**The Iona Impulse[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Rudolf Steiner and the Western Mysteries**

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On 27 August 1924, giving the last of his ‘karma lectures’ in England, Rudolf Steiner included an account of an experience he had a few days earlier at Tintagel, on Cornwall’s Atlantic coast, as he stood on the ruins of what had once been King Arthur’s Grail castle. He vividly described gazing out to sea there, and as he did so slipping into the supersensible vision of pre-Christian people. According to Steiner, these people developed an intimation of the coming Christ. He describes how the knights of the Round Table received their impulses as they immersed themselves in the elements: the glitter of the waves, the play of light on water, the mist and clouds. And he calls this elemental vision a ‘science of the higher degrees’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Alongside other comments, such as those by Eleanor C. Merry[[3]](#footnote-3) and Günther Wachsmuth,[[4]](#footnote-4) who accompanied him, it is apparent that Steiner here was not just communicating an interesting fact but was speaking of an experience of great significance for himself: he had here made contact and formed a connection with the western mysteries.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This visit to Tintagel took place during the second ‘Summer School’ which D.N. Dunlop and E. C. Merry organized in Torquay. In the lecture cycle Rudolf Steiner gave during this event, entitled ‘Initiate Consciousness’, he refers on several occasions to how modern people may gain access to the spirit through their sensory engagement with nature, and he cites copper as an instance of this. His encounter with Dunlop was clearly an important moment of destiny for him. In the moving accounts of this meeting we read how, for long minutes, the two clasped each other’s hands beneath the table to ‘celebrate’ their reunion;[[6]](#footnote-6) and we can sense that in this meeting with Dunlop Steiner found a remarkable, spiritually independent individual. He expressed the greatest esteem and gratitude to Dunlop, especially for the Summer School initiative which had brought him also to Penmaenmawr in Wales the year before (1923). There too he had encountered the druidic, western mysteries, and had been thrilled to find how powerfully he could still experience the presence of their history in some places.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Most of Steiner’s descriptions of ancient mystery sites relate to centres of cultural evolution in Persia, Egypt and Greece, with which his spiritual individuality is closely connected. He only rarely spoke about the western or Hibernian mysteries.[[8]](#footnote-8) He referred explicitly to the latter in just two or three lectures, a few supplements and scattered references.[[9]](#footnote-9)

According to Rudolf Steiner, one characteristic of these Hibernian mysteries was that the initiates sensed the sun spirit approaching in natural phenomena long before Christ was born. They saw in vision how this spirit departed from the sun to take up a new abode on the earth. The western mysteries, he said, were mysteries of the depths, and this was apparent also in the deep spiritual affinity which the Celts and other northern peoples had with nature. They embodied a loving engagement with the earth, the concern to care for and cultivate it. This, he said, was connected with healing. Druid ritual was a mystery medicine in which the human being and the earth were experienced as sacred and united. The affinity with earthly nature of these initiates was something they could connect with Christ. A cosmic Christianity, that perceived Christ in the elements, proceeded from the Hibernian mysteries and was something the Iro-Scottish monks still experienced and knew. The Irish monk Columba brought this initiation knowledge to Iona, an island in the far West of Scotland, and there cultivated it further. From Iona many monks went eastwards and brought this message of nature-imbued Christianity to the heathens.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In Rudolf Steiner’s first Mystery play, *The Guardian of the Threshold*, Scene 7, Johannes Thomasius is shown recalling, in dreamlike transfiguration, an experience of such ‘Christianization’. These were not warlike campaigns as usually depicted in modern history books. Steiner represents the Hibernian Christians as emanating an inner light, drawing towards them people who wished to learn more of the spirit that informed them, and opening their hearts to these messages; [[11]](#footnote-11) only later did missionaries come from Rome[[12]](#footnote-12) and enforce upon the population a dogmatic and comparatively more material form of Christianity, which was fixated on the body and blood of Christ.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Standing on Iona, say in the ruins of Iona Abbey and looking East, you can see the nearby island of Mull across the sound, with the shining pink granite cliffs that convey a feeling of sunrise all day long. Sunrise also signifies budding, growth, future: an enticing sense of annunciation. From here monks went eastwards, not using violence to bear witness to Christ but bringing their inner light into the dark forests of Europe.

