



ROWAN- TREE OF WILD MAGIC

A bird flies over a steep mountainside and drops a Rowan seed that lands in a rock crevice which sprouts and gives life to a tree with creamy white clusters of flowers and bright red berries. Aptly named mountain ash the rowan is the tree that grows higher up a mountainside than any other native tree. It is not related to ash but shares the same feather-like leaves created by numerous leaflets on the same stalk.

Various insects feed on its flowers and song birds including thrushes, redwings and fieldfares flock to feast on its berries.

The Rowan truly is a delight of the eye and a tree worth exploring.

'Wild windswept places, keen with presence that disturbs man,
Keep Me Wild.

Rough sharp shards of rock which never belong, Keep Me Wild.

Weathered lichen-covered stunted thorny trees, Keep Me Wild.

Untouched, uninhabited wild places, Keep Me Wild.

Tame me not with the concrete maze of dullness,
May my wildness never be tamed on shorelines of sanity that repress a freedom of spirit.

May I live a wild untamed free life devoid of limitation.

Keep Me Wild.'

J.Huet 2018

The native Rowan is a tree of the wild uninhabited cold places of Britain. It grows on the windswept cliffs of the river Wye and Scotland producing scarlet red berries which birds gorge upon, and beautiful white flowers which insects feed from.

In old stories it is guarded by giants and offers a bridge to the land of promise and eternal youth to one who dares approach it. For the Rowan stands as a threshold guardian, afearred by those with a tainted heart, the paramount tree of the Druids, Witches and Magicians, a protector of the green world whose use can bring joy or sorrow depending on who implements its magic!

The Sorbus family to which rowan belongs is both fascinating and beautiful just like its stories of magic. You can see how it stands as a guardian, almost like a beacon of hope out on those unforgiving landscapes offering flower, fruit and shelter where there is little on offer. A very different species from the cultivated tree often seen in parks, roundabouts or roadsides.

Its family include Britain's rarest tree, the True Service Tree or Whitty Pear (*S.domestica*) and the Wild Service (*S.torminalis*) which has more maple-like leaves and small pear-like fruits. In addition to these species there up to 18 rare or endemic species of Whitebeam (*S.aria*) specific to a range of places from Devon to the Wye valley and the Isle of Arran to Wales and Ireland.

It seems to refuse to be pigeon-holed and brings to issue the importance of preserving true native species which we shall now explore.

Definition of a native tree

The true native trees of Britain are those which were left on the British Isles when they were severed from the main land in 6200BC and therefore not introduced by artificial means.

Palynology or pollen analysis is the main method that enables us to study which woods were present in history. Preserved pollen can be found in peat soils, lake muds and in acid soils on drier land. Scientists can date the pollen found and therefore tell us what trees and plants existed in different periods of time.

This system can be limited as it is difficult to tell certain species apart such as different Oaks, Poplars, Maples and Willows. Pollen analysis on drier land is notoriously difficult to interpret. Preserved remains of certain invertebrates associated with specific trees can also determine which species were present at certain periods in history.

Snail shells are especially good pointers as to whether woodland has been cleared as some species tolerate more open ground than others. This is due to moisture and how much certain species need to thrive.

Although it is considered 12 species of tree (as discussed under Birch) dominated our landscape, the species generally considered native amount to 35.

In addition to the total of 35 species are the rare or endemic (found only in UK) Whitebeams to which there are 18 that we currently know of.

To add to this list is the True Service Tree as mentioned earlier which is probably native but only occurring as an isolated colony on the cliffs of South Wales. There are also another 14 species of Willow which are considered to be shrubs.

Finally, there are trees which are still undecided which include the Elms which may have been introduced by the Romans and the Sycamore thought to have been introduced in the sixteenth century.

Official Native Tree List

- 1/ Alder- *Alnus glutinosa*
- 2/ Aspen- *Populus tremula*
- 3/ Black poplar-*Populus tremula*
- 4/ Beech- *Fagus sylvatica*
- 5/ Wild cherry- *Prunus avium*
- 6/ Bird cherry- *Prunus padus*
- 7/ Ash- *Fraxinus excelsior*
- 8/ Box- *Buxus sempervirens*
- 9/ Common oak- *Quercus robur*
- 10/ Sessile oak -*Q. petraea*
- 11/ Crab apple- *Malus domestica*
- 12/ Silver birch- *Betula pendula*
- 13/ Downy birch- *Betula pubescens*
- 14/ Field maple- *Acer campestre*
- 15/ Hawthorn- *Crateagus monogyna*
- 16/ Midland hawthorn- *C. laevigata*
- 17/ Rowan- *Sorbus aucuparia*
- 18/ Whitebeam- *Sorbus aria*

