



'Fascinating mix of legend and common practices' *Sunday Tribune*

IRISH TREES

MYTHS, LEGENDS & FOLKLORE



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Introduction

This is a book all about trees, which is nothing unusual in itself, as there are many books on the subject. This book, however, is a bit different to most. Normally, books about trees concentrate exclusively on the natural history of each tree, with folklore consisting of a few remarks added in for a bit of colour. That is when folklore gets a mention at all. This is a book for all those frustrated by this state of affairs and who want to know more about the sorely neglected (and dare I say important) topic of tree folklore. This book therefore reverses the usual order of things by gathering together for the first time the folklore of all our native trees; and confining questions of natural history and practical uses to a few remarks. As such it is intended to complement existing books about trees, rather than replicate what can easily be found elsewhere.

Folklore did not always have such a lowly place. In ancient Ireland and in Europe generally, mythology and folklore were an integral part of the store of knowledge surrounding each tree. There was not the split we find today between folklore and natural history. There are abundant references to trees in early Irish poetry and many poems solely about trees. This book contains the most important of them, with the original Irish text when it is clear and accessible. Many of them are for the first time published outside of academic works (the translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated). The fact that the creators of the first Irish alphabet Ogam or Ogham named its letters after trees is also a testament to the regard with which trees were held. Ireland itself was once heavily wooded and as an example of this, it was alleged at one time that a squirrel could travel all the way from Killarney to Cork without once touching the ground!

Yet the special place of trees to the Irish changed dramatically over the last few centuries. Pressures of population as well as the use of timber for various purposes, particularly shipbuilding and charcoal, meant that the landscape was increasingly denuded. Even today Ireland remains one of the least wooded countries in Europe. A measure of this is the shameful fact that Ireland must import ash

of trees brings us to one of the most basic mistakes made about tree folklore. Many scholars are uncomfortable with the idea of trees being regarded as sacred, and so try to find a practical explanation to refute such a notion. This approach is incorrect, since presenting practical reasons to oppose the sacred is a false dichotomy. Taking an example unrelated to trees, the Plain Indians of North America regard the buffalo as sacred, since it provides them with food from its meat, clothing and shelter from its hide, and various implements from its bones. It is seen as a gift from the Creator, imbued with supernatural powers, sacred because of its many important practical uses, not despite them. In the same way the oak was regarded as particularly favoured by the gods due to its many valuable attributes. The distinction between the sacred and the practical, therefore, is a very modern approach and it is inappropriate to project the distinction onto people who would not have understood it.

An example of such a modern misconception is found in the scholar A.T. Lucas' treatment of the sacred tree or *bile* in his article 'The Sacred Trees of Ireland'. After examining the evidence in detail, Lucas concedes that many church sites were located near trees or groves sacred to pagans, no doubt as part of a policy of Christianising them. However, he then goes to offer an 'alternative' explanation, namely that pre-Christian sites may have been sited close to tall trees because of the latter's worth as lightning conductors. It is true that the value of trees in this regard was probably known by ancient people but this misses the point. For a tree to attract lightning onto itself and away from buildings would be a sign of its protecting power, and is therefore further evidence of its sacred status. Indeed, the tendency of lightning to strike both the oak and ash was noted since ancient times and is an important element in the mythology surrounding both of them.

Many 'practical' motives do not stand up to analysis. For example, it is commonly stated that the association of yews with churchyards is due to the need for a supply of bows for archers. It is true that several English kings did decree that yews be widely planted for this purpose in medieval times,² but there is no evidence that the yews growing around churchyards were ever used for this purpose.

In fact there is ample evidence that many of the church yews are the oldest to be found anywhere, having survived unmolested. Similarly, it is claimed that yew was planted to prevent cattle from straying into church grounds, because the yew is poisonous to cattle. Yet, as every farmer knows, the only thing that will prevent livestock from straying is a fence. Such explanations are probably stock answers that entered folklore simply to explain an otherwise mysterious phenomenon.

