

**An extract from an essay on Bardic Tradition, published in 1795 by**

**Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg)**

1. Read the extract carefully and underline any words or phrases that particularly strike you.
2. Who are the Bards of Britain?
3. What is their role?
4. How do they perform that role?
5. What are the author's views on literacy and orality?
6. What is the wider context for this piece, and why is Williams so vehement in his arguments?  
(i.e, who is he writing *against*?)

*The three primary and indispensable requisites of POETIC GENIUS are, an EYE THAT CAN SEE NATURE, a HEART THAT CAN FEEL NATURE, and a RESOLUTION THAT DARES FOLLOW NATURE.*

(A Welsh Triad)

The Bards and Druids (both one and the same people) of Ancient Britain, had, before letters were known, reduced the Arts of Memory and oral tradition into a well systematised science. Song was one of their methods of giving permanency or fixation to orality: songs skilfully composed on interesting subjects, were learned with avidity, they soon became popular, they could be transmitted without the aid of letters from one person, time, or place, to another, though ever so remote. Long details and diffuse declamations could never be learned orally with any tolerable degree of ease, nor could they be retained in the memory; or, were it possible, and fact, in a very few extraordinary instances, it could never be so generally, or sufficiently frequent, as to be of any material use to mankind; for this reason, in addition to song, the Bards invented a variety of aphoristical forms, on fixed, regular, and unalterable, principles, that were obvious to the understanding, easily learned and remembered, it was necessary that these should not be capable of assuming any other form, or materially different mode of verballity, than that in which they were originally delivered. Aphorisms constructed on such fixed principles could be learned with ease, and with ease retained by the memory; they would, with nearly, if not quite, as much facility as Song, become widely diffused over a large extent of Place and Time: in Songs and in Aphorisms of this description were the Theological, Ethical, and Scientifical, Maxims of the Ancient Bards of Britain delivered, and these were easily retained by the public memory.

The term Bard, in its original Cimbric acceptation, signifies Priest {or teacher}; but, when letters were not known, Song having been found the best, most pleasing, and for that reason the most effectual, means of fixing permanently the Oralities of Religion and useful science, it became as indispensably necessary for a Priest to be a Poet as it is in these {our} times for him to be able to read and write; hence Bard and Poet came in length of time to be synonymous terms.

Moderns understand nothing by the word Tradition but the wildly confused popular story of we know not what; Old wives tales; something as widely different from Bardic Tradition as the East is from the West; and, of course, whether they censure {reject}, or, in part, admit what they call tradition, they only talk nonsense, and jabber they know not what.

The Didactic Songs and Aphorisms of the Bards were always laid before their Grand Meetings, Convention, or Curalities, of the Solstices and Equinoxes; there they were discussed with the most scrutinizing severity, if admitted at the first they were re-considered at the second meeting; if then approved of, they were referred to the third meeting; and, being approved of by that, they were ratified or confirmed; otherwise they were referred to the Triennial Supreme Convention for ultimate consideration, where all that had been confirmed at the Provincial Conventions were also recited, and the disciples, that there attended from every Province, enjoined to learn them, that thereby they might be as widely diffused as possible; these were recited for ever afterwards, annually at least, at every Curality, or Convention, in Britain: this being the practice, it was impossible for perversion and interpolation to take place, every thing of this kind would be soon detected and rejected; all the Bardic Traditions were thus to be for ever recited annually at one or other of the four Grand Meetings of the year: being thus guarded in every Province, it was impossible for them to deviate materially from Truth.

This well-guarded Tradition was a better Guardian of Truth than letters have ever been, especially before the art Printing was discovered: we confide in letters that skulk in dens and dark corners; we know not whence they come into light, we often know not how they came into existence. If a manuscript has a little of the mould of age on it, we admit blindly more of what it says as truth than becomes a wise man. Letters can transmit lies to posterity through a long, dark, and unknown, known, as it were, subterraneous passage: Bardic Tradition walks in open day and beaten tracks, exposes itself to the eye of light, as its own language emphatically has it. Macpherson, Chatterton, Pinkerton, and others, could never have sported with Bardic Tradition as they have done with Letters.