port founded by Phoenician merchants who traded with the Mendip tin-miners, and are said to have given the name of one of their gods to this very range of hills. The site of Pilton Harbour is still pointed out. But can we say no more?

First of all, let us take into account the *mise-en-scène* of the various fights which recall the ritual of the Nemi Grove.

The Irish stories and the story of Owain place the scene of the encounter at a well or pool, sometimes on Upper Earth, sometimes in Land Underwaves. In Balin and Balan it is on the shores of a lake or river surrounding an island; in one or two other Arthurian examples, such as Perceval and Lancelot, it is by a ford, and in Perceval's case the soul of a bird-woman accidentally slain in the fight is carried back to Avalon. Now the confines of the territory actually called the "Isle of Avalon" to-day are not wide, and hardly extend beyond the limits of Glastonbury itself. Their western extremity is bounded by a curve of the River Brue, which passes between Glastonbury

and the almost adjacent town of Street. Here the river is crossed by an old bridge, vulgarly called "Pomparles Bridge," though its true name is *Pons Periculosus*. The origin of the name is unknown; but the position of the bridge is suggestive, for it is near the foot of Weary All Hill, in full view of the tree planted to commemorate St. Joseph's Holy Thorn, and in former times a sentry stationed near this tree could see and attack any stranger coming to the bridge.

The name of this bridge, so strangely recalling the *Pont Perilleux* of the Romances, may possibly have been handed down from a time not far distant from that in which the priest-kings of Avalon challenged strangers after the fashion of the priest-kings of Nemi. The Latin name need not have been given originally by the monks, as though there are no traces of Roman occupation in Glastonbury itself, there are a few such traces in the surrounding country, and Street is the Roman *strata*. The name might be, however, the translation of a native appellation.

This does not exhaust all the possibilities. We find in the *Perlesvaus* (which alone of the Romances professes to have originated in Glastonbury Abbey) and in the *Conte del Graal*, as well as in the various Lancelot legends, accounts of a Graveyard Perilous which faintly echo the account of William of Malmesbury of the haunted cemetery of Glastonbury Abbey. Miss Weston has localized this place in the North of England; but if a ghostly graveyard full of unknown horrors were, as she suggests, a necessary part of the initiation terrors, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that there was more than one of these places! The Graveyard of the *Conte del Graal*, though unlocalized, is connected with Glastonbury by indirect implications. It is in a country which was, like Glastonbury, sacred to the Mother of God; it is in an orchard (*vergier*) near the settlement of some religious; and it is near that Chastel Orgueilleux which the *Elucidation* prologue associates with the Perilous Bridge. And here the mention of the Perilous Bridge brings us to a point invariably overlooked.

A very vague local tradition says that each entrance to Avalon was guarded by a chapel and a holy well; and a few

scattered remains support the assertion, such as the "holy well" in a wall to the south of the town, the Blood Spring, between the Tor and Chalice Hill, the Chapel of St. James, now a cottage, on the hill called Bove Town, and the remains, or rather the site, of the Chapel of St. Bridget of Beckary, not far from *Pons Periculosus*. Had all these places their guardians in pagan times, who enacted the gruesome ritual fight with the newcomer, and are the Christian chapels late erections on ancient sacred sites? Of *Pons Periculosus* and the Blood Spring we may guess as much with a practical certainty, because the latter is so closely connected with the local legends of the Grail, which is said to have tinged its water red with the Blood of Christ as It dripped from the Chalice. It is a ferruginous spring, and the bright red deposit of iron which the water leaves doubtless gave rise to the legend; but, situated as it is on the slopes of the Tor and the confines of the town, it is at least possible to hazard a conjecture as to its original purpose.

