



HAWTHORN- GUARDIAN OF THE EARTH.

As you walk out onto the Downs taking in the spectacular views, breath-taking scenery and the beautiful array of colourful flowers you may come across a lone Hawthorn tree full of blossom, windswept and covered in lichen. The same tree in winter may be filled with red berries and delightful birds feeding upon them, its whitish grey bark standing out amongst the green undulating hills. Hidden amongst the blossom or red berries are long pointed thorns which the forager may miss and just like the stories be pricked by them.

John Keats reflects on the innocence of trees:

'Trees old and young sprouting a shady boon for simple sheep.'

Chaucer expounds on its beauty:

‘Among the many buds proclaiming May,
Decking the fields in holiday array,
Striving who shall surpass in bravery,
Mark the fair blooming of the Hawthorn tree
Who finely clothed in a robe of white,
Fills full the wanton eye with may’s delight.’

The naturalist may admire it as a valuable habitat supporting insects, birds and mammals with flower, fruit and shelter. The Bard may well acknowledge as Kipling once did its role as a witness through the ages:

‘Oak of the clay lived many a day if ever Aeneas was born,
Ash of the loam was a lady at home when Brut was an outlaw man,
Thorn of the Down saw New Troy Town before London was born,
Witness hereby the ancestry of Oak and Ash and Thorn.’

It is easy to see why magic surrounds this tree which has been with us across time as it merges innocence with harshness out on the Downs or Moors. A pricked finger serves as a warning, its blossom and berries help induce sleep whilst many a songbird takes you into another realm with the beauty of its song whilst perching on its branches.

In Ireland it is recognised as the Faerie tree harbouring the elementals and it is not hard to see why this is so. Stories abound of what may happen to you if you were to harm the tree. So firstly, let us reflect on the pragmatic roots of these tales not to remove the magic but to explore the themes that this magic indicates.

A lone tree in an otherwise flat landscape is surely home to the elementals as its role is paramount in creating further biodiversity out on the landscape. When names and relationships are given to landscape features, we create an intimacy with them and thus wish to protect them. Therefore, a warning about destroying special trees in the landscape is perfectly justified for they are of such value.

You may not be struck by lightning or whisked away to faerie lands when you destroy these precious trees but the impact you make on the landscape has far-reaching effects on the physical landscape and therefore the psyche of the inner landscape- the soul.

When country folk or indigenous people speak of Faerie land or elementals we are entering into more subtle unexplained realms.

When we see the increase in chronic problems and mental health issues who is to say how the destruction of nature has not only affected our planet but also our own inner health. These effects long understood in the metaphor of story are only just starting to be understood in the scientific world.

Protecting the Wilderness

'This sudden splash into pure wilderness- baptism in Nature's warm heart- how utterly happy it made us. Here without knowing it, we were still at school, every wild lesson a love lesson, not whipped but charmed into us.'

John Muir 1838- 1915

I would find it hard to not write about wilderness protection without mentioning John Muir. In his home town of Dunbar in Scotland he was almost forgotten until the 1960s when Californian bibliographers of John Muir, Bill and Maymie Kimes asked to visit Dunbar. They discovered he had largely been forgotten and therefore with the help of Frank Tindall the first County Planning Officer in Scotland this oversight was addressed. This resulted in plaques, exhibitions, books and photographs being exhibited and eventually a 1660-acre country park in Dunbar.

Although Muir spent most of his life in America exploring its wilderness his legacy lives on not only in the millions of acres, he helped protect in America but also in the John Muir Trust in Scotland which protects wilderness to this day.

The trust currently has 50,000 acres under its care including the exceptional site of Ben Nevis. John Muir set in motion the modern-day conservation movement and the importance of ecology and re-wilding before these terms were even known! His most important legacy is the protection of wild areas in the form of National Parks.

The Southdowns National Park

*'I've given my soul to the Southdown grass,
And sheep-bells tinkled where you pass.
Oh Firle an' Ditchling an' sails at sea,
I reckon you keep my soul for me!'*

Rudyard Kipling

I live and work in the Southdowns National Park which stretches 100 miles along the south coast in one of the busiest parts of the country. A quarter of the park is owned by private landowners and eighty percent of the park is farmland. The landscape has been shaped by farmers and foresters since ancient times and has had thriving communities since at least the time of the Romano- British (43AD). Originally it would have been a landscape of unending woodlands and now mainly consists of close-cropped turf and dry valleys. It is a highly altered landscape, a far cry from an untouched place of wilderness!

