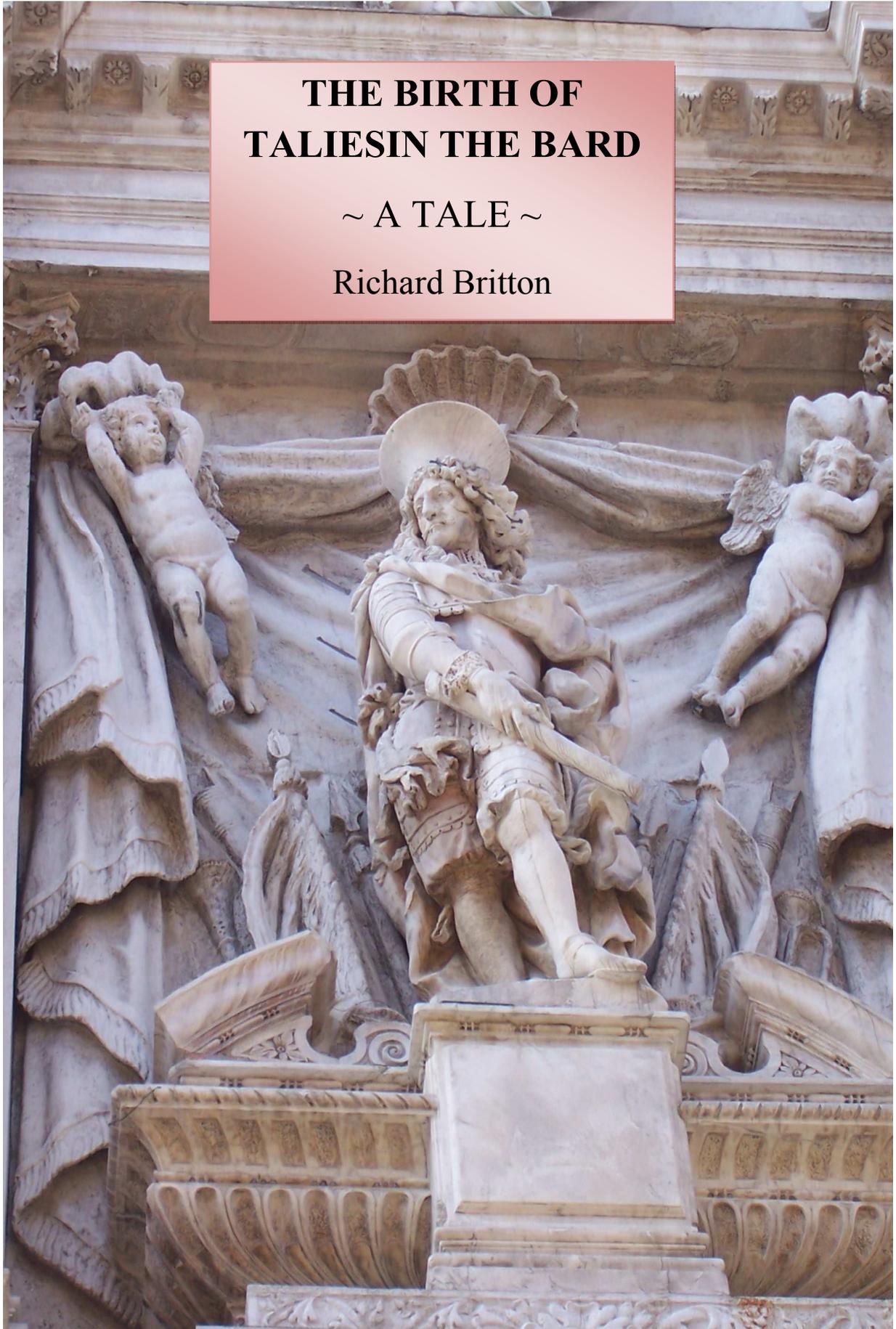


**THE BIRTH OF
TALIESIN THE BARD**

~ A TALE ~

Richard Britton



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THE BIRTH OF TALIESIN THE BARD

I, Taliesin the bard - carpenter of words,
The joiner of Druid and Christian lore,
Gouger of heroics and noble quests,
Cutter of homilies and carver of truth -
Was wrought from the fowl and the grain...

