

Interview: Philip Carr-Gomm



„Ultimately, the purpose of magic is to free our potential, not bind us to ideas.”

„But what exactly is magic and what inspired our ancestors to begin its practice? Magic begins in darkness – the darkness of the earth, the sky, and the body – and an awareness of it is born with light. Seeing green shoots appearing out of the dark soil, the sun, moon and stars rising and setting in the sky, babies emerging from the womb, fire leaping up in the midst of a cold night, were all primal experiences that awakened that sense of awe and wonder that lies at the heart of the magical experience.”

„*The Book of English Magic*”, Philip Carr-Gomm

Out of a deep reverence for Philip Carr-Gomm's work and dedication to spiritual growth, and my personal admiration of his dazzling personality, this won't be a classical interview, but an introduction to our readers with just a few questions in appreciation of his time, considering the fact that he's given a number of interviews over many decades of his professional work, and has lately been dealing with new books, one of them about sleep science, has just come out, and the other is to come out in May. Also, we wish him a happy birthday on the last day of January.

Philip is one of the leading figures in druidic community, the author of over 20 books on Druidry, magic, and spirituality. Philip is trained in psychology, at the University College London, in psychotherapy for adults at The Institute of Psychosynthesis, in play therapy for children with Dr Rachel Pinney, and in Sophrology – a system of mind-body training for deep relaxation and personal development. He is also trained in Montessori education and he founded the Lewes Montessori School.

His spiritual path began when he was only 11 and read a book „*The Life of the Buddha*” by L.

Adams Beck. Although he grew up in an agnostic family, his father edited a historical magazine back then, so Philip had an opportunity to meet many interesting people.

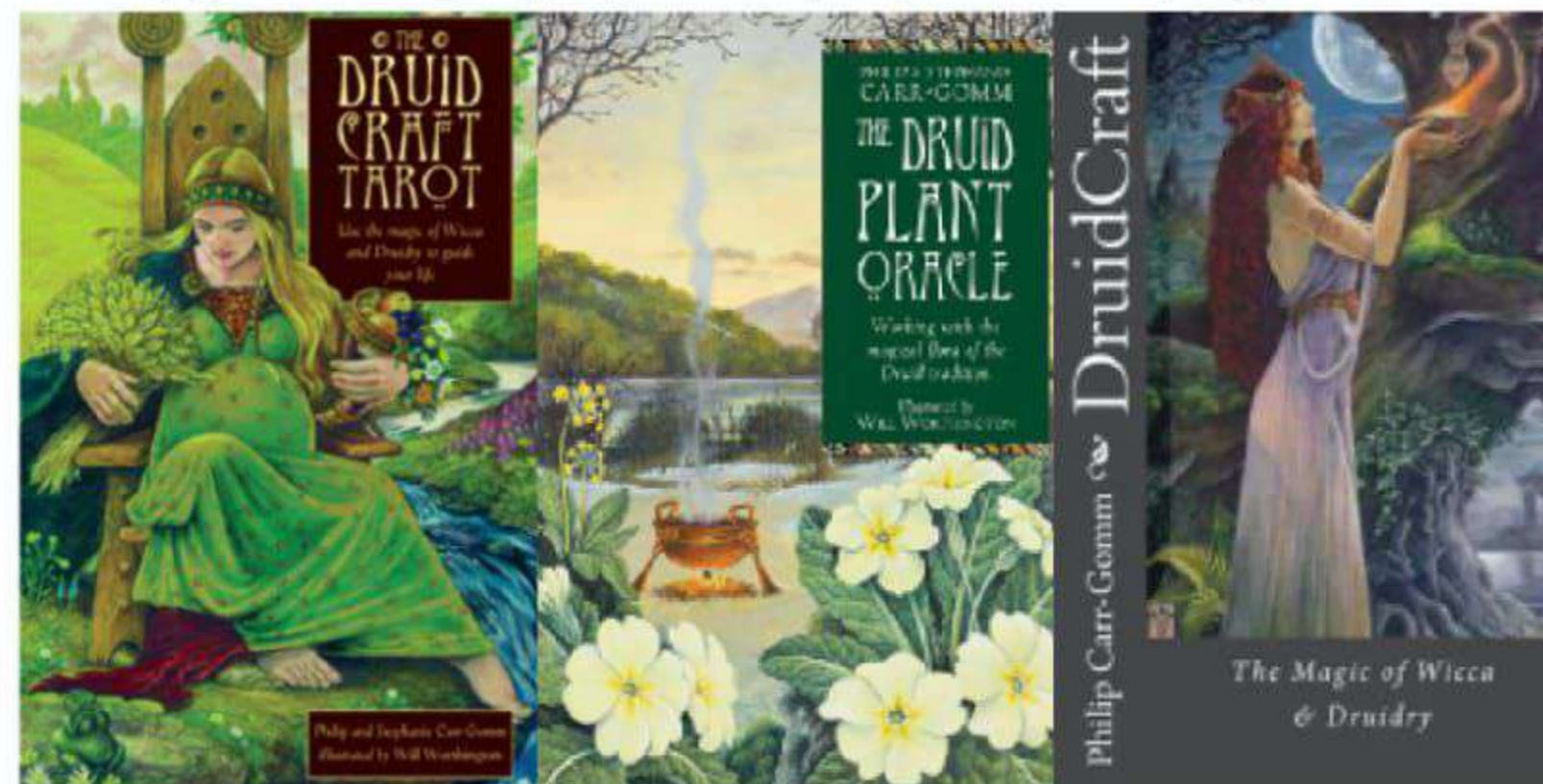
That was also the time when he met his spiritual teacher Nuinn (Ross Nichols), who founded the Order of the Bards, Ovates, and Druids that year. Ross was the principal of a college in London, and a friend of Philip's father, who was a teacher at the college. At the age of 16, Philip began training with him, visiting his house after school once a week or so. Little before Ross passed away, Philip met a Bulgarian spiritual teacher, a witty charismatic man Omraam Mikhael Aivanhov, who became his „guru”. After seven years, he left his philosophy as it felt rather too dualistic.

