

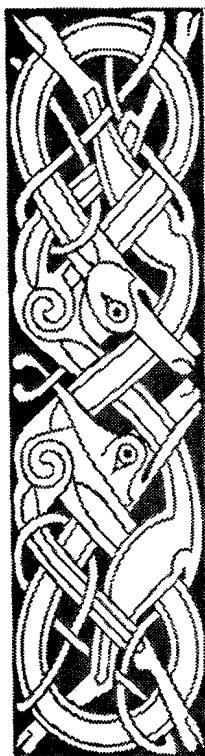
KATHARINE KERR

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF A TIME OF EXILE

A TIME OF OMENS

A NOVEL OF DEVERRY AND THE WESTLANDS





a time of omens

A Novel of the Westlands

katharine
kerr



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THE BOUNDLESS IMAGINATION OF
KATHARINE KERR

Her novels of Deverry and the Westlands

DAGGERSPELL
DARKSPELL
THE BRISTLING WOOD
THE DRAGON REVENANT
A TIME OF EXILE
A TIME OF OMENS

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Katharine Kerr is the author of seven novels: *Daggerspell*, *Darkspell*, *The Bristling Wood*, *The Dragon Revenant*, *A Time of Exile*, *A Time of Omens*, and a science fiction novel, *Polar City Blues*. Her new science fiction novella, *Resurrection*, will soon be published in paperback by Bantam Spectra. She is at work on her next novel.

By Katharine Kerr

DAGGERSPELL

DARKSPELL

THE BRISTLING WOOD

THE DRAGON REVENANT

A TIME OF EXILE

A TIME OF OMENS

POLAR CITY BLUES

RESURRECTION

**a
time
of
omens**

Dedication

**For Nance Jordan Ashton
My Grandmother**

Acknowledgments

As usual, I owe a lot of friends a lot of thanks. Some are:
Brian Carnright, who keyboarded above and beyond the
call of duty,
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plot problems mean,
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and as always, my husband, Howard Kerr,
who is Himself.

A Note on the Pronunciation of Deverry Words

The language spoken in Deverry is a member of the P-Celtic family. Although closely related to Welsh, Cornish, and Breton, it is by no means identical to any of these actual languages and should never be taken as such.

Vowels are divided by Deverry scribes into two classes: noble and common. Nobles have two pronunciations; commons, one.

A as in *father* when long; a shorter version of the same sound, as in *far*, when short.

O as in *bone* when long; as in *pot* when short.

W as the oo in *spook* when long; as in *roof* when short.

Y as the i in *machine* when long; as the e in *butter* when short.

E as in *pen*.

I as in *pin*.

U as in *pun*.

Vowels are generally long in stressed syllables; short in unstressed. Y is the primary exception to this rule. When it appears as the last letter of a word, it is always long whether that syllable is stressed or not.

Diphthongs generally have one consistent pronunciation.

AE as the a in *mane*.

AI as in *aisle*.

AU as the ow in *how*.

EO as a combination of *eh* and *oh*.

EW as in Welsh, a combination of *eh* and oo.

IE as in *pier*.

OE as the oy in *boy*.

UI as the North Welsh *wy*, a combination of oo and *ee*. Note that OI is never a diphthong, but is two distinct sounds, as in *carnoic* (KAR-noh-ik).

Consonants are mostly the same as in English, with these exceptions:

C is always hard as in *cat*.

G is always hard as in *get*.

DD is the voiced *th* as in *thin* or *breathe*, but the voicing is more pronounced than in English. It is opposed to TH, the unvoiced sound as in *th* or *breath*. (This is the sound that the Greeks called the Celtic tau.)

R is heavily rolled.

RH is a voiceless R, approximately pronounced as if it were spelled *hr* in Deverry proper. In Eldidd, the sound is fast becoming indistinguishable from R.

DW, GW, and TW are single sounds, as in *Gwendolen* or *twit*.

Y is never a consonant.

I before a vowel at the beginning of a word is consonantal, as it is in the plural ending *-ion*, pronounced *yawn*.

Doubled consonants are both sounded clearly, unlike in English. Note, however, that DD is a *single letter*, not a doubled consonant.

Accent is generally on the penultimate syllable, but compound words and place names are often an exception to this rule.

I have used this system of transcription for the Bardekian and Elvish alphabets as well as the Deverrian, which is, of course, based upon the Greek rather than the Roman model. In spite of the ridiculous controversy still continuing in certain university circles, I see no reason to confuse the ordinary reader with the technical method of Elvish transcription in common use among linguists and scholars. Anyone who wishes to learn this system may of course refer to the standard works upon the subject available from the University of Aberwyn Press; the average reader of popular fiction would no doubt rather forgo such a formidable experience. I am surprised at the stubbornness of certain professors of Elvish, to say nothing of a certain Elvish professor, which has forced me to ap-

pend such a self-evident remark to these notes. One can only assume that these persons are underemployed by their academic institutions if they have the leisure to write scurrilous articles about contemporary novelists rather than devoting themselves to their proper areas of expertise.



Prologue

*W m m g l a e d d ,
1096*



On the Inner Planes, Time as we know it no longer exists. This is why an omen may refer to things which we perceive as long over and done with as well as to things in process at the moment in which the omen is cast and to things which we have yet to perceive at all. Past, Present, Future—these states do not exist in the world from which an omen proceeds, yet there is no denying, of course, that they do exist in ours. . . .