Rudolf Steiner said that the Hibernian mysteries were relatively hard to study, since they were protected against occult research, and thus also against misuse. The deeper secrets of these mysteries still await discovery. We can have a sense of Steiner's difficulty in gaining access to Hibernia; while things ‘western’ were not unknown to him, nevertheless they were perhaps a little more foreign to his nature.[[14]](#footnote-14) It seems likely that Steiner’s access to the West only strengthened towards the end of his life, and was closely connected with the individuality of Dunlop. He had planned a trip to North America for 1925, with his highly esteemed translator George Adams, and possibly also with Dunlop.[[15]](#footnote-15) The West was coming into focus for him. Sadly the trip, and what might have arisen from it for anthroposophy, never happened because of Steiner’s premature death. In 1927 Dunlop organized a summer conference at Gareloch in western Scotland, to which both Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede came as members of the Dornach executive council. This concluded with a visit to Iona and the volcanic island of Staffa. Dunlop died suddenly and relatively young in 1933.[[16]](#footnote-16) Since then the impulse of connecting and even complementing anthroposophy with the western mysteries has lain dormant. It seems likely that this fateful lack has played into the karma and outward course of events in the Anthroposophical Society since Steiner’s death. In her ‘Letters to Members’,[[17]](#footnote-17) Wegman gave a striking account of the visit to Iona. It was she too who in 1923 in Penmaenmawr turned to Steiner with important words about the renewal of medicine as part of the mysteries. This question gave rise to anthroposophic medicine, and a series of important lectures by Steiner.

Steiner spoke about Hibernia shortly before the Christmas Foundation Meeting of 1923/24. In the third, concluding lecture on this theme, there are aphoristic remarks that are sometimes hard to understand, but suggest a wide-ranging and future-oriented gaze.[[18]](#footnote-18) From Hibernia, he says, a stream issued into the whole of (European) civilization. This was connected with the Iro-Scottish monks who, from Ireland, Scotland and also Iona, brought (cosmic) Christianity to the peoples of Europe. In Steiner’s account, this stream later faded out and today works only in hidden, underground ways, not so far becoming a part of culture. Occasionally, though, this impulse has resurfaced, for instance in Valentin Andreae’s *The Chymical wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*,[[19]](#footnote-19) and – though he only hints briefly at this – also in Goethe, for example his scientific writings. The Iona stream of Christianized science was born for our times through the figure of Goethe.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Today European culture is imbued with Roman Christianity, which at an early stage (388 AD) became the state religion, and was thus corrupted by power interests.[[21]](#footnote-21) The impulse that adheres to the body and blood of Jesus, to the earthly aspects of the Christ mystery, is palpable everywhere, right into our thinking and daily life, our outlook and tendency for objectification. We could even go so far as to see an outcome of this type of Christianity in materialistic science, which has dedicated itself entirely to physical matter, to all that we can touch, measure and weigh. On the other hand, this Christian outlook is also associated with the earthly 'things of the flesh' as diabolical, and thus with a degradation of sensory reality. The path to loving care of the sense world was blocked and even rendered impossible in consequence. In this context the Inquisition eradicated the last vestiges of the love of nature and nature spirituality, thus preparing the ground for modern, materialistic science.

And so we can discern a connection between Goethe and the impulse of the western mysteries: Goethe culitvated a loving engagement with nature, and sought to perceive its essence. He immersed himself fully in natural phenomena and their inner formative laws so as to embrace the world with a 'morality of the senses', in a gesture that validates our human experiential capacity. Goethe's mission, we might say, was to practise 'soul observation' in the sense of phenomenological perception of the world which includes the observer. 'World knowledge is self-knowledge' is another way of describing this credo. Thus Goethe created an alternative to materialistic science, one that validates life: a scientific method in which, instead of destroying, one becomes a co-creator.

In Goethe's manner of observing nature Rudolf Steiner saw not only a distinctive scientific method but a fundamental, modern way of approaching and engaging with the world, which he further developed into anthroposophy. In the chapter 'New Perspectives' in his 1916 book *The Riddles of Man* (GA 20), Steiner shows in clear detail how Goetheanism and anthroposophy belong together and dovetail with each other. Both cultivate an envisioning, discerning relationship with the world by seeking the supersensible within the sense world and taking it fully into account. Thus in a strict sense there is no 'underlying reality' behind things since spirit *is* the world, beings and essences *are* phenomena, and we ourselves participate in their manifestation. Without us the world, whether physical or spiritual, remains dead and abstract. The higher stages of knowledge, of Imagination, Inspiration and Intuition, are simply stages that emphasize diverse aspects we can already distinguish in our knowledge of the human being and the world. A phenomenon can be perceived and experienced more outwardly (sense perception and Imagination) or we can unite ourselves with it more inwardly (Inspiration and Intuition). Rudolf Steiner describes, for instance, how we can experience the light-bringer Lucifer as spiritual reality in the pink evening clouds of sunset.[[22]](#footnote-22) The depths to which such insight into nature penetrates is already prefigured in Goethe's phenomenological outlook. In Imagination this outlook condenses into a strong, feeling sense that can be expressed in images. In Inspiration what is perceived 'sounds forth' in inner resonance, and we experience ourselves intimately interwoven with a phenomenon, and part of it. Intuition enables us to unite with reality, the boundary between the observer and the phenomenon here cancelled altogether. Thus as we immerse ourselves in the sensory phenomenon of illumined clouds, the being of Lucifer becomes a distinct, envisioning mode of existence with which we are united, that we help to manifest, and that we can perceive as this being's reality. Nature becomes the portal to the world of spirit.