What lies behind many of these theories, however, is the desire to deny or downplay any pre-Christian origin to tree folklore, particularly anything that smacks of druidism and paganism. This is by no means a new attitude. All across Europe as Christianity spread, the evidence points to folklore being adapted to a Christian context to enable it to survive. For example, trees that appeared to have a malevolent aspect from pre-Christian times invariably became linked to the story of the crucifixion in various ways. The aspen, hawthorn, yew and elder are each said to be the tree upon which Christ was crucified. The elder has the added shame of being the tree upon which Judas was said to have hanged himself. In the same way, any tree with thorns such as the blackthorn, hawthorn and buckthorn, could hardly avoid becoming the tree from which Christ's crown of thorns was made. However, these trees already had a hostile reputation before this legend attached itself. The bramble, although thorny, did not attract the same story because it had a benevolent image. Instead the bramble became the rod which Christ used to ride his donkey into Jerusalem, and to drive the moneylenders out of the temple.³

In the same way, sites of pre-Christian significance were taken over to make them acceptable to Christianity. In Ireland, Lucas lists among others, Armagh, Derry, Clonmacnoise and Kildare as being associated with sacred trees or groves from before the beginning of Christianisation. Usually the trees then became linked to the particular saint credited with founding the church site, such as Colmcille with Derry, or Brigid with Kildare. According to legend, the saints themselves often recognised the ancient sanctity of the groves and saw no contradiction between venerating them and being devout Christians. Colmcille for example, is famously said to have dreaded

Birch – Beith

Betula pendula - Silver birch

27 December -23 January

Betula pubescens-Downy birch

3rd month of Ogham Tree

1st consonant of the Ogham Alphabet

Calendar



The Birch, with its pale white bark and graceful sweeping habit, is renowned for its beauty. It is the first forest tree to colonise new ground, and its twiggy branches are ideal for use as a broom. These qualities have made it a symbol of birth and rebirth, youthfulness, love and purity.

FOLK BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS

Birch was widely associated with birth and young children.¹ Birch was put over cradles to protect babies in the Hebrides, and in Wales cradles themselves were often made of birch. In the Scottish Highlands a cross of birch twigs was used in Bride's Eve (31 January) ceremonies, which after Bride (or St Brigid) was invoked, was placed in the cradle to represent either a child or a *dealbh bríde* – 'the form of Bride'. Alternatively, a rod of birch or other suitable wood (such as willow or broom) was placed in the cradle beside a straw figure. This rod was known as Bride's wand or Bride's birch. Another variation was a bed of birch twigs made especially for St Brigid. In many parts of Europe birch saplings were placed in houses and stables to promote fruitfulness, and young people and cattle were struck with birch twigs. A Scots Gaelic rhyme states that to strike cows with birch twigs would lead to them calving.

Birch features strongly as a symbol of love in Celtic lore.² The warrior Diarmaid made a bed for himself and his lover Gráinne out of soft rushes and birch tops, once at Doire Dá Bhaoth and again at a place called simply Beith or Birch. In the tale "The wedding of Maine Morgor", green leaved birch branches and rushes were strewn on the floor to welcome Maine to his marriage to Ferb. In later Irish Gaelic poetry birch was often compared to a beautiful



young woman – *finnbhean na coille* or ‘the fair woman of the woods’. In Wales the lovers’ bower was traditionally beneath a birch tree and wreaths of birch were given as a love token. A birch twig given by a boy to a girl as a love token meant constancy. This association of birch with love was a constant in Welsh poetry. The fourteenth-century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym asks a nun with whom he is in love: ‘Is it possible, the girl that I love, that you do not desire birch, the strong growth of summer?’ Later he calls on her to come with him to the spreading birch.

Given its associations with youthfulness and love it is not surprising that birch features prominently in summer time festivities in many countries.³ Frazer, in his seminal book on folklore *The Golden Bough*, gives plenty of examples in his account of Maytime and St John’s Eve customs. In many countries like England, France and Germany, birch was one of the favourite trees to use as a maypole, or the maypole was itself bedecked with leafy birch boughs. In Sweden boys made the rounds of the village on May Eve singing songs, with each carrying a bunch of fresh birch twigs, and in parts of Germany a wooden frame covered in leafy birch twigs hid the ‘May King’ whose identity had to be guessed by the other villagers.

In Wales dancing and playing games around a birchen maypole was a feature of the festivities. In south Wales the Morris dancing around the maypole was known as *dawns y fedwen* – ‘the birch dance’. This could also be done on St John’s Eve. In Cheshire groups known as May Birchers went around people’s doors on May Eve leaving humorous messages. In Cheshire it was also the custom to fix a birch twig over a sweetheart’s door on May Day. In Scotland birch kindling was used to set alight a ritual fire at the rising of May’s first sun, and birch branches were hung over doors on Midsummer Eve. Strangely there seems to be no evidence of birch being used in similar customs in Ireland.