The Pseudo-Iamblichus Scroll

In those days the eastern border of the elven lands lay in the middle of a forest. A traveler leaving the high plains and heading east came down a long gentle decline into the oaks to find several rivers that might mark a border—if only anyone at all had lived on either side of them. In that vast tangle of tree and shrub, bracken and thorn, finding the lands of men (that is, the three western provinces—Eldidd, Pyrdon, Arcodd—of the kingdom of Deverry) was no easy job. If you wanted to go from west to east, the sandy coast of the Southern Sea made a much more reliable road, if, of course, you could fight your way south to reach it. The ancient forest had a way of tricking travelers unless they or their companions knew the route well.

The woman who rode out of the forest late on a summer day traveled with a horde of such companions—not that most human beings would have seen them. Sylphs and sprites hovered round her in the air; gnomes clung to her saddle or perched on the back of the spare horse she was leading; undines rose out of every stream and pool she passed to wave a friendly greeting. Her friends weren't the only odd thing about Jill. If you looked carefully at her silver hair, cropped short like a lad's, and the fine lines that webbed her eyes round and latticed her cheeks, you realized that she had to be at least fifty years old if not somewhat more, but she radiated so much vitality, the way a fire gives off heat, that it was impossible to think of her as anything but young. She was, you see, the most powerful sorcerer in all of Deverry.

The first human settlement that any traveler coming from the west reached on the coast was the holy precinct of Wmmglaedd, although in those days, before the silting of the river and the meddling of humans had extended the shore, the temple lay a little ways out to sea on a low-lying cluster of islands. Jill rode along the sea cliffs through meadows of tall grass to a rocky beach, where the waves washed over gravel with a mutter, as if the sea were endlessly regretting some poor decision. A fair mile offshore, she could see the rise of the main island against the glitter of the Southern Sea.

She led her pair of horses down to the two stone pillars that marked the entrance to a stone causeway, still underwater at the moment, though when she looked at the water lapping at the carved notches along the edge of one pillar, she found each wave falling a little lower than the one before. Crying and mewling, seabirds swooped overhead, graceful gulls and the ungainly pelicans that were sacred to the god Wmm, all come to feed as the dropping tide exposed the rocky shallows. At last the causeway emerged, streaming water like a silver sea snake, to let her lead her horses across the uncertain footing. At the far end of the causeway stood a stone arch inlaid with colored marble in panels of interlace and roundels decorated with pelicans; it sported an inscription, too, "water covers and reveals all things."

About ten miles long and seven wide, with a central hill standing in the midst of meadows of coarse sea grass, the island sheltered four different temple complexes at that time, brochs as tall as a lord's dun, clusters of wooden guest houses, cattle barns and riding stables as well as a series of holy shrines placed at picturesque locations. Although the temple had been founded in the year 690 as a modest refuge for scholars and mystics, during the long civil wars of the ninth century its priests had the shrewdness and the good fortune to play a crucial role in placing the true king on his throne. When the wars were over, their fame drew an occasional desperate soul seeking an oracle, and as the long years went by, the rare case became a swarm of pilgrims, all laden with gifts to earn the favor of the god.

Now Wmm was rich. Still leading her horses rather than riding, Jill left the causeway and followed a fine road, paved with limestone blocks, through the smallish town that had sprung up near the temples. In among the round, thatched houses townsfolk and visitors strolled around or sat in the windows of one of the many inns, and peddlers kept accosting her with trays of sweetmeats or baskets of little silver medals and pottery souvenirs. She brushed them all off and strode on her way, skirting the main complex, too, bustling with visitors and priests here in the summer season, and took a little-used path that ran southeast through pine trees, all twisted and bowed down from the constant wind. In a

little bay of rocky shore a jetty stood with a ferry bobbing at anchor beside it. Beyond, a scant mile away, she could see the rise of East Island, a long sliver of land that most visitors knew or cared nothing about.

"Jill, halloo!" The ferryman, a stout priest draped in an orange cloak, waved both hands at her as she led her horses gingerly down the steep path. "Back so soon?"

"I am, at that. How have things been? Quiet?"

"They always are, out our way." He grinned, revealing brown and broken teeth. "His holiness has pains in his joints again."

"I'm surprised you aren't all as bent and stiff as village crones, frankly, out here in the fog."

"True, true. But well, we've got a bit of sun today at least. Enjoy it while we can, say I."

Since the tide was running out, the journey was quick and easy, though the ferryman was bound to have a harder trip rowing back by himself. Jill coaxed her horses off, left him sighing at the job ahead, and headed across a wind-scoured meadow to a complex much smaller and plainer than those of the main island. At the base of a low hill stood a clutter of roundhouses and a stables, shaded by a few stunted oaks. Dust drifted and swirled over the threadbare lawns and sickly vegetable gardens. She turned her horses over to a groom, carried her saddlebags and bedroll to a hut that did for a guest house, dumped her gear onto the narrow cot, and decided that she'd unpacked. With a deferential bob of his head, a servant came in, bringing her a washbasin and a pitcher of water.

"His holiness is in the library."

"I'll join him there."

After she washed up, she lingered in the silence for a moment to get her questions clear in her mind. Like all the other pilgrims, she'd come to Wmm's temple for help in making a decision, in her case about a voyage to the far-lying islands of the Bardekian archipelago, a very major undertaking indeed in those days. It was likely that she'd be gone for years and almost as likely that she wouldn't even find what she was looking for, the translation of a single word that she'd found inscribed inside a ring. The word,