- 19/ Wild Service tree - *Sorbus torminalis*
- 20/ Scots Pine- *Pinus sylvestris*
- 21/ Small leaved lime- *Tilia platyphyllos*
- 22/ Large leaved lime- *Tilia cordata*
- 23/ Strawberry tree- *Arbutus unedo*
- 24/ Holly- *Ilex aquifolium*
- 25/ Hornbeam- *Carpinus betulus*
- 26/ Juniper- *Juniperus communis*
- 27/ Hazel- *Corylus avellana*
- 28/ Wych elm- *Ulmus glabra*
- 29/ Plymouth pear- *Pyrus cordata*
- 30/ Wild pear-*Pyrus pyraster*
- 31/ Yew- *Taxus baccata*
- 32/ Crack willow- *Salix fragilis*
- 33/ White willow- *Salix alba*
- 34/ Bay willow- *Salix pentandra*
- 35/ Goat willow- *Salix caprea*

An endemic species is a plant only native to a certain area. Outside this area they are usually a result of cultivation and are considered non-native unless they have spread naturally. Britain and Ireland have few endemic trees, most being micro-species of whitebeam which are in the *Sorbus* family, the exception is given below.

Plot's Elm – English Midlands only.

Whitebeams endemic to the British Isles:

Sorbus arranensis – Isle of Arran only.

Arran Service Tree – Isle of Arran only.

Sorbus pseudomeinichii - Isle of Arran only.

Lancaster Whitebeam - Lancaster only.

English Whitebeam - Great Britain and Ireland only.

Bristol Whitebeam - Avon Gorge only.

Devon Whitebeam - Devon, Somerset, Cornwall and Ireland only.

Ley's Whitebeam - Brecon Beacons only.

Lesser Whitebeam - Brecon Beacons only.

Sorbus leptophylla - endemic to UK

Sorbus wilmottiana - endemic to UK

Bloody Whitebeam - Exmoor only.

Sorbus subcuneata - coastal North Devon and Western Somerset only.

Cheddar Whitebeam - Cheddar Gorge only.

“No Parking” Whitebeam - North Devon only.

Llangollen Whitebeam - Llangollen only.

Irish Whitebeam - Ireland only.

Leigh Woods Whitebeam- Leigh Woods only

Additional notes on the Whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*)

As a young man walking the Downs I will never forget my first sight of the Whitebeam in full flower. It stood like a shining beacon of hope and its memory is forever etched in my mind. It announces its presence in the spring with effervescent silvery white leaves giving the tree a look of a candelabrum. It grows on dry chalky soils resisting drought effectively.

Traditionally the Whitebeam as well as the Hornbeam is used for the making of cogs from its very tough wood (beam meaning tree in Anglo-Saxon). Its over-ripe berries can make a syrup to flavour venison and its wood can also make bows.

'Beacon of hope, boundary marker,
Effervescent glow, the Whitebeam.

*Pure white flowers, soft hairy leaves,
Gentle presence, the Whitebeam.*

*Stands alone, cannot be pinned down,
Wild, untamed, the Whitebeam.*

*Limestone cliffs, babbling brooks,
Rolling landscape, the Whitebeam.*

*Hard timber, bow-wood,
Gentle warrior, the Whitebeam.'*

The importance of native trees

Native species are important firstly because they provide the most valuable wildlife habitats being ideal for the indigenous flora and fauna of Britain. They are often the most effective at coping with disease and climatic conditions in this country. Even though many imported diseases have reached our shores they have affected the native species the least, causing more problems with nursery grown or non -native species.

Finally, native trees are more varied in their genetic make-up, varying from region to region within the same species group. This means they can evolve to cope with new diseases unlike clonal or even cultivated species, which can be wiped out by an imported disease.

This was demonstrated by Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970s, which almost destroyed Britain's common Elm population. This disease was first conceived in 4000BC and may have helped early land clearances. The Wych Elm which was probably the main true native Elm of the time must have evolved naturally to overcome this.

This could be likened to mono-cultural crops by the fact that if we only grew iceberg lettuces and a disease specific to them wiped them out, we would no longer have lettuces! Diversity and genetic variability is therefore key to a species survival.

An Oak in Yorkshire, for instance, is different to an Oak in Hampshire and if this difference is no longer encouraged it creates a vulnerable situation for the future of our trees. Trees grown in a commercial nursery on a large scale lose those all important gene variations.

