



**Blackthorn- Tree of Mysteries
Straif (Ogham) Prunus spinosa (Latin)**

*Hedge of a stream is Blackthorn
Careful effort, strongest of red, Sloe which gives strong red dye on metal.
An arrows mist, smoking drifting from the fire.
Increasing of secrets.*

Book of Ballymote 1391

Blackthorn has hard wood, lethal thorns and black bark, it is the counterpart to hawthorn and invites us to enter the mysteries. We have already explored the importance of the dark depths of nature, the longing and sadness of ancient people and are responsibility to be in harmony with the earth and now we will now enter the mysteries further.

The mysteries we speak of with Blackthorn is the consideration of our soul journey, the contemplation of death. This does not need to be a depressing or even terrible thing as we have already explored in the Apple essay but more an acceptance of our place in the web of life.

In the Celtic traditions there does not seem to be a creation myth as such, which is interesting as many of the key principles seem to have been preserved through extant texts written down by medieval monks who wished to preserve the tradition. Although many of the texts do have Christian interpolations to align them more with Christian values, most scholars agree the essence of the tradition has still been kept.

What is important to remember is the monks may well have been keepers of the old traditions before being monks, for although we have the terrible crimes of the burning times we must also remember early Celtic Christianity was very different from some of the more modern interpretations of the Christian faith.

Even in this century we have the exceptional works of John O'Donohue who was a Christian priest that infused his belief with the Celtic tradition.

So, let us ponder the words of John O'Donohue as he writes on the Irish tradition concerning death.

'One of the lovely things about the Irish tradition is its great hospitality to death. In Ireland there was a tradition known as caoineadh. These were people, women mainly, who came in and keened the deceased. The caoineadh helped people to let the emotion of loneliness and grief flow in a natural way.'

extract John O'Donohue from Anam Cara- spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world.

In order to explore the blackthorn and its relationship to death we need to first understand the Celtic Tree Ogham which is a sacred language pre-dating Gaelic and possibly the origin of what is known as Goidelic. A language which is coaxed into the dark speech of our ancient poets who preserved knowledge through story, metaphor and poetry. A language which takes us to the root of ancient tree folklore. It consists of twenty letters, five of the which are not what the modern reader would recognise as trees. They are the climbers of Vine and Ivy and the shrubs of Broom, Gorse and Heather.

The Ogham system is another example of the continued use of the Celtic tradition working its way into Christianity.

There are two stories of origin for this system. In the older stories it is Oghma Grianainech who is said to have created it. Oghma was considered to be a champion of the Tuatha de Dannann who are known as the Sidhe in Irish tradition which we shall return to later in the essay.

In the Christian interpretation the Ogham was created from the best of all languages after language was corrupted in punishment for the building of the tower of Babel. Seventy-two scholars were sent throughout the world to learn all the languages and it was Fenius Farsaidh who selected the best from them.

The blackthorn in the Ogham system is represented by two letters, the first letter is S which represents Saille (willow) and the second is D or T which are interchangeable to represent oak or holly.

Blackthorn in the legends therefore is used to represent the warrior's death which is the meaning of S for Saille (willow) in service to others. Ultimately this sacrifice is for the King or Queen of the land which is represented by the letters D or T for oak or holly. The warrior seemed to welcome death as a transition to another world rather than as an ending. We will explore this further under the Elder tree.

Our ancestors would not have been so protected from death, they would have seen it all around them and their lives were much shorter. More modern ecologists such as Jane Goodall and earlier explorers such as John Muir speak of death being all around them when they lived in the wilderness for long periods of time.

Seeing death and allowing it to be part of our lives I believe means we can then be better prepared for it when the inevitable happens. It seems our ancestors had such a believe in the soul and a continued life after death that fear of it was less existent.

To explore the theme of the warrior and their relationship with death we must first understand the Sidhe mentioned earlier and in order to do that we need to enter the Celtic twilight which is a state not entered by reading facts but by meditation and invocation.

The Celtic twilight

Although many of the truths we explore in spiritual traditions are universal, each tradition has its own distinct feel. The Celtic twilight is the distinct quality in the heart of the Celtic tradition, a place between opposites, the thread that unites all life.

