The Celts were a very intriguing, almost mysterious people. Living in Europe before the Romans, and battling them for control of much of the continent, the Celts are often seen in books and movies as “naked barbarians charging Roman legions,” (Freeman xi). This is an obvious stereotype and oversimplification of the Celts, but, with scarce first-hand accounts we actually know very little about them. In *War, Women, and Druids: Eyewitness Reports and Early Accounts of the Ancient Celts*, Philip Freeman has organized the surviving primary documents into one concise volume.

The Celts were very different from tribe to tribe, but they had one common thread: they were a people constantly at war. Rome coveted the Celts’ land, and the Romans saw the Celts—who practiced human sacrifices, had no written language, and let their women fight along side the men—as barbarians. On the battlefield, the Celts were formidable enemy; their holy men, called druids, were enough to scare even the most seasoned Roman warriors with their ferocity and war-painted bodies.

Indeed, since the Celts had no written language, much of what we know about them comes to us from their Roman enemies, who saw them as less than human. Most of these accounts were written by Roman or Greek authors and are found in histories, letters, and poetry. Many of the references are mere mentions of the Celts while others such as those found in Julius Caesar’s letters include detailed accounts. Arranging the topics by subjects such as poetry, religion, war, and feasting, Freeman gives the reader each quote verbatim with relevant historical and contextual information.

The Celts own history of themselves was handed down orally from generation to generation. Bards were the “voice of their people,” creating and singing songs and poems, praising the deeds of kings and warriors of their time times past. Bards were respected members of their societies and expected to be paid for their services. After the once vast Celtic people were pushed by the Romans back to the British Isles and eventually only Ireland, Christian missionaries arrived to convert these people. Much of the Celtic culture died or was assimilated into Medieval Christianity, and the bards no longer sang about their history. Thus, the most reliable source for learning about the Celts vanished.

Some of the accounts do mention women fighting in battles, their strength matching that of the men. Queen Boudica, for example, led a united Celtic people to expel the Romans from Britain. However, despite the romantic portrayal of Celtic as having complete equality with their men, Celtic wives were completely subjective to wills of their husbands much like their Roman counterparts.

Freeman himself draws few inferences from these quotes and accounts. The straightforward, factual reporting can seem a bit choppy, but at ninety one pages, the book is overall a quick read and a great resource for research. Considering his task of searching through fictional poetry and factual histories spanning over 600 years, Freeman does an excellent job.

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