1. At this point, more precisely, in 1984., nine years after Ross died, you said he returned to you in a meditation and that your whole life changed in that moment. What was that experience like and how exactly did your life change onwards, if that's not too personal question?

So, it was nine years after he died, so, it's a long time. At that time, I had a routine of meditating every morning in this sort of attic space, top space in our house. Watching the sunrise through the window, I would sit there and I would do a form of meditation of just being empty, and it was really surprising. I started not to think about that part of my life, because 9 years is a long time. And suddenly he was there. He was present in a way not like seeing a ghost, but if you imagine you were sitting in your room quietly, very peacefully, and say, a relative who died, your grandfather or grandmother, suddenly was standing next to you and you would just feel, so suddenly he was there, in a very real sense and he said to me – you should look at druidism because you think it's old-fashioned, it's something very old, and not rel-

evant, but it's really really relevant to how you're living now. You should put everything I taught you into the form of a course. I used to visit him after school. I was 16, and I used to go by train to his house. He would make me some tea and a sandwich. And then he would teach me. That method is very restrictive because you can't do that to many people. So he said – you should give a course you can send out around the world. And to do this, you should get all of my books which been published and will you, please, publish my book? Last few years of his life he worked on a book, but it was never published. Even though he left money in his will for it to be privately printed if they couldn't find a publisher. Nobody respected that. It was forgotten. So he said – please, find my book that I

worked on and have it published and please find my other books as well. And then he said – then everything will become clear for you. I would like you to lead the Order again. Because the Order had died. There were just a few old people. But he said – don't worry about it. It will all become clear. And then he was gone. And so, at that time, I was at work in the middle of London, and in my lunch break I just went into the nearest bookshop, which was antiquarian, and I said – would you happen to have



