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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Geirion mab Tegwir was Chief Bard of Prydain. He was but twenty summers old, yet no other wordsmith dared challenge his rank.

### Keywords

Mythril; Mythopoeic; Fiction; The Gifts of Annwn; Alexei Kondratiev

# The Gifts of Annwn

by Alexei Kondratiev



Geirion mab Tegwir was Chief Bard of Prydain. He was but twenty summers old, yet no other wordsmith dared challenge his rank. Geirion would touch the strings of his harp, speak a few rhythmic words in his calm, well-modulated voice, and all who doubted his talent would feel their doubts melt away before a real unquestionable beauty. The quiet majesty of his arwyrain, the keen wit of his englynion, the playful music of his cywyddau had never been equaled among the Brythons. He knew which words had remained untarnished since their making in Breint's forge in Annwn, and which were rusted and had become too poor for use. He had the skill of throat and tongue which gives the commonest words the sound of clashing weapons, or thunder rumbling over the mountains, or the distant awakening of birds, or the restless sea, or a secret kiss. All who heard him wept with joy or with cleansing sorrow, or laughed at finding true freedom in the world and in their hearts. In all the cantreves of Prydain, from the fens of Igyn to the eagle-haunted fastnesses of the Urddwig-iaid, chieftains would have given him well-wrought beast-head torques of the finest gold, and jeweled brooches twisted in the most cunning shapes, and the most colourful plaids, and the best roast meat from the spit--if only he would visit them and sing at their feasts and put their names into his deathless verse. But they knew it was in vain. Geirion honoured only the gods, and most of all Rhiannon, the Great Queen, the Mother. To her alone went all his praise. He sang of her as fiery Breint when the streams broke their icy sheaths and milk began to flow in ewes' udders; he sang of her as Modron when hawthorn and balefires heralded the summer; he sang of her as Arianrhod at harvest time; and he sang of her as Ebon Rhiannon on Night of the Dead, when the first frosts of winter brought in the New Year. He loved her more than any mortal woman; he loved the world only because she had made it, and all the beauty in the world was for him but a means of returning to her.

It came to pass that he visited the island Môn, which the bards call Talebolion. There the sacred groves flourished of old, where the druids dreamed and prayed. He went to the grove at Hirdre-Faig; the oaks and chestnuts, old as the island itself, shut out the sun, and there was an awful silence in the darkness, the awe of Annwn. Geirion sat and listened. Out of the silence words came to him, flaming rivers of words, too pure in their flame for his mouth to shape. They overwhelmed him: in this dazzling storm of speech he sensed the nearness of the Great Queen, and he yearned to be brought into her presence, to meet her face to face at last. So great was his yearning that the laws of flesh were suspended for him. Body and spirit, he entered Annwn.

In Annwn time brings no change. The birds of Rhiannon sing with an ageless voice, and those fortunate enough to hear them listen with unflagging attention. The guests of Annwn bask in the source of Light, and they are given understanding of the deep laws of Creation. In the world of Men years go by, death and decay do their work; in Annwn the heart of life throbs on with ever-renewed vigour. Yet deathlessness is not one of the gifts of Annwn to Men; and when, after an unmeasurable span of time, Geirion felt the song of Rhiannon's birds recede and saw trees and hills cover the wonders of Rhiannon's realm, he knew that his

moment of bliss was in the past and that he had returned to mortal life.

Not far from him, in the misty dawn, stood two other men. By the triskell pendants they wore and the look in their eyes Geirion knew that they, too, were bards who had enjoyed the hospitality of Annwn. They smiled at each other but held their silence, savouring the last of their vanishing Joy.

At last one of them spoke, a huge, unkempt man who wore only a ragged woolen cloak over his nakedness: "It seems long since I had a name. But I was Féidhín mac Ollmhéine, who dwelt alone on the slopes of Sliabh na mBan. Better than the towns of men I loved the forest where the Goddess speaks unhindered and where the beasts, her servants, live by their own laws. To the Goddess I sang. And she chose to hear me, and I am grateful."

"I am Youenn Skouarneq," said the other, who was thin, large-eyed and restless, "and was bard to Conan Meriadek in Breizh. But I tired of praising noblemen, and turned all my skill to the service of the Mother of God. I gave her my whole heart; my lips uttered nothing but my love for her. And she has rewarded me, after the manner of the gods of old."

Then Geirion told them his own story. And they stayed together for a while yet, sharing the peace that comes after Joy. But the sun rose high and their flesh, newly-waked to the laws of this world, knew hunger and weariness. So, with reluctance, they left that place, resigned to live once more by the laws of Men.

The land was much changed. There were many more houses, and hard black roads, and horseless chariots that roared. But men walked the fields, so there was promise of food and shelter somewhere. The three bards decided to return to their former homes, for the land was not yet so changed that they could not find their way back by mountain and river. They resolved to meet again in a year's time.

But there was no true homecoming for them. The Saxons and Franks had overwhelmed their lands, and driven out most of the old ways, and the old tongues were remembered only by a few country people, who spoke them haltingly, with no real faith in the power of their words. Bards received scant respect now; so the three had to turn to other trades. Féidhín took work in a noisy hall where great engines were built. Youenn copied meaningless scribbles that were given to him in a place where many men and women made such scribbles. Only Geirion had not the courage to forsake his calling, so he taught the harp and his native tongue in a house of learning where folk still took interest in such things. But there was no joy in this changed world. Men wore drab clothes, and walked drab streets, and shared few feelings with each other; in the evenings they huddled together speechlessly, staring at a box that shouted and jeered at them.

