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Elgar's Enigmas

A past script and a post script

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"Tis time to observe Occurrences, and let nothing
remarkable escape us" (Thomas Browne)

"In a May morning on the Malvern hills
A marvel befell me" (Piers Plowman)

In February and March of this year I suggested in these pages that Elgar's Enigmas (including his cipher letter of July 1897 to Dora Penny) derived in various ways from (a) an unknown source of secret writing, (b) Sir Thomas Browne and (c) *Auld Lang Syne*. At first hearing, what triad could be more dissonant? But suppose it had roots in common ground, *eg* written sources consulted by Elgar; then such books would much enhance the case. The search sounds a tall order; but it is over in short order, and presumably in the place where it began. All the books mentioned below can still be located in a few moments in the London Library, Elgar's chief source of books for nearly 50 years. But his first such source was his mother, and it is with her that this story fittingly begins.

She wrote to her daughter in 1898:

It has just occurred to me that I never told you about Caractacus . . . when I was at Colwall, E and Alice came to see me-on going out we stood at the door looking along the backs of the Hillst - the Beacon was in full view - I said Oh! Ed. Look at the lovely old Hill. Can't we write some tale about it; so full of interest and so much historical interest . . . in less than a month he told me Caractacus was all cut and dried and he had begun to work at it-that's the story. So I feel a sort of Godmother to it - I never meant music. I meant a tale - and asked Alice if she could get me any books of old Welsh history, or anything leading to it.

Why Caractacus? Because he had (according to an early 19th-century Vicar of Malvern) built the so-called British Camp on the Herefordshire Beacon. This notion continued (or perhaps started) a local tradition, which included Druids. So did Elgar's cantata. According to its librettist (a Malvern friend) "the unusual circumstance of mistletoe growing on the oak may still be observed in the woods below the Beacon". According to another Malvern friend, the way over the hills was known as the Druid path; and while working on Caractacus Elgar often walked that way in search of atmosphere and inspiration. Indeed, the inclusion of Druids in the plot may well have been in his mother's mind from the first. "Old *Welsh* history" was her phrase. The italics are mine; the Romans too are very likely hers. Under her tutelage her son had become a devoted bookman and antiquarian. Among his own home reading was Thomas Browne, whose *Urn Burial* mentions Romans, Britons, Druids, and mystic inscriptions; it was then (and is now) commonly published in the same volume as *Religio Medici*, which mentions enigmas, friendship and music. If these latter points are more than coincidence, what of the former?

But in any event Elgar's mind ranged widely beyond his study at home. He and his wife Alice were both voracious readers at the London Library, where she was a life member from 1885 (hence no doubt her mother-in-law's specific appeal to *her* for books, rather than to a beloved bibliophile son). *Prima facie*, he pursued Caractacus there too. So one might venture to follow his footsteps.

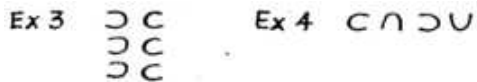
The likely start would be the current (9th) edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (a work he admired; he owned the 10th). It has almost nothing to say under "Caractacus" but a great deal under "Druids" (*eg* that they had a written language which used Greek characters). That article refers readers to "Celtic Literature" for more about Druids (*eg* that they determined by auguries the propitious times for fighting a battle, exactly as in Elgar's cantata). Next we learn about Ogham, a cryptic writing attributed to the Druidic cult, to which two further references are given, the *Book of Ballymote* and the - writings of John Rhys (who taught Celtic at Oxford : and had published the longest extant essay on - Ogham, in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1891-2*). It described the Ogham writing, composed of one to five strokes or curves at varying angles. One illustration is written as in ex 1, much as in Elgar's own cryptogram; another



as in ex 2, like a sign Elgar often used in his letters, as a pointer; another again mentions the use of Greek characters (a key to Elgar's cipher).

The *Proceedings* then move on to a detailed dissertation on (of all things) “Auld lang syne: its origins, poetry and music”. This is still the leading essay on the subject, and one quoted in works of reference. So nowadays one has only to look up any old Grove to be led on to Druids and other odd characters. But that avenue was not open to Elgar at the time. His known interest was in Britons and Druids and their ways; and his likeliest itinerary - leads straight to *Auld lang syne*. Next, one seeks to make the acquaintance of the old *Book of Ballymote*, mentioned by both *Britannica* and John Rhys. One might hesitate before asking for a 14th-century Erse folio codex, even in the London Library - But there it was, and still is. In its light, moreover, Elgar’s manuscript is itself illuminated. A few pages suffice to show that the Ogham symbols and systems resemble nothing so much as his cipher letter to Dora Penny.