- Taliesin The Bard
From *The Epistles to The Culdees*

1. THE BOOK OF PHERYLLT

Keridwen laboured as if her womb was filled
With stones fired in the acidic larva
That gored its path to fathom valleys
Between the star-threatening peaks
Of Snowdonia, in sleepless prehistory,
As time cut its cord from its creator.
Tegid Voel, her lord, glanced once only
At the wretched bundle, the love
For which had stemmed her bitter blood,
And then left the room to take wine.

Whilst her lord was slumped under his
Antler-mounted fire-place, she stared
At the pink moon as it haemorrhaged
Love into the bruised-blossom night.
Her son, Avagddu, smiled at her
Despite the tightening of his cleft lip,
Flashing his crooked, premature teeth,
His body covered in hair as thick
As a boar's, his hooved feet kicking.
"The gods have rid their brittle clay
To render your form" she whispered
"But I will engender you with wisdom
And craft that will emblazon your name
Beyond the curse of your misshapen body."
The baby opened his mouth and roared,
His hunger-echoes shaking the stillest
Nests in the undefiled trees of the forest.

Her priest risked the wrath of her lord
To ride through the densest woods
For seven nights and seven days
To enquire of the Holy Book of Pheryllt
From which she would draw sublime
Incantations, and breath life into her pledge.

At the city of Emrys the priest arrived,
The city of pyromancers, where red-bearded
Druids converse in *koine* with turbaned
Alchemists and draw potent symbols
In the shell-sands for far-eastern sages
And fakirs from the valley of Indus,
Who sweat water from the Ganges,
As they lean over their kilns and forges.

The Dragons of Beli lived underneath
The city, in a labyrinth, guarding
Rocks of great urge that calibrated
The measure of the power released
From these citizens' metaphysical toils.
They never stirred, but always
Had one eye open and breath bated
Lest the laws of nature should be defiled.

After much consultation and seeking
Of advice and counsel, the priest was
Sent to the Grand Keeper of Books
In the Tower of Books, the most
Magnificent library in the world,
Housed in a hollowed mountain
Far from the city's yellow-stoned core.
There, he was shown the ancient
Text, ciphered in ogham, but reading
In a tongue as ancient as the species
Of worms that the wizened librarian
Plucked from its spine, obsessively,
With the sabre-points of his grey nails.
And so he noted the concoction.
And he journeyed back to Penllyn,
Past quarries of slaves, dust shrouded,

The spoils of wars – sacked cities
And barbarian wastes, enemies subdued -
Excavating rocks or cosmic wisdom?
Muscle Gauls cracked whips scoring
Red lines in their lime-blanching skin.

2. PREPARATION OF THE BREW

As Tegid lay sleeping off his wine,
Keridwen cut his throat with the bone
Of a cuttlefish; his eyes flashed open
And she ordered the nurse to bring
The child forth and shame his neglect
As his noble blood drained through
The smiling clean wound and mixed
With the wine spilt on the floor
After his glass fell in his struggle:
The two ruddy liquids mingled as one.
His black-eyed son stared into his death,
Watching the embers of a cruel fire dull.

Retainers were sent on missions wide
Some to charm adders into thrall,
To milk the venom from their ducts,
Some to clip nails of prince's brides,
Or swab the backs of Egyptian toads,
Others to peel off skins from stoats,
That languish in Iberian meadows,
Others to cut hearts from the chests,
Of Norse warriors in the Orkneys,
And pack them in ice to chariot back,
Still pumping their last as they add to,
The concoction in the cauldron pot,
That must be boiled for a year and a day,
Three drops of which, only, are potent.