A year passed. The three friends met again with troubled minds.

"The men of this age are dead," said Youenn. "Their words are as cold ashes. They have lost the power to summon beauty, and have ceased to believe in it. They are blinded by gold, the gift of the Horned God. They see only pride, and greed, and death: darkness is closing its circle about them."

"It is so," said Féidhín. "I have been in their places of worship, and much of what is said there is true, but the preachers seem not to believe in what they are saying. Men forget that there is such a thing as truth. They think the world lies to them, and they lie back to it. Darkness has devoured them: there is no hope."

But Geirion said: "My love for Rhiannon is not in vain. The lords of Annwn will not abandon us. Where there is darkness, they will make light, if we beseech them properly, as true bards should."

Then, at Geirion's urging, the three took up instruments of music and such supplies as they would need for a few months' time, and went wandering through the conquered land, singing and making verse, as they had done in the old days. The weeks went by; they grew sure again of their nearly forgotten craft. The memory of Annwn glowed bright in them once more, and they fed their art on the memory. Ever bolder, they asked the Queen of Life for a gift--however small--of power against decay and death.

They came to a green county by the sea. The sun shone frankly, a laughing wind rode in on the waves, birds sang. Life welled up in the hearts of the three bards: they knew at once that their power was at its zenith, that the time had come to weave the great spell that swings open the gates of Annwn. Slowly, tenderly, their fingers began to touch the strings. The green well of the past opened in their hearts. Old memories found their way to their lips. They sang in the Oldest Tongue, that had been spoken before the Keltoi left the shadows of the Greenwood and the Land of Old Rivers to settle along the cliffs of the Outer Sea. They sang of the death of beauty, of the shriveling of life, of the weariness in Men's failure. They begged the Great Queen for a sign, a magic gift of her love--however small...

For most of a day they sang thus, and when at last, half-unwillingly, they let the vibration of their strings die, all living beings around them were silent, caught in the spell. The bards waited in the long stillness, anxiously, not daring to believe that their call would be answered.

Then, like audible sunbeams, like pipes forged of a heavenly metal, like the reassuring laughter of gods, a whistled song broke the silence. Half-grave, half-mocking, it challenged all thoughts of drab death, drawing Nature up to a level of magic stronger even than silence. And with the song came wondrous birds, yellow as alchemical gold, sailing on midnight wings. The bards stared at them in speechless wonder, then laughed, joyfully, as they understood.

Their magic had indeed reached the heart of Annwn, and brought golden orioles back to Devon; and the orioles--who are the birds of Rhiannon in earthly form--now explored the disenchanted land they had left long ago, and filled it once more with their magic. Men of science who study birds saw them, and were delighted. A young boy caught sight of them in a country land, and stood frozen in awe and surprise that such creatures could be. Lovers noticed them, and felt them to be a natural prolongation of the miracle of their love. And an old woman, sitting weary before her cottage, heard the strange song and saw the golden birds, and rejoiced that the world had not grown stale for ever, that new wonders could yet emerge from it. For all of them the gift of the orioles was no trifle, but a moment of piercing beauty that, tended by memory, could warm a whole life. Wherever the orioles went, chuckling like the flutes of Faerie, Men would look up, and see the power of life, and forget despair.

Such are the gifts of Annwn to our time. Those with eyes to see them and hearts to know them will find strength, and peace, and hope.

## AUGHOR'S NOËE

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The three Welsh words do in fact refer to types or forms of poetry:

1. Arwyrain is simply praise-poetry.
2. The englyn (pl. englynion) is a short stanza-form, somewhat like haiku, with a set number of syllables and a set alliterative pattern. Englynion were thought of as verbal "arrows" consisting of one paladr ('shaft') and two esgyll ('wings'). Because of its brevity the englyn as a form became a vehicle for terse, witty epigrams or concise encapsulations of intense moods--again, like haiku. As an illustration, here is an example of an englyn with accents and alliteration marked:

Énglyn a thélyn a thánt -- a'r gwléddoedd

Arglwyðdawl ddarfuant;

Llé bu bónedd Gwynedd gánt,

Aðar nóg a deyrnasant.

(Taliesin o Eifion)

(Englyn-reciting and harp-string music and the lordly feasts have passed away; where the nobility of Gwynedd was of old, the birds of night now rule.)

3. The cywydd (pl. cywyddau) is a set metrical form, usually arranged in rhyming couplets (as in many Celtic verse-forms, an accented syllable must rhyme with an unaccented syllable). The cywydd became associated with love-poetry and nature-poetry, and was made famous by Dafydd ap Gwilym (fl. 1340-1370), perhaps the greatest Welsh poet, who wrote long poems in this metre. To give an idea of the structure involved, here (with accents marked) is the opening couplet of Dafydd ap Gwilym's "Cyngor y Biogen" ("The Magpie's Advice"):

A mi'n gláf er mwyn gloywferch

Mewn llwyn yn pryðu swyn serch...

(And I sick for the sake of a bright girl, whiling away my love-enchancement in a wood...)

Full-fledged bards were expected to be able to conduct conversations in extemporized englynion. By listing the three verse-forms I meant to show that Geirion was equally proficient in the three types of poetry--ceremonial, intellectual, lyrical--that a Chief Bard had to be a master at.