One page shows characters grouped as in ex. 3. The same page shows how the symbols can be arranged symmetrically in numerical order on successive radii. Then we learn about the enciphered Oghams. In one for example the sound of a letter stands for the letter itself, as f say x were enciphered as AH. In another, a basic semicircular symbol is rotated to give different readings as in ex 4. These



ideas though novel are not new; they had already been inferred in solving Elgar's cipher. The *Book of Ballymote* also lists the materials on which Ogham was inscribed, eg “The Wand of the Poet” - perhaps a pointer to *The Wand of Youth?* - and explains how all the Ogham letters were named after kinds of trees. In that topic Elgar had an unusually marked and sensitive interest. “This is what I hear all day”, he wrote to Jaeger in 1900; “the trees are singing my music-or have I sung theirs?” And he quotes from the morning forest music of *Caractacus*. Finally the editorial notes to this codex once again link Ogham with Druids. So do many other contemporary authorities. And Elgar was working on his cantata about Druids in the very month of *his* Ogham-like cipher message to Dora Penny.

This terminus is reached not by any imaginative flight but simply by taking the pedestrian steps of looking at books Elgar might have consulted, at the place and in the order in which he might have consulted them. In that way we are led straight from the Malvern Hills down to *Auld lang syne*, via Thomas Browne, a cryptic script and Miss Penny. These five have one other thing in common; they have all been thought relevant to the solution of Elgar's Enigma. *Prima facie*, so they are. Furthermore the last four have been discovered emerging from a cipher broken by purely cryptographic means.

The decrypted message ran essentially thus “LARKS: ITS CHAOTIC BUT A CLOAK OBSCURES MY NEW LETTERS . . . I OWN THE DARK MAKES E.E. SIGH WHEN YOU ARE TOO LONG GONE”. “Larks” may suggest a canard; but the word is not only in Dora Penny 's diary but also in a letter from Elgar to Jaeger (1900) - a letter moreover which is actually about her. Similarly the rest of the text, together with its basis of phonetics and name-anagrams, conforms closely with Elgar's known and habitual modes of thought and expression. Further, we can now add (a) the written language of Druids (Ogham Plus Greek) to the other cipher sources already identified, namely (b) Thomas Browne and (c) *Auld lang syne* (as detailed in the March MT). If all three insist on arriving unbidden in two quite different ways, perhaps one is on the right track. If so, we can now solve the solution. This has been called “Baconian”; for how could Miss Penny have made head or tail of it? But that argument has two sides. Elgar (unlike Bacon) is known to have sent riddling messages. For example he once asked Jaeger to send a postcard to their friend Rodewald with “this question and nothing more – ‘What is the boon of far Peru?’ “. Its significance eluded Jaeger; but no doubt Rodewald could grasp it. Similarly, knowledge of (a), (b) and (c) above would have made the cipher if not simple then very much more readable. Yet they are not mentioned in letters. So presumably they had cropped up in casual conversation. But why and how could they have possibly done so?

Despite appearances, the answer might be very simple. Elgar, we know, talked to Dora Penny about the plot of *Caractacus* as they walked over the Druid path. Hence Druids; hence Greek and Ogham; hence *Auld lang syne*; hence friendship; hence *Religio Medici*; hence enigmas and music; and hence “you of all people”, as Elgar later told her, ought to have guessed the answer to his own Enigma's “larger theme”. In that sequence, only *Auld lang syne* is both possible and guessable.

At what points these trains of thought switched over on to musical lines; these, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture. In July 1897 Dora Penny received her Druidic script; and danced to Elgar's piano-playing (the *Lullaby* op 27). *Caractacus* op 35 (1897-8) has a dance of Druid maidens; the *Enigma* op 36 (1898-9) has an Intermezzo, “Dorabella”, which suggests (according to the composer) a dance-like lightness. All three dances move in a measure of musical affinity.

Auld lang syne is brought to mind partly as rhythm but mainly as melody, suggesting a remembrance of the cadences of speech or song. Perhaps there was some verbal pleasantries between the Elgars and their friends the Pennys – “Come and see us again soon should old acquaintance be forgot?” One typical phrase in which (I suggest) that melody flows most clearly from the *Enigma* (ex 5a) is actually *quoted* from *Caractacus*, where it is the motif associated with the words “Watchmen alert” (ex 5b)



and the idea of comradeship; there it means hopeful nocturnal vigil among friends, just as *Auld lang syne* does. Further, the specific idea of awaiting the dawn of a brighter day, moving from darkness to light, also seems to have a special motif in *Caractacus* (ex 6b). This recurs hardly changed at the end of the Enigma theme (ex 6a), with similar effect.



There can be no such conversion from *Religio Medici*. But the feeling-tones of Browne's chiaroscuro imagery of dark and bright, enigma and resolution; the stately singing of his sumptuous style, *nobilmente*; these sound truly Elgarian in mood and manner. So do his topics of discourse: love of country, of friends, of God, are Elgar's own triad in *Caractacus*, *Enigma*, *Gerontius*. The first of these (perhaps their initial root) has been forgotten; unfairly, as the revival this month at Cheltenham will surely show. It may then seem less strange that music should spring from Ogham, *Auld lang syne*, and *Religio Medici*. An amalgam of symbolic language, song and poetic imagery may be what in essence music is; an analogue of the mental and emotive life of reading, writing and ciphering. At least it was arguably so for Edward Elgar, who might have said with Thomas Browne "I love to lose my self in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an O altitudo!"