It is impossible here not to mention the tree-shaded fountain by which, in the German poem of *Lanzelet*, Lancelot fights and kills the father of his wife—that Iblis who corresponds in name to Malory's Elaine of Corbenic. The likeness to the Owain fight is obvious, and suggests that here, too, we are hot on the track of a misunderstood ritual. It would take too long to examine details; but since the fountain or ford-fight is also an adventure of Perceval or Peredwr, since it is connected with Balin and the *Lit Merveil* and Perilous Bridge, need we doubt the kinship of the stories? And this makes me think that one or two other elements have entered into the legend, which seem to have escaped attention.

Even before reading Miss Weston's last book I had noticed the affinities between the Grail story and the worship of Mithras, to which she draws attention. I had also noticed points which seemed similar in the Mithras cult, and in certain Grecian mysteries. I looked eagerly through *From Ritual to Romance* for remarks on the Dionysiac and Orphic ceremonies, only to be disappointed; and I looked, also in vain, for notices of the initiations at the sanctuary of Trophonios. The tree-shaded

wells of Mnemosyne and Lethe seemed to give a parallel to the earthly wells beneath their sacred trees, found in so many temples of so many cults. The inspired mantic head of the murdered Orpheus recalled the inspired head of Brân in the Welsh myth, become now the ghostly head of modern Glastonbury tradition. The worship of Dionysos is so plainly a Life Cult, with its tree-worship, its sacred ritual meal, and its frenzied women corresponding to the wailers for Tammuz and the weeping maidens of the Grail.

I would now make one last suggestion.

Sir John Rhys equates with the Grail all those cauldrons, cups, baskets and dishes of Welsh, Irish and Gaelic folk and fairy-lore. He mentions especially the Cauldron of Pwyll Head of Hades, whose rim was surrounded by pearls, and which was kept boiling by the breath of nine maidens. Nine maidens also kept the skerry-quern of Amloði, or Avallach, which seems to have been also a property of the Life Cults, and Miss Harrison connects the Nine Muses with the Maenads and Bacchantes, representing the women of the Tammuz and Adonis rituals and the Maidens of our own Grail rites. I wish to make what must remain a tentative suggestion, that Glastonbury has unconsciously and unexpectedly provided us with a tangible link with the days when the Life Cults were celebrated there. The wonderful Lake Village discovered outside the town is now famous, and equally famous is the most beautiful of the many objects unearthed there, the "Glastonbury Bowl." This is a fair-sized bronze bowl of perfect workmanship, surrounded by a ring of bosses in which, at regular intervals, a triangle occurs. There are three triangles, and three bosses to each, so that the complete number of balls to the triangles makes nine—the number of the women who watched the Cauldron of Pwyll, of the women who guarded Amloði's Quern, of the Muses and Maenads. The bowl had been cracked and mended before discovery, and it was found in what had evidently been a workshop, with flakes and fragments of bronze lying round it, suggesting that it was newly repaired at the time of the disaster which overwhelmed the village. Its discoverers suggested that it was an object of great value that had been

carefully repaired again and again. If Glastonbury were really a seat of mysteries, Druidic or otherwise, it should not be beyond the bounds of possibilities that this bronze "Glastonbury Bowl" might have been a sacred vessel used in the celebration of the rites, and sent to the metal-workers of the Lake colony for repair.

Something should now be said, however briefly, of the condition which fostered the persistence of this tradition, even in so fragmentary a state as that in which we find it to-day. It is rather a difficult matter in a confined space, because of the many questions that it raises, some of which cannot now be touched on.

We know Glastonbury Abbey to be a Celtic foundation, and we know that it was already very old in the early days of the eighth century, as it was spoken of as "*Vetusta Ecclesia*" by King Ine. Quite briefly the facts are as follows :