any books, privately published during the war, by a man called Ross Nichols? And he said – well, it's extremely unlikely because it was privately published for a start, and during the war, secondly, it's a long time ago, but he went down and he came back with one of Ross Nichols' books, tied up in string, with letters from Ross and drawings, little pen drawings, in a little package, and he said – you can have that for 10£. It was extraordinary. I said – thank you. I bought it. And I walked from there to The Atlantis bookshop, which is by the British Museum, and I opened the door of the shop and immediately, directly ahead of me, I saw this twin volume edition called „The History and Practice of Magic“, so I just walked across the shop, put my arm out, took it out and bought that and that evening I went to see a friend and I told him the story and I said – look, this is extraordinary. In the morning I had this meditation I experienced, at lunchtime I got these two books and there was only one book I was missing because I was young. When I was 16 or 17 he sometimes gave me one of his books. You know, when you're young, you don't appreciate things so much so I didn't buy all of his books. I should've just bought all of his books, but I expected him to give them to me slowly over the next year, but he didn't, he died, so it was kind of arrogant of me. So I said to my friend Collin – after this experience, I only have one more book that I don't have of his, and Collin said – oh, I've got two copies of that, and he gave me one. So, within 24 hours, in the same day, I had fulfilled one task in a mission and then I thought – okay, I have to find his manuscript, and I telephoned around various people who knew him and finally I located it. It'd been under the bed of an elderly lady and before she died she had given it to somebody else as it'd been on her bed. So I finally located it, I had the manuscript and then, almost immediately after that, I was invited to a party where I met a publisher and I told him the story, and he said – we'll publish it, fantastic. So, immediately it was contracted by the publisher. But there was a problem that the file of the pictures and the diagrams in the book was missing. I only had the text manuscript. So I thought I have to read the whole thing very carefully and then try to recreate the images of diagrams, but I put it off and put it off and put it off to the last minute and then as the deadline was becoming very close, I was at the Mind, Body, Spirit festival, and this man came up to me with a rubbish sack and he said – I think this is for you, and he put it on the desk. It was a woman, it was Louis Marie, this guy called her, his wife, he had died by then, and

she gave me this, and said – I think this is yours. And it was the illustrations file. It was peculiar. It turned out that he had gone into his flatmate teacher's flat after he died and it was unlocked and he'd just taken some things and she gave them back to me. There were other files, paper and things there, but there was the illustration, so I had that. And then it became even stranger; I mean it was extraordinary time because by this time I telephoned, he might knew it, because Ross Nichols had a house and he lived at the bottom two floors and then he rented room upstairs to students, to these young guy who lived upstairs. And I thought – well, they must have sold the building, but I kept phoning the telephone number 9 years later and I found myself speaking to one of those young guys, who was still living there and I said – hey, come and have coffee with me, I wanna tell you what's happened. So he came round and when he came round with about 6 black rubbish sacks full of papers and I told him the story and he gave me these sacks of rubbish papers and he told me how he got them. There were entire archives of the Order and the reason he had them was because when Ross Nichols died, there was a big storm a few days later and this guy who knew him, as it was raining, went into a pub he'd never been in before to get away from the rain and he met another man, who had also never been in this pub, but came in because of the rain and the conversation went – have you heard that Ross Nichols has just died? And this chap said – yeah, I've just heard that. You know, somebody should rescue his papers because he's a single man. The most likely scenario is that lawyers would come round and just put all of his paper in rubbish bags and put them in the street to be taken away because he didn't have a wife or a relative, nobody. And so, you should tell the boys who live upstairs that they should look after that. The other guy said – oh, I think that's very unlikely, but okay, I'll give them a ring. And he gave them a ring and exactly a few days later these men in gray suits came to the apartment and they cleared out, they put a whole bunch in rubbish sacks, so in the evening they went downstairs and they looked in the sacks and it was all of the archives of the Order and they took the sack up to their apartment and they sat in the corner for 9 years. And when I told them the story, they said – okay, they belong to you. And then there was only one vital document missing, one key ceremony in all the various ceremonies. And then completely out of the blue, I've got a letter from a friend in Ireland, saying – I think you may be interested in this, my friend's husband has

died and she has these documents that she thinks you should have, and in the document there was one ceremony that was missing, one piece of the archives that was missing, and it just got posted from Ireland. It was crazy.

2. Also, if you feel comfortable sharing, could you describe your personal mystical experience of Deity you've mentioned in an interview? Every person's spiritual path is unique as a fingerprint and I'm always curious to learn about different experiences.