However, it is the most important chalk landscape in England, it supports many of Europe's chalk rivers which are of global importance and has the finest Yew woodland in all of Europe as well as beautiful chalk grasslands filled with orchids and flowers which are home to rare butterflies and moths.

Chalk geology which formed in tropical shallow seas in the cretaceous period between 75 and 90 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth is rare worldwide. The chalk is made of millions of tiny skeletons of plankton and the flint from the skeletons of sponges and algae (diatoms) that contain silicon. In fact, diatoms are the only organism in the world that have silicon in their cell walls.

The chalk acts like a giant sponge storing vast amounts of water by creating an aquifer which is a huge underground reservoir. Springs feed into rivers and streams which support brown trout and native crayfish. These rare specialist waters are characterised by water cress beds, water crowfoot and other unique flora. Specialist invertebrates are attracted to the chalky water and unusual gravels.

The South Downs has four main river valleys which are the Arun, Adur, Ouse and Cuckmere creating valuable habitats and beautiful landscapes, there are only 35 large chalk rivers in the whole of the UK and far less throughout Europe.

The wilder areas when they are left create rare groves of Yew and Juniper surrounded by species-rich chalk downland flowers which begs the question whether we should continue to farm so much of this exquisite National Park?

If we employ sensitive farming it can actually help rather than hinder the landscape creating more biodiversity. Beatrix Potter a fierce campaigner on local conservation issues worked closely with the National Trust in the Lake district acquiring land and farming sustainably.

The South Downs as already discussed is a rare geological chalk habitat with internationally rare chalk streams and rivers currently supporting a huge biodiverse flora on the close-cropped grass. The species-rich downs depend on sensitive farming. If we left the area to regenerate it would produce secondary woodland meaning rare flowers and invertebrates would become extinct.

If we converted the farming of the downs to arable crops as they had to in World War Two, this would also destroy the valuable habitats. In just 40 years from 1940 to 1980 ninety seven percent of lowland meadows were eradicated. Planting conifers for forestry also destroyed these precious downs.

Today, if you were to walk through these planted woodlands or arable farming areas out on the downs you would notice how they have destroyed biodiversity and how they make a clear statement of how land needs to be managed for conservation.

If we visit Old Winchester Hill which was inhabited as far back as the Bronze age and is still maintained by traditional sheep grazing, we find stunning views, hundreds of wildflower species and huge numbers of butterflies.

The Herdwick sheep which graze this area are the same species that Beatrix Potter used as a keen farmer and conservationist in the Lake district.

Hawthorn invites us to look at our actions and manage land sensitively looking to nature for the answers. Generic solutions of mass planting of trees for instance must be inhibited by carefully surveying nature's intentions in order to not cause more harm than good in the name of conservation.

The folklore of Hawthorn

Huath is Whitethorn. A meet of hounds is White thorn, it is formidable owing to its thorns.

Pack of wolves.

A difficult night, Hawthorn.

Whitening of face.

Book of Ballymote 1391

Hawthorn represents the inevitable back lash, both positive and negative of taking action in one's life. It is also the abode of the heart where we are nourished, protected and loved. You can take shelter in the hawthorn thicket to strengthen your heart and resolve.

'Earth has no sorrow that earth cannot heal.'

John Muir

The Hawthorn has two sides to it. On one hand it is a healer of the heart, a tree of protection and a supporter of life. It is also a guardian of sacred wells (to which cloth is tied to), a love charm and is said to help cattle thrive and a food source for weary travellers, which is why it is known as the bread and cheese tree. This is the flowering spring thorn dedicated to the maiden known as Olwen of the White Track.

On the other hand, it is a tree that protects and harbours the elementals taking people into Other-realms with a more a sinister side to its nature. This is the winter thorn standing in the thicket as a speared warrior dedicated to the powerful archetypal earth guardian such as Yspaddeden Pencawr which means giant hawthorn.

Huath, its Ogham name, means frightful or horrible, reminding us of the inevitable backlash our actions can bring.

It is said in the old stories that devastating satire was pronounced whilst holding the thorn of the tree. Maybe this is why there is a custom of adorning and worshipping Hawthorn known as 'bawming the thorn'.

The lessons therefore of Hawthorn are intrinsically linked with cause and effect, how our actions impact on the world around us and indeed in our own inner landscape. More recent traditions whether it be Christian or even in the more recent 'New Age' movement we find an overt focus on the light and the heavenly realms which is in danger of cutting us off from our roots.