It is also important to note the genetics of regional trees means they come into leaf or flower at the best time for a given area to optimize their use as a means for food or shelter.

Trees and Global Warming

Britain's weather is always variable but the climate is the general trend that evolves from the weather.

For instance, Britain is half a degree warmer than it was in the 1960s.

Climate change can create the extremes in weather conditions which causes much destruction.

Our native trees are dealing with global warming and climate change more effectively than most other species.

Trees and Pollution

There is no evidence to suggest trees are affected by pollution. In the seventeenth century when industry and household fuel was especially dirty, causing much of St Paul's Cathedral to be dissolved for instance, the surrounding trees were left unscathed. Trees suffer much more from drought or fungal attack than they do from any form of pollution.

Folklore of Rowan/ Mountain Ash

'Delight of the eye is Mountain Ash, owing to the beauty of its berries.

Delight of the eye.

Strength or friend of cattle, the Elm.

Strength of cattle.'

Book of Ballymote 1391

Rowan is a natural progression from the study of Birch, both dominating trees in Scotland and both abundantly praised by the poets. The inclusion of Elm in the above kenning is explored over the page.

'Oisín, old and blind, and compelled to fast, asked a swine-herd, to guide him to a certain rowan tree, that he may feast on its berries.'

Irish texts society translation David Nutt 1908

A common theme explored in Celtic folklore is retiring to the woods at a certain stage in life. This seems to be a universal theme as Hindus recognise in their old age a period of time also to retire to the Forest which is representative of a time to contemplate and enjoy the fruits of the inner worlds now the body is ageing.

Maybe this is why in the stories Rowan berries bestow youth to old age. Old age can be celebrated as a re-birth into the realms of the inner landscape, the soul or Tir na nOg, the land of youth.

Traditionally this knowledge of the soul is guarded well and to continue with the story of Diarmaid and Grainne (mentioned in the Birch booklet) the tree of Dubhros that they encounter is guarded by Searbhan Lochlannach, a baleful giant who can only be killed by his own club!

This theme of protection continues in the story of the Faery Rowan- tree:

'No mortal may take a berry that grows on it... Fergus will have to guard this tree until he gets one who will guard it for him'

Interestingly enough it is a giant, Crom Duv, whom Fergus finds to continue the guardianship. He has a herd of goats and while guarding the tree obtains a herd of cattle. When Crom Duv takes his cattle to new pastures the faery Rowan is guarded by the Bull of the Mound and twenty- four fierce yellow cats!

These common themes link us back to the opening kennings of this section which may be the essence of the tree in Celtic folklore. The kennings connect us to its beauty, and the use of the word 'eye' probably is referring to an inner beauty or inner gaze. The kennings also connect us to the land through their mention of cattle.

Cattle were a status symbol, a currency as well as a symbol of the fecundity of the land. Beef would have been a luxurious meat for feasts as the herd were of such value both for milk and blood. Farming was a key to a more stable, richer way of life as each person knew their dependency upon it, creating a sacredness of farm animals.

It is the swineherd that guides the great hero Oisín in his old age, the bull that protects the tree and the cattle and pigs which are featured in so many Celtic stories.

Today domestic livestock still have a positive effect on the land maintaining old meadows, moors and downs as well as providing meat. This relationship between people, the land and animals was paramount to our ancestors.

This means that the Rowan in folklore has a key status in the health and well-being of the land. This is further enhanced in the ritual of Tarbh Feis, which is sometimes used to divine the future King. The seer/poet spends the night on a platform made of rowan wrapped in a bull skin.

Again, this connection of the Rowan and cattle.

The Elm is also mentioned in the kennings and it is a tree that would have been used for fodder, providing food for cattle. The Elm's presence in the landscape can be seen in paintings like the Hay Wain by Constable, or in Brighton, East Sussex where its majesty continues in the living landscape shining like a guardian of the countryside.

The third element coming into play is the King who played a key role as a caretaker of the ancient land, for a good reign would bring good health to crops and animals.

The giants guarding the tree represent the oldest inhabitants of the land, the raw energy of the green world and its protection above all else; a world where we protect the wealth of the land passionately, where our heroes look to the farmers, crops and animals with loyal passion; where our kings wish to adhere to Nature's laws above all else and show respect to the wise female elders; and where the sacred trees are honoured as guardians. This is the message of Rowan and is needed now more than ever!

Delightful and Sinister.