Gwion Bach, the son of the Llanfair Herald
Tended to this malevolent brew,
Out of which dark creatures tried to crawl,
And cruel faces moulded into the slime,
He stirred it to break up the ferment,

And crack the callous carrion crust,
He tore open the septic skin-surface,
Keeping the mixture moving round and through.

Keridwen, despite her obsession,
Was taking leisure with several knights,
And woodmen from her juniper forests,
She almost forgot the care of the potion,
And left her baby to suckle his nurse,
And wander in the mistletoe gardens,
And climb the ivy wrapping the trees.

Morda, the blind seer adjusted the fire
From his hut, high in the old oak tree,
And sang the flames high or low,
Sniffing towards the stench of the crows
Flying in the direction of the brew
To sit on the window-ledge of the lady's
Apothecary and beg, beg for the gristle
From the discarded chunks of flesh.

As the year of boiling came near its end,
Gwion Bach stirred the brew to split
Its volcanic curdling head,
But as his ladle pierced through, three
Molten droplets hit his finger,

Licks dulled the listless pain,
But Gwion Bach's mind fell inwards,
In a second, his eyes floated through
The depths of the universe
Like heavy stars plucked from the sky,
And then they crashed back into his head.
Morda stood at the door, nostrils ablaze,
But Gwion could see the marrow
In his gnarled bones and could see
His memories played over and over,
The horrors of battles blood-burned
Into the battle-field, where spears drill
For the deepest biles to replace the dew.

He could hear the voices of the trees
Outside and could feel the burden

Of future horrors bowing his spine,
Faces flashed and their fates forced
Their way across the pallet of his sight,
And so Gwion Bach took frantic flight.

Now the precious three drops were gone,
It seethed into a venomous brew,
That cracked the blackened cauldron
Base and streamed into the river near.
Keridwen's rage upturned her woe,
And with the ladle she struck Morda
Dead (How his grey eyelids flickered)
As man, but alive as a crone, freshly cruel.

3. THE CHASE AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS

Gwion Bach could see the buckled face
Of Keridwen as she stormed through
Field, forest and farm in his pursuit –
The vision woke him from a fever-fit
Sleep, he put out his fire and followed
The icy winds, that growled and snarled
And slapped at his ankles like tentacles
Of an ancient, cursed and beast remote
In the lateness of the summer night,
To reach a beach and charter a boat.

Keridwen had the help of Morda's witch,
That impeached her to follow the guide
Of the icy winds. But Gwion, with sight
That eclipsed the reach of the furthest
Sights, saw this crone's dead-horse hair
Whipped out of her louse-hive head.
Gwion Bach strode into the woodlands
And convulsed into the guise of a hare,
Black furred, black tongued, black eyed
Tricking itself into the skin of the night
With each leap and the flicking of its tail.
But the witch-seer muttered incantations
That melted her patron's mortal flesh
And ground to powder her desperate bones

Re-moulding them into a tall sleek hound,
Following his trail into the woodlands.
How the crows and blackbirds were silenced
By Keridwen's hag chanting dark words
Through her cracked-coal teeth, searching
The sky with her sour-milk eyes and then,
Through the parted pages of a dank tome,
She curdled song to hasten Keridwen's
Foot flip, angled her teeth to aid their rip.

But Gwion the hare came to a still mere,
And, in the midst of his dive, his dark fur
Crisped into scales that sparkled silver
As it pierced the print of the buxom moon
On the water-skin and swam into the depths.
But the crone, how she shrieked, sending
The prowling weasels back into the depths
Of their burrows, the badgers to their sets
And the foxes to their dens. Even the wolves
Cowered in the towering tree-shadows.
And as Keridwen the hound submerged
Within the cloak of the praeternatural mere,
Parts of her flesh and bone filed away
And as her snout drilled through the shafts of
Still waters, it rounded and her paws shrank
As she patted away the silence and shuffled on.
Her tail widened and she became an otter.