If the fallen angels did come to the earth, it makes perfect sense that they would take the forms of reptiles and giants. For the reptiles are the most primitive forms of life on this earth and the giants in mythology are the raw elements of the earth- its guardians.

By reaching down into the depths to discover our primitive self, one can put down strong roots and build a foundation that is unshakable in difficult times, being aware of our innate connection to the earth, soil and rocks.

Let us now examine the stories connected to the Hawthorn. Its primitive male form is reflected in the giant Yspaddeden Pencawr mentioned above which means Giant Hawthorn featured in the old Welsh tale of Kilwich and Olwen.

Yspaddeden is the guardian of the land, a threshold keeper representing the power of nature and can only be appeased by questing with a brave and pure heart.

In the stories the questers have to confront these threshold keepers in order to gain knowledge and ultimately understand the workings of our inner worlds, the soul, in a deeper way. For these quests contained in the deep myths are not necessarily physical adventures but metaphors which invite us to understand the knowledge of the Self, maps of the inner worlds, keys to unlock our inner treasures.

The formidable guardians are there to protect this knowledge.

However, the mysteries are also conveyed through the light feminine touch, the blossoming thorn of spring represented by Olwen of the white track the daughter of Yspaddeden Pencawr.

This is also reflected in the qualities of the sturdy oak or the wispy willow which are of equal strength and importance. They represent the power to go forth and the power to yield. The neglect of either is to our inner peril as explored below in the tale of Merlin by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

When Merlin meets King Vortigern two dragons are awakened when the King questions Merlin why the foundations of his tower will not hold. In the story the red dragon represents the native Britons and the white dragon the invading Saxons however mythology runs far deeper than the surface tale and the fight of these dragons is representing a far deeper and older concept.

The colours of red and white represent the two aspects of male and female, the qualities of passion and purity and of life and death. As these concepts rise from our own deep foundations, they create an alchemy bringing balance into our lives knitted together by a central pole of darkness. If one aspect consumes the other or the darkness from the depths is denied it leads to an imbalance and an acting out of repressed parts of ourselves.

This is why it is so important to build a strong foundation instead of a rushing to the light which often leads to a spiritual bypass that denies our human fullness. Vortigern represents that imbalance as his foundations shatter in his need for power.

In Celtic lore as already explored the power rises and flows from the female so in more modern times not only have we ignored our deep roots but also the power rising through them by our destruction of the natural world and our oppression of the female qualities.

Many of the deep themes in folk tales explore the exploitation of more feminine qualities through our disrespect of the natural order of things.

This exploitation leads to more challenging and unsavoury energies rising within us that expose our own wounds. Questers need to reconcile these abhorrent acts of disregard.

Hawthorn calls us to look at our own deeds and how we exploit the earth and its inhabitants including ourselves. In Celtic lore the Kingship is literally a marriage to the land and if the King is wounded it is conceived as an outward sign reflecting the deep wounds of the land.

In early Irish lore Nuada of the Silver hand was considered incomplete when his hand was severed in the battle of Moytura so Lugh Lamfada stepped in to become King and face the Fomorian giants who were exploiting the land and its denizens.

This story continues in the plight of the Fisher King in the stories of the Grail. His wounds which can only be cured by the correct questions asked by a quester of a pure heart. This quest has become the pursuit of the Grail and reflects our own relationship with the land.

'The kingdom was laid waste, with no wells nor tree in leaf; The meadows and the flowers dried up, And the brooks diminished; Nor could be found from now on the court of the Rich Fisher which had been making the country resplendent with gold and silver, furs, gray fur, Rich brocaded silks and meat and clothing.'

**The Elucidation Poem 1200 (unknown author) sourced in
The Lost Book of the Grail by Caitlín & John Matthews with Gareth Knight**

Celtic spirituality therefore is about developing and exploring our own inner landscape which is our soul as well as linking the individual soul to something much bigger, the soul of the land and ultimately the universe.

Hawthorn is especially inviting us to heal our own wounds but then to carry our healing out into the land through our inner work as well as through our daily actions. It seems to me that sometimes more modern religious dispositions can focus so much on the individual salvation that the soul of our ancestors, the land and beyond is forgotten.

All healing is of the earth and for the earth for we are made of the same substance. An individual's premature flight to the heavenly realms bisects the very roots that sustain them. Reaching down to the earth with strong roots will give rise to a strength that can reach up to the heavens rooted in the earth.

ECOLOGY OF HAWTHORN.