Sometimes very profound experiences are very simple. So the experience was very simple. I was meditating on a mountain, high hill kind of site, in France, in Alsace, and when I finished, I started walking down the hill, and a being said to me – come back to where you were. And I said – I don't need to come back because you are in me and I am in you. You know, so physical location is not important. And I continued walking down, and the pull said – no, no, you need to come back. I'm not there with you, I'm up there. In the end, the further I walked, I found myself starting to cry, tears came and I turned around and and walked back and as I walked back, I came exactly to a spot where there was a bench on this hillside and sat down and just open myself. And at that moment, I was given this teaching if you like, this understanding. The understanding was so simple – yes I am a part of you, but I'm also separate from you. It's a paradoxical thing that they're in you, but

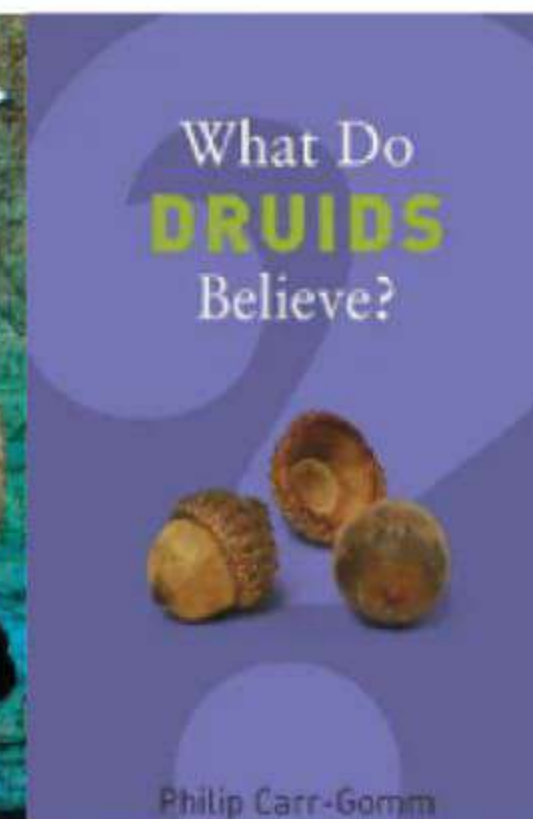
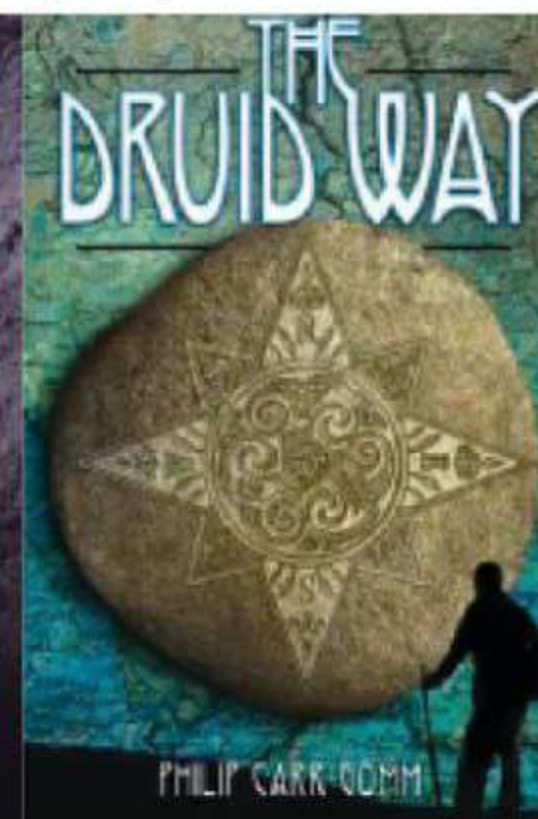
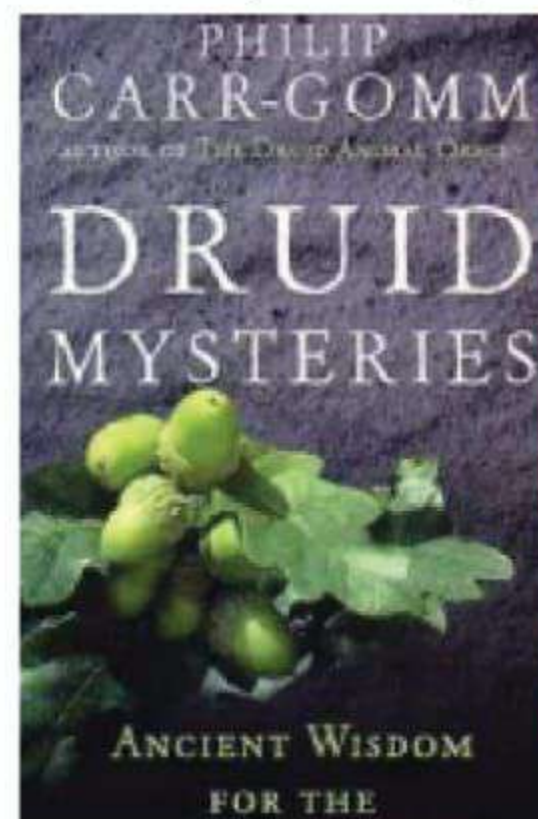
also outside of you, a separate being. The feeling was so beautiful and extraordinary and impossible to put into words. It was very powerful experience. It's the mystery of incarnation, the mystery of separation that, when you experience unity you can quite easily tell yourself that everything else is an illusion and everything is one. On some level that's not true because there is separation, there are separate beings, we are all connected, we are all one, but we're also distinct, separate beings.