Twilight is betwixt night and day and in Celtic times was the new day beginning to unfold as the days started at night. This place of the imagination enables us to explore all aspects of ourselves without judgement, a place as the famous mystic Rumi said 'beyond right or wrong doing'. As we enter into the timeless place of our imagination, we connect with our soul awareness and the concepts of male and female, dark and light, passion and purity as all aspects of ourselves and not limited by gender or conditioning.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a 'Celtic Twilight' emerged; learned people felt inspired to research and revive our Celtic traditions. By this time the traditions of the land had suffered immensely, but thankfully in the Celtic lands of Scotland, Wales and Ireland these traditions had not been completely obliterated and old texts have survived that have insights into our traditional oral past and much more importantly people especially in remote areas who still practiced and connected to the real and living tradition.

Great writers and poets such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory helped bring about a revival of Irish literature and poetry and the Scots Alexander Carmichael and Professor Magnus Maclean helped renew interest in Gaelic literature and Celtic studies. Lady Charlotte Guest put the ancient stories of Wales (the Mabinogion) into a modern print format for the first time in 1841 and Kuno Meyers a German Scholar brought much ancient Irish poetry back into the light.

For me the Celtic twilight is as real as ever and is not a neo-pagan tradition but a 'living tradition' brought alive by practitioners working directly with these traditions that are still alive in all of nature. More modern writers continue this work such as Caitlin and John Matthews who offer that same living tradition through their incredible works.

_Here is an invocation of the Dagdha who is considered to not only be a father or chieftain of the Sidhe but also the spirit of the land and trees.

Chorus:

Take me to the Old Ones, Take me to the Hidden Ones,
Take me to the Sidhe, Guardians of the Land.

Good God Daghdha, Father of Many, Parentage of the Sidhe, All-knowing Noble,
Spirit of the Green Wood shelter us; Power of the soft brown earth comfort us.
May the strength rising from the roots of the trees transport us to the bright realms
acting as pillars of hope.

May the roots of trees ground us in one reality,
taking us into the depths of our being, the womb of the earth.
Inspiring us to be caretakers of all Nature.

Good God Daghdha, May we be as steady as a tree,
serving all beings and taken only that which we need to sustain our lives.

Good God Daghdha, Envelop us in the knowledge of the Green Wood.
Teach us to have a compassionate heart and truly love all souls equally as one.
Great God Daghdha teach us to be light of spirit, tender of heart, steadfast in being.
May the wild wood of all souls continue to blossom for all eternity.

Who are the Sidhe ?

Some of you may be aware of the Tuatha de Dannann, the ancient tribe of Ireland. They are a magical tribe of beings who once lived on the surface of the land and are said to have retreated into the hollow hills when the Milesians invaded who represent the Celtic people. This lore is a fundamental to the Celtic tradition.

This theme continues in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth as the invaders from Troy invade Britain from the shores of Totnes and fight the giants which represent the older races of the indigenous guardians. These same giants appear in Irish lore known as the Fomorians.

Their retreat into the hollow hills and the untrammelled, wild landscape of rivers, woods and lakes has captured the hearts of all Celtic tales from ancient Irish and Welsh tales through to the development of the Arthurian and Grail tales. They are the ancient guardians of the land and in order to live in harmony with the land we are called to be in harmony with them.

In the stories we recognise that some of the Sidhe appear as dark, even terrifying and wish to enchant or trick us, we are warned of their animosity towards the human race.

*'Dalua then must sure have blown a sudden magic air,
Or with mystic dew sealed my eyes from seeing fair,
For the great Lords of Shadow who tread the deeps of night,
Are no frail puny folk who move in dread of mortal sight. '*

Fiona Macleod

These are the tales where people are taken into the Otherworld by the faerie folk or undergo tests of valour and honour in order to pass into their realms. Throughout the tales they test us and sometimes mock us so why would we want to make the acquaintance?

On the other hand, they can be seen as wise and beautiful:

How beautiful they are, the lordly ones who dwell in the hills, in the hollow hills.
They have faces like flowers and their breath is a wind that blows amid grasses filled
with white clover.

Their limbs are more white than shafts of moonshine, They are more fleet than the
March wind, they laugh and are glad and are terrible when their lances shake and glitter
every green reed quivers.

How beautiful they are, how beautiful, the lordly ones in the hollow hills.

Fiona Macleod

This lore is exploring our relationship with creation and ultimately our contract with all of nature. The blackthorn stands as a stark reminder of the cruelty of nature with black bark and lethal thorns but also she delights nature with early blossom on still cold days.