Crataegus monogyna (common hawthorn) *Crataegus laevigata* (midland hawthorn)
Droiheann (old English) Hagaporn (Anglo-Saxon) Huath (ogham)

There are two types of Hawthorn known in this country. The first is common and widespread, the second (known as Midland or simply woodland Hawthorn) is restricted to the South and East and is an ancient woodland indicator, an uncommon sight. The latter has a bushy habit and shallowly lobed leaves, able to flower in the shade. This distinction was first made in France in 1790.

Hawthorn, especially since the 1500s, has been an important underwood species grown for fuel and its bark used for ink. Before barbed wire hawthorn was our main fencing, and early forestry writers recommend hawthorn as a nurse tree when sowing a new plantation.

However, the tree can colonise chalk downland too effectively becoming a permanent habitat thus threatening the delicate balance of our downs. This is known as being 'bushed over'.

The hawthorn is generally welcome, tolerating shade and grazing effectively (although new growth takes three weeks for the thorns to harden up and protect the plant from mammals like deer). The tree supports many insects, birds and mammals providing cover, nectar and fruit.

Uses of Hawthorn

Hawthorn wood is hard wearing ideal for knife/dagger handles making them lucky. Its root wood is also used to make beautiful small boxes and combs. It is also good firewood.

As a herb its berries, leaves and flowers are great for heart problems, especially high blood pressure, insomnia and helping one relax.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES

Hawthorn is a tree that are ancestors honoured and protected reminding us of the importance of our connection with Nature and the consequences of our actions.

Here are a few ideas to actively explore the themes related to Hawthorn :

Meditate on a favourite spot in nature, contemplate how you could be its guardian.

Could you offer your labour in conservation work? Donate to a charity which helps preserve it? Send it good thoughts, love and healing? Pick up litter or look out for any damages that spoil the landscape?

You could regularly visit the site in meditation and just breathe in its beauty and still the mind by focusing on the landscape and the good feelings it promotes. Once you feel connected to the site you could then send it positive healing and good thoughts.

Deepen your connection with the site by simply sitting, walking and observing its wildlife. You might like to do a diary with notes on your observations as well as your thoughts, stories, poems and feelings while you are there.

Hawthorn invites us to strengthen our resolve and to contemplate the actions we carry out.

You may wish to contemplate or meditate on:

What is the best way for me to respond to difficult situations?

Do I show kindness and understanding to people I dislike?

Do I allow people to treat me however they wish to?

Do I think about the consequences of my actions and words?

REFORGING A SPIRITUAL CONNECTION TO THE LAND.

‘There is a distant Isle,
around which sea-horses glisten:
A fair course against the white swelling surge.
Four pillars uphold it.

An ancient tree there is with blossoms
on which birds call the canonical Hours.
‘Tis in harmony it is their wont
To call together every Hour.

Splendours of every colour glisten
Throughout the gentle-voiced plains.
Joy is known, ranked around music,
In the southern white silver plain.

Unknown is wailing or treachery
In the familiar cultivated land,
There is nothing rough or harsh,
But sweet music striking on the ear.

A beauty of a wondrous land,
Whose aspects are lovely,
Whose view is a fair country,
Incomparable is its haze.

Then if silvery land is seen,
On which dragon stones and crystals drop,

The sea washes the wave against the land,
Hair of crystal drops from its mane.

There are thrice fifty isles in the ocean to the west of us;
Larger than Erin twice
Is each of them or thrice.

Begin a journey across the clear sea,
If perchance thou mayst reach the land of women.'

Voyage of Bran translated by Kuno Meyers, sourced in the Encyclopaedia of Celtic Myth and Legend
by John and Caitlin Matthews.

In the Irish tradition it is very clear on our relationship with the Otherworlds and the importance of
being connected to it.

When the Gaelic ancestors invaded it is said that Manannan mac Lir rose up and created a mist (feth-
fiadha), a cordon between the spiritual/faerie realms and the human world as well as gifting the Sidhe
(considered to be the Faerie folk) with immortality and perpetual feasts.

Although Mannannan's country is the Otherworld where we depart to when our soul leaves our
physical body there is also a spiritual world that intersects our own, that feeds and protects the spirit
of the Earth Mother and this breaking away from this realm is a key component in Celtic Lore.