Our open gaze as Goethean observer is therefore the *starting point* for dedicating ourselves to phenomena in both sense and supersensible perception, while anthroposophy is the *goal*: to consciously acquire this deep discernment as a 'science of higher degrees'.

Might we perhaps say that Goethean study of nature is, in a deeper sense, the Iona impulse of the western mysteries; that love for the sense world is the still unrealized potential of anthroposophy? In the life and teachings of Rudolf Steiner, the sense world gains ever greater importance as a distinct and authentic path to the spirit.[[23]](#footnote-23) On one occasion, in the context of Goetheanism, he described anthroposophy as the 'Christianity of the future', and as 'Christian natural science'.[[24]](#footnote-24)

This impulse can be felt and found on Iona, close below the surface of daily experience. You still get the sense that the elements there are waiting for something from us, whispering of it to us. By practising a kind of 'etheric archaeology', a gentle delving, we can discover this Christian opennness to the world as a spirituality lovingly dedicated to sensory nature. Many visitors, not only anthroposophists, who flock to this unique island in the Atlantic every year, find themselves deeply moved by its atmosphere. Most cannot say what it signifies but they come repeatedly. Others, like Ita Wegman, Eleanor C. Merry or Walter Weber[[25]](#footnote-25) gain a deeper grasp of what is at work here. On Iona the elements are so present and imbued with Christianity that it seems we touch here the living current of history and the Iona impulse. All can sense it, not only clairvoyants.

The 'Iona and Isle of Mull Summer School' seeks to make this impulse of 'Christianized science' an experienced reality. The intimate and mythologically precise tale of *The Druid of Iona. An Hibernian Initiation* can accompany this quest. The nature-healing aspect of anthroposophy has never been so important as it now is. No renewal can come from the decadent forces of materialistic science, whose mission was to develop clear, conscious and exact thinking, schooled only by objectifying the world through spirit-denying enquiry into mechanistic laws and functions. This mode of thinking is opposed to life, creating a deadening context within which new generations are now growing up. They need something else to replace modern systems of thought. This exists already but it still slumbers. On Iona we can experience it: a source on which we can draw to cultivate Goetheanism again in the 21st century, reconnecting with it and receiving from it impulses for the future. The Summer School, taking up Dunlop's initiative once again, seeks to practise, experience, observe, meditate upon, and realize this in living, social interplay with each other.