Rowan, as already discussed, is said to be a guardian of the land and therefore should be respected. The faery Rowan tree had to be protected, for Fergus had unwittingly dropped the berry that created it instead of eating it rather like birds do as they pass over. Natural trees belong in the landscape and most definitely should be protected. This is a common theme in Celtic stories but maybe has a practical concept of preserving that which is important.

Nature has two sides to it which balances the web of life. The contrast of prey and predator, new life and death etc... It is only a human concept that labels certain things as good or bad. The Rowan therefore has both a reputation of being both delightful and sinister.

Suibhne Geilt the legendary File (vision poet), speaks of Rowan with affection as does the leprachaun lubdhan also from Irish tales:

'O quicken, little berried one, delightful is thy bloom...'

Frenzy of Mad Sweeney 1200 Irish texts society.

'The graceful tree with the berries, the wizards' tree, the rowan burn...'

lubdhan the leprachaun

This tree is a delight to those who have a love of nature and magic, and its wood and berries are considered to be protective and lucky charms. However, we do hear of witches fearing the rowan and of malevolent spells but is this a later idea of labelling magic and wise old women as sinister?

In older stories however we also have these references such as when the great Ultonian hero Cu Chulainn meets his death:

Then he saw three crones blind of the left eye, before him on the road.

They had cooked on spits of Rowan tree a dog with poisons and spells.

In the tales of Fionn McCuail he also faces phantoms who cook on spits of Rowan. However, the concept of ugly crones in Celtic stories can be seen as the power of older age and the wisdom that is not apparent in the modern world of more shallow glamour.

This theme continues in both old tales and in more modern children's stories as heroes, princes and kings are tested by more sinister looking women who when revealing their true heart radiate an inner beauty undimmed by time.

This takes us back again to the responsibilities of those in power acknowledging the more feminine and wiser aspects of nature and what happens when she is not honoured.

It is the same crones that bring doom to Cu Chulainn known as the Morrigan that prophesies:

'I shall not see a world that will be dear to me.

Summer without flowers,

Kine will be without milk,

Women without modesty,

Men without valour,

Captures without a king,

Woods without mast,

Sea without produce.'

Irish Texts Society

The Uses of Rowan

Rowan wood has a yellow tinge and is strong and flexible.

Traditionally it was used to make tool handles and for smaller carved items. It is possible that like whitebeam it was also used to make bows.

Medicinally rowan bark is used for treating diarrhoea and its berries for sore throats.

I would like to share this enchanting poem which depicts the tree as both a guardian and a friend:

*'She lived where the mountains go down to the sea, and river and tide confer,
Golden Rowan of Menolwan was the name they gave to her.*

*She had the soul no circumstance Can hurry or defer,
Golden Rowan of Menolwan How time stood still for her!*

*Her play mates for their lovers grew, But the shy wanderer,
Golden Rowan of Menolwan Knew love was not for her.*

*Hers was the love of wilding things; To hear a squirrel chirr,
In the golden rowan of Menolwan Was joy enough for her.*

*She sleeps on the hill with the lonely sun, Where in the days that were,
The golden rowan of Menolwan So often over shadowed her.*

*The scarlet fruit will come to fill, The scarlet spray to stir,
The golden rowan of Menolwan, And wake no dream for her.*

*Only the wind is over her grave For Mourner and comforter,
And 'Golden rowan of Menolwan' Is all we know of her. '*

Bliss Carman (1861-1929)

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR THE ROWAN

The key theme for rowan is a connection to our wild nature as well as to our inner worlds. The native rowan grows in wild windswept places and acts as a bridge to Tir na nOg, the land of youth which is the Celtic Otherlands.

You can work with this tree to find that inner place of wildness as well as stillness which is not bound by conditioning or pain.

Here are a few questions to actively explore the themes related to the Rowan:

What is your relationship with the wild landscape?

Do you feel free to express who you truly are?

Do you enforce conditions on yourself to stop you being wild and free?

What does being wild mean to you?

Can you allow space in your life to connect with your inner self through meditation?

Are you able to create opportunity to dance, play a drum, chant or recite poetry?

Deepening your connection to Rowan

Find a wild space to connect with the energy of Rowan. If your wild space is a city park or a more built-up area connect to the wildness that still exists there. If your rowan tree is planted or part of a more urban landscape you can still connect with its wild aspect.

At the time I write this in autumn it has crimson-red berries and in the spring, it has white flowers.

Use the meditation videos on the website to connect with the rowan through the mountain mother and to visit Tir na nOg- the Celtic Otherlands.