Qualities of Blackthorn

Let us come back to the meaning of blackthorn when it is associated with the Warrior.

In the same way the Warrior makes the ultimate sacrifice to preserve the kingdom which is inseparable from the land we must also ask ourselves what are we prepared to sacrifice to restore that harmony. Can we expect the land to just accept our ways and embrace us when we decide to connect with it?

Sometimes when we first meditate in deep woods, wild places or even a patch of countryside in the middle of the city, we may feel anger or disappointment, we may too be tested as to whether we have pure intentions. The Celtic tradition comes with responsibility and it is not about creating a personal nirvana for ourselves but more about playing our part in bringing back harmony to all of nature. The guardians of the land may appear in terrible forms or if we are not genuine even mock us. However, if we do have pure intentions, the blessings we receive will provide more support than we could ever imagine.

Warriors were also said to have trained with thorns. The hedge of blackthorn (mentioned above in the kennings) represents the barrier of raised spears in the shield war.

However, it was not just the men who fought in that shield war but the women too and often the warrior's training was conducted by famous women warriors such as Scathach, Aoife and Bodhnall.

Thorn trees take centre stage in stories such as sleeping beauty and in a Scottish tale a thicket is created to protect King Eirinn's daughter from her father when eloping with her lover. The thicket therefore is a form of protection and in other stories an escape from giants.

This role as a dense thicket and its connection to giants gives Blackthorn a deep connection with the guardians of nature as already explored. It is the thicket that is the nesting place for birds, a home for the insects and a valuable habitat for the essential building blocks of nature.

Hawthorn and Blackthorn are seen as sisters often called May and Black having similar roles with their thorns and delicate blossom. In late March to early April when blackthorn blossoms it is often known as the blackthorn hatch, a mild period before the onset of colder and wetter weather. Blackthorn has also been known as the mother of the woods representing fertility and therefore used as part of wassailing celebrations for apple trees.

In the New Year it has been burnt as a fire charm as its ash is believed to create a fertile field.

Medicinally Blackthorn berries have been used for 'fluxes in the belly' as they are a strong purgative and therefore should be used with extreme caution. The berries can be safely used for the making of sloe gin and added to drinks and jam as 'bitters'. The juice of the berry can also be used as a marking ink.

Blackthorn wood is dark and hard and can be used for the teeth of rakes, fighting and walking sticks (Merlin's staff is said to have been blackthorn) and clubs, cudgels or the Shillelagh the name the Irish give to the traditional cudgel wielded by giants.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR BLACKTHORN

Blackthorn invites us into the mysteries and to explore the dark areas of our psyche without judgement. One of its main lessons is to accept fate just as it is and not to fight against the inevitable.

The themes to explore include:

Am I able to except fate and let go of control?

Am I able to contemplate my own soul's journey and be comfortable with death?

Am I able to make sacrifices in order to live in harmony with the land and its denizens?

Deepening your connection to Blackthorn

The blackthorn thicket can be dark and impenetrable and full of lethal thorns. As you approach the tree or thicket really begin to take in its form with all your senses. Sit near or if possible under the tree and tune into its presence. You may feel its anger at the treatment of the land or its coldness towards humans or you may be pleasantly surprised and feel its protective embrace. Blackthorn can be like a strong mother fiercely protecting those she cares for but also capable of being tender and giving. Blackthorn may reflect this aspect of yourself giving you a strength and a barrier of thorns that will not allow others to harm you. The tenderness may come from the songbirds singing in the thicket or tree, the insects feeding on the flower and fruit or the joy of a living being out on a windswept field or in a deep wood. Clear your mind and embrace all thoughts and impressions that come to you.

Practical tasks

Although the berries can be used for gin and sometimes jellies, I would advise caution when working with blackthorn. The best way to connect to the tree is if you ask its permission and can do it without causing damage, is to cut a small wand from its boughs to carve and meditate with. The qualities of the dark protective mother can be imbibed through this connection, however do not forget to listen to what it is you need to give back in return, for its a tree that calls you to take responsibility and make sacrifices to help create harmony in the world just like a good mother always will do.

This month allow yourself to listen to the voice of the earth whether kind or angry and carry out an action that will directly help the land you live on.

Next month we will continue with the Elder and she will push us even more to look at our relationship with ourselves and all of nature whilst offering the ultimate healing gifts.