The story of the invasions of the Milesians who are the mythical ancestors of the Gaels reminds us of
the importance of recognising this relationship with the unseen or the people of the hollow hills. This
was said of the Dagdha who is considered to be the chieftain of the Sidhe known as the Tuatha de in
the quote below:

'Great was his power even over the sons of Mil after they had seized the land. For the Tuatha de
blighted the grain and the milk of the sons of Mil until they made a treaty with the Dagdha. Thereafter
they preserved their grain and milk for them.'

This theme continues in the Fenian cycle when the grandson of the Dagdha, Aillen mac Midna erupts from the hollow hills of Shi Finnachy in revenge for the taking of his magical spear. Every year he burns Tara to the ground until Fionn mac Cumhaill faces him and restores peace to the land once more.

The stories of the accord or contract between Faerie and Human are plentiful both in the major mythologies and in the numerous folk tales.

The hawthorn seems to be the paramount tree of the faerie realms as discussed above and also reminds us to respect and honour this contract.

Writers such as Ella Young enable us to experience the power and energy of faerie through their words:

*'Lords of the Air, powerful sons of the goddess,
Are driving the tempest tonight:
Pitiless stinging rain
And blinding light.*

*Ah the wild proud laughter,
The wild proud throng!
They lean on the wind,
They cry to each other,
Exulting in power,
Brother with brother
Beautiful and ruthless.*

*They may pass over,
I may see the wonder,
The hurrying splendour again.
The sons of the Goddess,
Beautiful and ruthless,
Brightness that age cannot dim
Nor the grave-mould stain.'*

Excerpt Ella Youngs poem Folk of Dana

It tends to only be in more modern religions we paint this clear line between good and bad and wish to exalt spiritual beings to saints and angels rather than recognise the potent power of the guardians of the Earth.

The most effective way to honour the contract we have with the green world is to make a faerie alliance. One of the intrinsic principles of native cultures across the world is the merging and embodiment of a deep ancestor. In tribal communities they speak of the first Shaman or ancestor from which they take instruction from. This is reflected in the Celtic faerie lore which continued to be practiced especially in rural communities far beyond the oppression of the native traditions in the Western world.

The boundary between ancestor and faerie can become very blurred as deep ancestors may choose to also stay and be part of the earth, often merging with the faerie realm. It is here we find the coimimeadh or co-walker spoken of by Robert Kirk in his discoveries of Country lore and practice in the Highlands of Scotland.

In the terrible witch trails known as the burning times (1450 to 1750) when people were persecuted for believing in ancient traditions, we find accounts of witches who connect with familiar spirits. It seems these spirits are essential for those who are seers and/or healers. In later times to protect

themselves they call the spirit a Saint rather than a faerie or ancestor. Robert Kirk himself is shrouded in mystery and it is thought that he disappeared into the faerie realms rather than died.

Each person therefore has a double in the faerie realm, someone who is like them energetically and can guide, teach and aid them in healing. They are the ones who can help us see through the mist (feth- fiadha) or cordon that prevents us from seeing the other side of reality.

The late John O'Donohue Irish poet and scholar explains the necessity to lift this cordon:

'If we become addicted to the external, our interiority will haunt us. We will become hungry with a hunger no image, person or deed can still.'

Excerpt from Anam Cara by John O'Donohue

He continues:

'Fashioned from the earth we are souls in clay form. We need to remain in rhythm with our own clay voice and longing. Yet this voice is no longer audible in the modern world. We are not even aware of our loss, consequently, the pain of our spiritual exile is more intense in being largely unintelligible.'

Excerpt from Anam Cara by John O'Donohue

Deepening your connection to Hawthorn

Approach a hawthorn tree slowly and deliberately. Admire its form, bark, branches, leaves, flowers or fruit. Touch its bark and spend a little time with your eyes closed connecting to the tree. You may then wish to sit with the tree awhile, close your eyes, focus on your breathe and allow any impressions to come to you. If your mind wanders just bring it back to the breathe and the form of the tree.

Practical tasks

If you are able to find and identify a Hawthorn tree in May you could collect its flowers and young leaves to make a brew to relax and soothe you but this is not recommended if you have low blood pressure. In September you could do the same with the berries again unless you have low blood pressure. Simply steep fresh or dry flowers or berries in a hot cup of water for 7-8 minutes strain and dry.

Provided you honour and care for the tree and have permission you could cut a branch and make a simple wand from it. Simply peel off the bark and design it as you wish. If you are using sharp tools always take care!

You could meditate with the form, qualities and themes hawthorn presents over the next month and feel a long-lasting connection throughout your life. I recommend reading through the information regularly so you can absorb it over time and continue to visit the tree over the year if possible.