Sensing the stalk, Gwion the fish launched out
Of the mere and his fins fanned and feathered
Whilst keratin sharpened his nose to a point,
And legs sprouted at speed from his groin
As he swooped upwards eclipsing the moon
For half a second only, but time-enough
For Keridwen's hag to pull her patron out
Of the mere with the anti-gravity of her cruel
Incantations, and stretch her snout, harden
And shine it like the blade of a night assassin,
And split the strands of her dactylic limbs so
That blood fell and inked the mere surface
As webbing reunited the flesh into far spanned
Wings, vengefully parting the wind venting
Across the heights of the sky. Sensing awry

The blanket of the blackening span that cast
A denser night over his clothing of sparrow,
Making a pearl-bone day of the moon fattened
Sky, (excluded by the flapping from tip to tip)
So Gwion Bach was delivered realisation,
And the sprint of his leaf-width wings
Flicking open and shut a dozen times
For every flap of Keridwen's hawk- wings
Was not enough to clear her claw reach.
One last flap did halt his wings at his waist
And they would not move as his bludgeoning
Beak sank into his neck whilst his tail rolled
Over his head and under and over and under
Like the clod missile from an Olympian's palm,
Balling magnificently. Friction shaved him
Down, smaller and smaller, sparking flames
That spirit-danced the shapes of the feathers,
Burning the textile from the quill and then
Pulping the flesh into a ball of roundness
Envied by the forces of physics that fruit
The trees and carve worlds from the ecstasy
Of suns. Each revolution of his tumbling form
Shaved off a layer, with purple sparking off
His shrinking form, further and lower down,

Until his collision took him to a corn field,
Not un-mixed in the crestfallen grains
Gathered in a basket, with crows not
Pausing to pick what they peck at as
They take their fill of the weevils within.
Keridwen the hawk then dived down
As her hag oriented her to the target
Of her indulgent hate, but her dive slowed
And her sleek, muscled body fattened
As her wings drew into her shoulders,
She began to tumble as her plump bundle
Blundered to the ground with a thud,
Cratering a patch of the corn stalks,
And she wobbled to her feet, furious
With her latest guise as a fat black hen.

But there was measure in the hags deeds

As Keridwen's obese hen quickly spied
Gwion Bach's particle, shivering within,
Hoping, praying his tiny seed would be
Gobbled by a crow and flown up high
But soon evacuated in this bird's faeces,
Back to the ground and relative safety.
But Keridwen's hen, despite her wobble
Was, nevertheless mobile, and Gwion-
Bach's grain was physically most unable,
(Save for his sharper end, which tried to fumble
Him down to the safety of the wicker floor,)
And with a sharp withdrawal of her ugly neck,
She drilled her blundering beak into the basket,
Catching Gwion Bach's fugitive form,
Swallowing him down as a grain of corn!
Before returning to her human form.

4. THE NATIVITY OF TALIESIN THE BARD

Nine months passed and Keridwen bore
A child whose black hair danced in the wind
Around his day-sky eyes. His beauty bound
Her wrath, and despite Avagddu's premature
Death, she could not kill this child despite
The way his pearl skin shone against her
Memory of Avagddu's unfortunate hue.

She wrapped him in cloth as if she was
Hiding her sins, placed him on a coracle
And cast it out to sea. She did not turn
Back as the baby's cries battled the turn
Of the waves as evening fell and a storm
Creaked on the blade of the horizon.

The storm confused sky and sea; lightning
Wrought shapes in the sight of fishermen
Trawling the tumultuous estuary waters
And they nearly thought the coracle was
A salt-eye illusion but they dragged it in.

The child was passed to Gwyddno, a Lord,

And upon opening the bundle he cried:-
“Behold, a child with radiant brow!
He shall be called Taliesin and raised
In my court.” And then, he hugged the child
With the love that Keridwen could not find
Amongst all the bitterness at her first-born’s
Lot. And the sea rested and the clouds parted
And Taliesin laughed the sun out of hiding.

THE END