An annual cycle of eight celebrations is commonly identified as ‘The Celtic Festivals’. In fact, it originated in the twentieth century ferment that birthed the new Pagan religious traditions. Festivals of different historical and ethnic origin, celebrating the summer and winter solstices, the spring and autumn equinoxes, and four intervening ‘cross quarter days’ that mark the mid-points between these moments in the relationship between earth and sun, were fused into something new. Many people, not only Pagans, are aware of these calendar dates and, to varying degrees, the practices with which they can be celebrated. They have escaped identification with those who melded them into a cycle, or even with contemporary Paganism, although the media regularly publicise their performance by Pagans. Thus, this cycle of eight ‘Celtic Festivals’ illustrates the power and enchantment of Pagan rituals and ritualising in wider contemporary culture.

They are perhaps the preeminent example of a cultural product that has been readily adopted beyond the porous boundaries of Paganism. Significantly, however, they are not mere by-products of more central Pagan interests, but profoundly reveal the heart of Paganism. It is not that all Pagans celebrate this cycle (other cycles and events are definitive of particular sub-traditions) but that Paganism is about celebrating nature, or celebration and nature together. Whatever else inspired the rebirth of Paganism (and a number of factors will be noted in this chapter), the moment of conception was the uniting of ritual and a reverence for the larger-than-human world. Paganism is often identified as a ‘nature religion’ (as if it lacks the ‘revelation’ and ‘transcendence’ that are said to mark Christianity and Islam, or the engagement with notions of ‘self’ that are often used to categorise New Age and other inheritors of Western esotericism) but it is at least as important that Pagans do ritual. The central, defining activity of Pagan religiosity is the performance of rituals of human relationship with a world that can be identified as ‘nature’. In
the context of some celebrations of these ‘Celtic Festivals’, and on other ritualised occasions, Pagans elaborate new versions of live performance that can be identified as ‘bardic’. This chapter explores the context in which specifically competitive performance events (leading to the award of ‘Bardic Chairs’) take their place as expressions of Paganism and as Pagan contributions to wider society. Together they form the Bardic Chair movement that is a vibrant cultural product that Pagan Druidry has gifted to the wider society’s live performance culture.

The chapter begins with a sketch of Pagan origins that contextualises the significance of its evolving ritualism and provides some idea of the cultural context in which Bardic Chair competitive performance events have emerged. Consideration of three ways in which ‘bardism’ is defined among Druids precedes a summary of the pre-Pagan origins of the Bardic Chairs. The two following sections will assert not only that the performance cultures of the festival and activist movements of the late twentieth century deserve greater attention but also that they form the close cultural context in which the Bardic Chair movement was shaped. A note about the possible utility of the terms ‘indigenisation’ and ‘Paganisation’ is offered, before introducing the re-discovery and varied development of bardism and ‘Bardic Chairs’ among Druids. The chapter concludes with some pointers to following the latest and emerging steps along this path.

Pagan Druidic ‘bardic chairs’ might be taken to be a perfect illustration of Eric Hobsbawm’s “invented tradition” (1983), and elsewhere I have applied that idea within a broader discussion of “inventing Paganisms” (Harvey 2007). However, approaching the deliberate, debated, and purposeful evolving of these practices within a lifeway that makes sense to and of participants within the “autoproduction” framework proposed by Richard Peterson (2001; also see Peterson and Anand 2004) is considerably more fruitful.

Pagan Origins and Ritualism

In broad terms, this chapter engages with a culturally ‘alternative’ inheritance and tendency within Paganism: its remarkable emphasis on ritual or ritualising. In particular, the chapter focuses on one aspect of Pagan performance culture, namely the Bardic Chair movement, but presents this as rooted in more pervasive ritual and performative characteristics of the religion. Ritual and ritualising, while rhetorically denigrated by Protestant Christianity and modernist culture (Harvey 2005), have shaped Paganism