Birch is also a symbol of purity and protection against evil.⁴ Birch was used throughout Europe at the New Year or Winter Solstice to ‘beat the bounds’ of the parish to expel evil spirits, and birch garlands were generally known to keep away demons. For example, in Herefordshire, new birch twigs were put outside the house and outhouses, and a maypole of birch was erected to keep

away witches. Also, of course, birch rods were used to beat the evil out of miscreants. In Ireland the fairies were not supposed to like birch, and indeed the very first use of Ogham cautioned Lugh that his wife risked being taken by the fairies 'unless birch guard her'. In Scotland a catkin of birch twined into a cord and placed under milk would protect it from any harm. One Scottish folk story tells of how a man is saved from being taken away to hell by a phantom horseman called 'Headless Hugh' by hanging on to a birch sapling until the first cockcrow.



LEGENDS AND MYTHOLOGY

Perhaps because of birch's perceived purity and grace there is evidence of a link between birch and church bells. One story concerns St Molasius who left a bell in Rome. When Molasius returned to Ireland the bell was hanging outside his house on a birchen bough. Three times Molasius returned the bell to Rome and each time it returned to Ireland.⁵ In *The Life of St Patrick* the saint was said to have a handbell which, in a fit of anger, he threw under a bush. A birch tree subsequently grew up through its handle. On being rediscovered the bell was christened the Bethachán or Betullanum - 'the little birch of iron'. Suibhne Gelt or Mad Sweeney described the birch as: *A bheithi blaith bennachtach/a bhorrfaidaigh bhinn* or 'O birch, smooth and blessed/thou melodious, proud one'. Perhaps this belief in birch's purity explains the reference in the Welsh poem the '*Cad Godeu*' (the Battle of Godeu) to birch being late to battle because of, and not despite, its greatness.

But not only was birch a symbol of birth in this life, it was also a symbol of rebirth after death.⁶ The ritual for a departed person in Ireland involved a feast followed by funeral games and the carrying of the body to the grave in a covering of *strophais* or 'green bushy branches of birch'. A similar example was a Celtic chieftain found

buried at Hochdorf in Germany. The chieftain was dressed in robes of silk and was wearing a hat made of birch. This custom of birchen hats must have been known until recent times because it is mentioned in the Scottish poem 'The Wife of Usher's Well', where a mother's three sons return to her from the dead on the eve of Martinmass, each wearing a hat 'o the birk' which grew at the gates of paradise. The resurrecting abilities of birch may also account for the cryptic reference in the '*Cad Godeu*' which states: 'We have emanated from birches/He who disenchants will restore us'.

Birch's qualities of youthfulness and love suggest that it was associated with the Celtic god of love, Aongus. Aongus was the *mac óg* – 'the young son' – whose beauty was so great that four of his kisses were said to follow him around in the form of birds. Aongus also provided help to the lovers Diarmaid and Gráinne to escape the pursuing Fianna. Aongus' Nordic equivalent, the god Baldur, may have a connection with the rune letter called Berkana (or birch). A Norwegian poem about the rune states simply that Loki, the Norse god of mischief, was fortunate in his deceit. As Loki's most infamous act of deceit was to have Baldur killed with a spike of mistletoe, the poem may be a cryptic reference linking Baldur to the rune. In Ireland other youthful heroes have references to birch.⁷ In the story of Cúchulainn's boyhood deeds his hair is described as having 50 tresses between one ear and the other and being 'bright yellow like the top of a birch tree'. Again Lóeguire, one of the chief warriors of the Ulaid, is described as having 'short reddish hair that shone like the crown of a birch tree at the end of autumn'.



SEASONAL PLACING

Another link between the birch and Aongus is that both are associated with the sun. We have seen how birch featured in many summer time festivities and it is not hard to see how its shining white

bark would link it with the sun. Aongus also has a link with the sun as his chief residence was in Brú na Bóinne or Newgrange, famous for the winter solstice sun penetrating its inner chamber. Aongus was born at Newgrange, just as the new sun is 'reborn' there each winter solstice. It was considered in Ireland that Christ was born in midwinter.⁸ Is this through an association of Christ with Aongus? Birch is linked with the winter solstice in many places through the custom of the 'beating of the bounds', and Ireland may have been no different. The customs of Gaelic Scotland certainly link birch strongly with the festival of Brigid at the beginning of spring, so there can be little doubt in any case that birch was particularly associated with the beginning of the year in Gaelic culture. Birch is associated with the Ogham letter *Beith* which itself means birch. The birch is also the first tree to have colonised open ground, making it a suitable tree to begin the alphabet, with the added virtue of B being the first consonant of the Latin alphabet.



THE USES OF BIRCH

In early Irish law birch was classified as an *Aithig fedo* or Commoner of the Wood. Apart from making brooms, dye made from birch bark was used for tanning leather and for preserving fishermen's lines.

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