Philip studied meditation in Ireland with Olivia Robertson, the founder of the Fellowship of Isis, whom we wrote about earlier. He was initiated into the Order on Glastonbury Tor when he was 18.

In his twenties, this pioneering spirit founded the Esoteric Society in London which organised trips to Egypt and Bulgaria. Back in 1980s, it was a fairly new idea compared to today, but recognizing the need to rethink our pilgrimages in ecological fashion, he advises a new approach of exploring sacred sites far away in meditation, on the Internet, Google Earth, and visit only when we feel it's really important and proposes building a new local sacred sites or help others building them.

3. I also learned that you're fond of trekking. What is your latest catch or the favourite one? How do you choose trails?

I've always liked hiking. Well, there's this track in South Island in New Zealand, called Abel



➡ Tasman, where you walk along the north coast of the South Island, to caves with glow-worms, you come to beautiful beaches, go through the bush, it's just quite extraordinary. I walked for about 4 days there.

From 1988-2020, Philip was the head of The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids, having succeeded Nichols. Druidry is a Spirituality that reveres Nature and its cycles and draws inspiration from the Druids of old, who existed in Ireland, British Isles and Brittany before the coming of Christianity. A revival of interest in Druidry began in the 17th century, and over the last 30 years it gained massive support. Philip witnessed the change in interest over time and the rapid increase in membership reached the number of around 17.000 members and the course taught in seven languages.

Ross Nichols was a friend of Gerald Gardner, „the father of modern Witchcraft”, whom we also wrote about earlier, and during the 2nd World War, the two of them used to ponder on the need for a revival of reverence for Nature and an observance of the eightfold festival cycle. Nichols edited Gardner's „Witchcraft Today”, but went on to promote and reform Druidry within the three traditional divisions of Bard, Ovate, and Druid. And, as Philip correctly stated – we could say that much of the impetus for the modern Witchcraft and Druid movement both emerged from the same place at the same time – London in mid twentieth century.

Bards develop artistic side of Druidry, it is studied first for gaining emotion, subtleness and sensitivity. Ovates develop shamanic side of Druidry working on their healing and divinatory abilities, working with plants, animals, and oracles, while Druids develop their philosophical and magical abilities and work with teaching, ceremony, and philosophy.

Philip combined philosophies, practices, and teachings of the both in his sublime book „Druidcraft: the Magic of Wicca and Druidry”.

4. Do you still consider „The Druid Way” your most important work or would you add some others, too?

They're all quite different. It wouldn't be up to me to say which one is important. But, from the author's perspective, I just wrote one novel, non-fiction, called „The Prophecies”, and that took 5 years to write. It was so difficult to write because it was based on a true story, and if you want to write fiction, try to avoid writing fiction based on fact, because if you do that, you'll have to constantly check whether it's true or not. You create