1. Lightly edited version of ‘Der Iona Impuls. Rudolf Steiner und die Westlichen Mysterien’, published in *Die Drei* magazine, December 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In GA 240, *Karmic Relationships,* Vol. VIII, Rudolf Steiner Press 1975 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eleanor C. Merry: *A Man Before Others: Rudolf Steiner Remembered*, Rudolf Steiner Press 1993, in the chapter ‘A Day at Tintagel’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Günther Wachsmuth, *Die Geburt der Geisteswissenschaft. Rudolf Steiners Lebensgang von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Tode,* Dornach 1941, p. 595f. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The experience at Tintagel was not Steiner’s first encounter with the western mysteries. But it did represent a culmination, prepared by Steiner’s previous visits to England in 1922 and 1923, and his meeting with Dunlop (1922). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eleanor C. Merry, [English title/date?]; Thomas Meyer, *A Man For Our Time* *– D. N. Dunlop,* Temple Lodge 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Steiner’s account of the course and the druid stones in GA 223, lecture of 30 September 1923. Also Steiner’s sketch ‘Druidenstein’ which can be attributed to this experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hibernia (or Hybernia) is the old Latin name for Ireland. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. GA 232, *Mystery Knowledge and Mystery Centres*, lectures of 2, 7 and 8 December 1923; and GA 233, *World History in the Light of Anthroposophy*, lecture of 21 December 1923; also a brief mention in relation to a former incarnation of Victor Hugo in the karma lectures of 1924 (GA 239, *Karmic Relationships*, volume V, lecture in Paris on 25 May 1924). In this context it is also worth considering an address Steiner gave back in 1911 after a performance of Mendelsohn’s ‘Hebridean’ overture, concerning ‘Ossian and Fingal’s Cave’: in GA 127, *Die Mission der neuen Geistesoffenbarung*, Dornach 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here we must distinguish between Columba of Iona (512/22 to 597) who founded a monastery on Iona and also went on missionary expeditions to the East, and Columba the Younger (540 to 615) who, setting out from Ireland (with, among others St. Gallus and other followers), brought Christianity to the populace north of the Alps. The cities had already been converted by Rome, but not the larger rural population. In contrast to the ‘Roman’ impulse, Irish-Scottish Christianity was able to make headway with these people. According to Peter R. Müller (*Columbans Revolution*, 2013), this form of Christianity was a good deal les hierarchical and placed great emphasis on forming personal connections. By founding monasteries and monastic rules, Columba exerted an enormous influence on the development of central Europe – for instance on central European agriculture, clear signs of which still inform our modern landscapes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The scene shows that Maria, at that time in a male incarnation, announced the coming of the Christ within the Hibernian mysteries, and came to a people where Johannes was living at the time, where he worshipped Baldur and Odin. Baldur is connected with the healing rites involving mistletoe, which Rudolf Steiner and Ita Wegman revived in a modern form as mistletoe treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Christianity as a state religion was connected with power ambitions, and already greatly altered by diverse doctrinal disputes from early Johannine Christianity. Symptomatic of this, for instance, was the dispute between Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo, which ended favourably for Augustine, whose doctrine of grace (all flesh is sinful, the Fall through sexuality) connected earthly things with Satan. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. We can here recall the bloody Saxon wars or the subduing of the ‘Danube kingdoms’ by the Roman missionary Bonaface. See for instance Lutz E. von Padberg, *Die Christianisierung Europas im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We do not know of any former, ‘western’ incarnation of Rudolf Steiner. Here, in relation to chapter 22 of his *Autobiography*, we can recall Steiner’s account of only ‘wakening’ to the sense world around the age of 36. Since his childhood he had known the reality of the spirit, but could only slowly master the sense world, and then also, gradually, and increasingly – quite markedly so from 1923 onwards - acknowledge it as a distinct approach to the spirit. For instance in the ‘Butterfly Course’ (GA 230, *Man as Symphony of the Creative Word*) he sets out a programme, as it were, for experiencing the supersensible within the sensible. See also footnote 22, and the script by Dirk Kruse on inspirational walking (available in German on request from the author). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Peter Selg, *Elisabeth Vreede*, Ita Wegman Verlag, note 220. That Dunlop might have accompanied them is an assumption based on Dunlop’s close ties with America, the fact he had lived there for a while, and travelled there several times a year in his professional capacity. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I do not include the fourth Summer School in Bangor in the autumn of 1933 amongst the others. Ita Wegman helped organize it, but the Dornach council refused to support it (apart from Elisabeth Vreede who remained neutral). The character of the whole conference had changed due to the situation in Dornach (the schisms and threatened exclusion of Wegman and others, especially English members) and the world political situation (the threat of world war and Hitler’s seizure of power). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ita Wegman, *Esoteric Studies. The Michael Impulse,* Temple Lodge Publishing 1993, pages 99-108. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. GA 232, *Mystery Knowledge and Mystery Centres*, lecture of 8 December 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Walter Weber, author of the tale *The Druid of Iona*, a memory of his past life as a druid on Iona in the period shortly after Christ’s birth, is the same person who published a translation of *The Chymical Wedding* (Zbinden Verlag) which many regard as outstanding and profound in nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See here also the moving lecture ‘Goetheanism as Mood of Expectancy’ in GA 188 (*Der Goetheanismus: ein Umwandlungsimpuls und Auferstehungsgedanke*). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. here Accounts by Steiner of the councils of Nicosia in 325 or Constantinople in 869, some of these in GA 346, (*Vorträge und Kurse über christlich-religiöses Wirken, V. Apokalypse und Pristerwirken*), pages 102f; or in GA 51 (*Über Philosophie, Geschichte und Literatur*), the lectures of 19 July and 25 October 1924. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See GA 232, *Mystery Knowledge and Mystery Centres*, lecture of 24.11.1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The author is shortly to publish a detailed study on this theme. It is currently available on request in manuscript form. From 1923, Steiner presented nature explicitly and exclusively as 'real imagination' and as doorway to all realms of the world of spirit, including the most sublime. In this context see also the book *Der Weg der Initiation. Anthroposophie und die neuen Mysterien* by Malte Diekmann, Verlag am Michaelshof 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In GA 188, *Der Goetheanismus: ein Umwandlungsimpuls und Auferstehungsgeanke*, the lecture 'Goetheanism as Mood of expectancy'; and in GA 194, *The Mission of the Archangel Michael*, lecture 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Eleanor C. Merry [publication/date?]; Ita Wegman, *Esoteric Studies. The Michael Impulse,* Temple Lodge Publishing 1993, pp. 99-108; Walter Weber, *The Druid of Iona. A Hibernian Initiation* (in this volume). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)