In the year 658 Cenwalk, then a Christian, conquered the last remaining strip of country that stood out for the old British princes, the chief places of which were Malmesbury, Bradford and Glastonbury. Any subsequent risings of the British were no more than the insurrections of beaten rebels. It is quite uncertain what followed the conquest of Glastonbury, except that Cenwalk made gifts to the Church there, and set a Saxon abbot over the British Culdee monks. This militates against the idea that the sanctuary was deserted by the British clergy, or that it was desecrated by the invaders, as was suggested by Canon Scott Holmes. Cenwalk did not restore the settlement so much as put it in order, bringing it into subjection by placing there as its head Abbot Hemgisles, who was brought to his notice by Hedda, Bishop of his own new foundation at Winchester. For a few centuries this state of things continued, and Celtic and Saxon monks lived together in a Celtic monastery situated in an old Celtic town with a new English name; for Avalon or Ynyswytrin had become Glaestingaburgh. In the ninth century St. Dunstan, a native of the district, made radical changes, and swept away the last of the Culdees, bringing the Abbey definitely under the rule of St. Benedict. From this date on Glastonbury was, at least out-

wardly, a purely Saxon monastery, until, in the year 1081, William the Conqueror sent there Turstin, the first Norman Abbot. Turstin, as is well known, was removed from office in disgrace, because his enforced alteration in the method of chanting led to a brawl between the Saxon and Norman monks in which one or two were killed. So much for racial feeling! Yet a century later race hatred seems to have died, and the Norman Abbots of Glastonbury were busily propagating a purely Celtic legend, hostile alike to their own people and the Saxons whom they had replaced, and shedding no glory even on the Order of St. Benedict. It was a legend, moreover, which, as everyone knows, was looked upon but coldly by the Church.

Now a study of an ordnance map of Glastonbury shows that although the majority of local names are Saxon words, one or two Celtic names do survive, mostly in the interior and on the western borders of Avalon proper—suggesting that the Saxon invasion came from the East, and did not make quite such a "clean sweep" as some people have supposed. This in its turn implies that although the town became English many of the native inhabitants remained, and we know for certain that British monks continued to live in the "Abbey." Naturally, when the race-hatred grew cool and the two peoples intermarried, the traditions of one became the traditions of the other, and the Glastonbury-born Saxon was proud of the Celtic legends of his home—as, indeed, he still is. Many a man of this mixed breed must have entered the monastery between the days of Hemgisles and Turstin.

It is to these unknown people, this undercurrent gathered from the populace, that we should probably look for the slow growth of the Grail Legend, rather than to the men of high position who wrote and sang, although these certainly brought their own contributions. Henry II., who was interested in all that concerned Glastonbury, who visited the Abbey and superintended its building operations, probably brought there in his train some of the men who wrote Romances and gave the legends to the public. The Romances, particularly the works of Chrestien and his continuators, are often full of

Glastonbury local colouring, and one or two instances rather suggest first-hand knowledge and information. The whole story is a very good example of "the amazing toughness of tradition."

MARY A. BERKELEY.

Cranbourne,
Nr. Salisbury.

FOLKLORE SCRAPS.

I HAVE collected in this note several customs and beliefs which I have come across at different times, more than one of which puzzle me.

1. *Rabbits.* According to several correspondents in the *Westminster Gazette* (spring of 1919), the following belief is common in many parts of Great Britain, with local variants: To secure good luck of some kind, usually a present, one should say "Rabbits" three times just before going to sleep on the last night of the month, and then "Hares" three times on waking the next morning. If any thing is said after the first words or before the second, the spell will not work. A schoolmate of my wife's, who came from Lastingham, Yorks, took this quite seriously; on the other hand, more than one Yorkshire informant disclaims all knowledge of the belief. No convincing explanation has yet been put forward so far as I know.

2. *Weather signs.* If the moon in its earlier phases looks well-rounded, the weather will be dry; if long and thin, wet (Seaford, Sussex).

"East wind begs its bread and dies" (Budleigh Salterton, Devon). The east wind is unfavourable for fishing, and it is thought unlucky to go to sea while it is blowing; hence the saying.

A peaked mass of clouds in stormy weather is called a Noah's Ark at Anderton, near Plymouth; whether anything is predicted from it with regard to the weather I do not know.

To kill beetles brings on rain (Killinghall, Yorks; perhaps some one particular species of beetle). One of my children had this belief from the daughter of a farmer, 1919.