a sort of problem for yourself, you're not free to make it up because it's fiction based on fact, so that was very difficult to write and it was about a very difficult subject, that in some ways I didn't want to write about but it had to be written. There was a woman called the Druidess of Brocéliande, who used to make predictions, prophecies, political ones, of the outcome of the war and so on. And she lived in this forest in Brittany where I was staying, and just nearby there's a Grail chapel, a chapel built to some sort of, to celebrate the Holy Grail, built by a priest, and employed German prisoners of war to build it, and in Germany there's a Grail chapel, built by Himmler, for the SS soldiers, built by prisoners of war. So, there're two Grail chapels, and I was told a story about this woman that was so extraordinary that I had to write it. I had no choice, even though a part of me said – why are you doing this? Why are you writing about war? You know, there're so many books on war, you had enough of war, so tedious, you have to start looking at Nazism. I really didn't want to write it because of that, so that was kind of the hardest.

Celebrated historian, Ronald Hutton, wrote that the OBOD course „arguably represents one of the major documents of British spirituality from the late twentieth century”, and the Order is now the largest Druid teaching order in the world.

In his thirties, Philip started studying psychology at University College London and Jungian analysis, initially planning to become an analyst. Instead, when he discovered Psychosynthesis, he trained as a therapist at the Institute of Psychosynthesis in London and began a private practice. He is also involved in the ACER Integration programme and the work of the Sophrology Institute.

Now, Philip's got an online school, called *The Art of Living Well*, which has grown out of his practice of Yoga Nidra and Mindfulness Meditation, and offers courses that combine psychological and spiritual understanding, which is the place where magic begins, in Philip's words.

Moreover, with his wife Stephanie, he co-authored „The Druidcraft Tarot”, „The Druid Plant Oracle”, „The Druid Animal Oracle”, and even „The Opera Tarot”.

5. After analyzing your life-long spiritual exploration, growth, and work, it seems that what one only finds is your maturity, top-tier professionalism, and deep wisdom, coupled with continued successes and modesty, but have there ever been challenges throughout your both spiritual and therapeutic work and if so, how did you overcome them?

There're so many different ways I could talk about this. A part of me is very sceptical of everything, even, for instance, when I had this experience with Ross Nichols, because at that time I was dealing with my psychology degree, and I know how much the mind can trick you, so I asked myself – maybe I secretly want to become a chief of this order, and so I have manufactured this experience, my subconscious has created this experience to trick me, if you like, but when these synchronicities occur, when there's outer circumstances, that's when the things start to get strange, because with that story at that stage – I've acquired all of his books, I started doing all that he asked me, putting a course together, but I still hesitated to do anything about it in the open, and then my life fell apart completely. I got divorced after 17 years, separated from my wife and children, it was terrible, and I kind of suddenly had no money and everything broke. It was extraordinary period and just after that happened, I got a telephone call from this man, saying – we want to come and see you, he had known Ross Nichols 10 years previously, and he came on 14 February, I even remember the date, and he said – you must start the Order again because you knew him so well and you're trained in psychology, you're the only person out of a small group of people who'd be capable of doing this, so we would like you to start it again, and the thing is – he didn't know the other part of the story, he didn't know that I had this experience, that I gathered all the papers, he was unaware of

that. He and a few other people who were involved with Ross Nichols decided they should ask me, but they didn't know all of that story, so at that point I thought – okay, I surrender, I accept. As for the doubting part, very often, I would think that all that I do is not very good, including books, and maybe years later I would pick it up by chance, or somebody would say something about it and I would look at it again, read a bit and think – actually, this is okay, this is quite well-written. I think that's normal. The difference is that when you hear that voice, that critical voice, 'cause you know, there's a part of me that's very critical and a part of me that is slightly ashamed that I have involved in druidry because it's this strange, crazy, fringe thing, or ashamed and embarrassed because I started Sophrology because everything I've done you can criticize it, even Psychosynthesis, there are gaps in it and problems in it. Every system has its faults. I was very interested in Jainism, for instance, and you think – why isn't Jainism well-known, why everybody talks about Buddhism, but nobody talks about Jainism? That's because there're problems around Jainism. So, the trick is that you make friends with those little voices and you sit them down and you give them tea and you let them speak (but not for too long). I don't resist them because as soon as you start resisting, as soon as you push against it, it pushes back harder.

Thank you Philip very much for your time, and willingness to give an interview. Blessings from members and readers of our magazine.

