

RECONSTRUCTING IRELAND AT HOME

ANDREW NUSCA provides a fascinating look at a sect of paganism as practiced by Celtic Reconstructionists here in the U.S.

PAUL Pigman remembers running his hand along the emerald blades of grass that covered the sweeping limestone ridges of his ancestor's land and feeling the tip of each drag against his palm.

He remembers feeling the warmth of the fire burning before him on the great Hill of Tara, the Hill of the King, stirring the food in his stomach and warming his face.

He remembers the effort it took to persuade his tongue to form the Gaelic syllables, the poetry of a language that has been in constant use for eight centuries.

Pigman, an American, is in Ireland. He is home.

In all his 50 years, Pigman has never set foot on the Emerald Isle. But he has been to Ireland.

That's because today is October 31, or Samhain, the end of the harvest season on the Irish calendar, and Pigman is celebrating his spiritual ancestors with a ritual in his backyard in Western Massachusetts.

Born a Roman Catholic in New Orleans with only a drop of Scottish blood, Pigman is a Celtic Reconstructionist, a sect of paganism that revives the traditions of the pre-Christian religions that existed in Ireland.

Tonight, Pigman has just concluded the official part of "the lighting of the signal fires," a special ritual that Celtic Reconstructionists are conducting all over the world tonight for Ireland's Hill of Tara. In many ways, the ritual has transported him to the island.

"In a sense, it's a kind of pilgrimage," Pigman said of his mental state during the ritual. "When you go to places that are really important to you and your people, it throws a light on things. If you can see and feel Tara and the artifacts, and feel what the wind is like there, something as mundane as that ... it is really important to visit these places and go to the land."

That's because Tara, one of the most sacred sites in Celtic Reconstructionism, and the surrounding Skryne Valley in Co. Meath, are threatened by the development of the M3 motorway, a new highway under construction about a mile from Tara.

The plans have been met with opposition from thousands of environmentalists and local protestors claiming that the government didn't act in accordance with its own laws before modifying the historic site.

But for Celtic Reconstructionists in Ireland and abroad, including those in the U.S., the site is even more special — it is the spiritual center of Celtic Ireland. To them, the motorway's construction is the desecration of holy land.

"Part of lighting the fire was to connect to the signal Tara fires," Pigman said. "Part of bringing the fire into yourself was essentially to light your own internal signal fire."

"A fire pointed towards Tara to illuminate it, give it power. To help strengthen the plight of Tara."

Celtic Reconstructionists believe that Tara was the center of a ritual complex in pre-Christian times where signal fires were lit to mark the holy day.

Typically, Celtic pagan families across the land would simultaneously extinguish the fires in their homes and meet in the center of town to take a new

flame from a single bonfire to bring back to their hearth at home. These town bonfires would be lit after the central beacon fire atop Tara was seen on the horizon.

With Tara under siege, the recent celebration of the Samhain holiday has taken a new meaning for Celtic Reconstructionists beyond that of the "Celtic New Year" — a chance to send prayer and energy back to Tara.

The community has arranged a grassroots initiative to light individual fires on hilltops and in fields and homes



Photo By: Laurie Castonguay

At a Celtic festival in Massachusetts, Celtic Reconstructionists make offerings of traditional foods and poetry to the Goddess (and Saint) Bríde, and pray in Old Irish for the protection of Tara.

around the globe to show spiritual solidarity with their ancestors — and to signal to the Irish government that they are united in protecting Tara.

"The landscape of Ireland is alive with the stories of our ancestors," said Kathryn Price NicDhana, a Celtic Reconstructionist from Massachusetts. "Here is a burial mound that appears in this tale, there is the river that the goddess Boann created, here is the shore where the ancestors left for Scotland, or America."

"Here is a site that tells us by its structures and its art what they believed. There are a number of sacred sites, and the land where we find ourselves now is sacred, too, but Tara, with all her history and many generations of spiritual importance, is one that is particularly important."

NicDhana, a writer who runs the website paganachd.com, said many people who might understand the cultural significance of Tara often don't realize the spiritual importance of the site.

"A lot of Irish poets spoke of Tara being the ritual center of the land," she said. "I don't see how anyone of Irish heritage couldn't take that seriously. They're literally digging up the bones of our ancestors. It would be analogous to someone wanting to put a highway through Jerusalem."

Despite its centuries-old connections, Celtic Reconstructionism is a relatively young sect of paganism, and began in the late 1970s as an outgrowth from the greater Neopagan community.

Its followers tend to be educated professionals who find other pagan sects incomplete or unfulfilling, and the research-based faith has thrived alongside renewed interest in the Irish language and the proliferation of Irish studies programs.

Kaatryn MacMorgan, a Wiccan biologist from

Buffalo, New York who has ancestral ties to Ireland and has written several articles about Celtic identity in paganism, said Celtic Reconstructionists can be thought of as "the Jesuits of paganism."

"There's an increase in the number of (Celtic) Reconstructionists going to pursue degrees in ancient languages and Celtic studies," she said.

"There's certainly a focus on preserving the ancient languages and ways, and preserving the culture. It's definitely being studied. The whole Reconstructionist movement is firmly grounded in actual historical study and archaeology, than say, Wicca, which is much more modern."

Many of these new faces have appeared in the ranks to preserve Tara. Susan McKeown, a Manhattan-based musician and Dublin native who is leading efforts in New York City to save Tara, said she's noticed the Celtic-minded pagans who have quietly joined her ranks.

"I've seen their postings online," she said. "It's a sacred center, and I respect their opinions. But no one's come up to me (after a demonstration) on the basis of being pagan."

"I've been told that there are up to 19 groups outside of Ireland trying to prevent the destruction of Tara. But they're all divided. There are rifts. It's an issue. It would behoove me to unite with them."

For many Celtic Reconstructionists in the U.S., the campaign to save Tara has been a formative experience in practicing their faith.

NicDhana said her efforts in organizing and coordinating efforts in the U.S. — which includes helping people get to a local consulate or even Ireland — has drawn her closer to her faith.

"I don't think I was prepared for how powerful it would be spiritually," she said. "I was astonished at how intense it was. This is one of the most intense things I've ever done."

NicDhana said she has many friends who have traveled to Ireland as a sort of pilgrimage to the motherland. Many are planning to go after feeling the pull of the fight for Tara, she said.

"It's through these sacred areas that you make connections with the underworld — connections greater than ourselves, which is a pretty universal religious impulse," she said. "You can't destroy the sacred ground of the ancestors without destroying your spirituality. The two are intertwined."

Back in Massachusetts, Paul Pigman is looking forward to that chance — the possibility of walking the lands that he pictured in his mind during the Samhain ritual.

"I'm renewing my passport for the first time in 30 years," he said. "That's the first step. Going to places where your ancestors have been and have practiced their spirituality, that's what's important."

"It's kind of like the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It's that important. There's a certain play in which it affects you spiritually. You feel much closer to them."

"There's something about being in the place where that stuff happened. It's still the same land, even if it's been changed over the course of the last 2,000 years."

"It really is exciting. Taking concrete steps is much better than taking theoretical steps. It means I'm going to Ireland."

(Andrew Nusca is a graduate student at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York.)