



WILLOW- TREE OF POETS.

*'The woodland willow stands, a lonely bush of nebulous silver,
There the spring Goddess cowers in faint attire of frightened fire. '*

Robert Bridges 1844-1930

Whilst the woodland is still stark, the wind cold and the ground hard we witness a tree with golden yellow blossom as if it is reminding us that the sun is returning. The Sallow or Pussy Willow produces silver catkins first and then the catkins of the male tree laden with pollen turns gold, thus providing a valuable source of early pollen for the bees.

*'How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour
And harvest honey all the day from every open flower,
How skilfully she builds the cells, how neat she spreads the wax,
And labours hard to store it well with the sweet food that she makes. '*

Isaac Watts (1674- 1748)

The rest of the year the woodland Willow is probably unnoticed by most merging back into the dense woodland as just another small tree with green leaves.

The other two tree species of Willow (the Crack and the White Willow) are huge forest trees with branches growing low and high creating a dominating bush-like structure of abundant leaves in the summer. The Crack Willow is our most common large willow growing over many a waterway with shiny green leaves on top and silvery beneath. The White Willow can grow up to 80ft covered with silvery leaves on both sides creating an impressive sight in low-lying districts.

As with the Alder in the previous profile Willow is intrinsically linked with the waterways, invoking a feminine presence which breaks up the skyline and encourages wildlife where the land meets the water. The beauty of our rivers, brooks and streams is a joy to behold and one can see why our ancestors gave names to the rivers linking them to the Goddess.

The terrible pollution of our waterways is in direct contradiction to the tradition and importance of their function.

Willow is the female guardian of the waterways, the 'Lady', whereas the Alder explored in the previous booklet is the male guardian, the 'Lord'. Giving names to the landscape and its features creates a more intimate and familiar relationship with it.

Our relationships are key to our psychological make-up and when we are in good relationship with someone or something we wish to respect it in every possible way.

Our ancestors relationship with rivers acknowledged their life- giving properties to the otherwise barren land. This quality is reflected in the nourishing aspects of the mother archetype thus giving rise to the rivers being named as goddesses.

This is a universal concept as seen in the river Ganges in India, named after the great Mother Ganga. In Europe the Goddess takes form as Danu in the river Danube, Sequana of the river Seine, Nimue and Diana in the lakes of Brittany, in Britain as Sabrina of the Severn, Vaga of the Wye, Sulis of the springs

of Bath and in Ireland as Boann of the river Boyne.

In Celtic lore the Goddess is seen as three in the Matronae and as nine in the form of the gifting mothers or muses. Ultimately the source of inspiration in Celtic lore is seen as flowing from the cauldron of life which over-pours into the waterways, offering inspiration to all who drink from its source.

Geoffrey of Monmouth (author of *The History of the Kings of Britain* 1136AD) recognises this concept in his writings as he notes the importance of the three main trading rivers of Britain in the Thames, the Severn and the Humber. These could be seen as the arms of the Matronae in Britain, the Triple Goddess giving life, abundance and fruition to the beauty of the landscape. Geoffrey of Monmouth (*Vita Merlini* 1150AD) explores this further with the nine sisters which are prevalent throughout Celtic lore.

Their function is to bestow our souls with the gifts we can offer to the web of life and guide us to fulfil our destiny.

Exploring woodland clearance.

The wild woods and the water ways are the victims of human progress and the Willow and Alder remind us to be aware of their care as we lose these valuable native trees and habitats.

The destruction of the wild wood started very early on in history and by the time the Romans began their invasions in 50BC, Britain was already a land of mixed fields and coppices...

To what extent was Britain wooded?

'They shut the road through the woods
Seventy years ago.
Weather and rain have undone it again,
And now you would never know
There was once a road through the woods
Before they planted the trees.
It is underneath the coppice and heath,
And the thin anemones.
Only the keeper sees
That, where the ring-dove broods,
And the badgers roll at ease,
There was once a road through the woods.'

Rudyard Kipling

Woodlands today are less managed and wilder than they have ever been at least since Anglo-Saxon times (800AD). How so much of our countryside was cleared and managed in early times is a puzzle to many woodland historians and ecologists.

The model we generally believe to be an accurate portrayal of original woodland coverage was first put forward and made popular by Sir Arthur Tansley in the 1950s. It is based on the fact that if land is neglected for any length of time (usually around 30- 40 years) in this country it will turn back to woodland if below 2000 feet above sea level. This means that Britain was once around 90 % woodland and the natural climatic species of Britain in most areas is trees. However, when we look at evidence of woodland coverage throughout history, we discover that Britain was only half wooded even in 500BC. This can mean one of two things:

1 – Woodland was cleared at an alarming rate by early man.

2 – Something prevented woodland from ever dominating the landscape.

The latter reason was especially explored in 2000AD by Franciscus Vera, a Dutch ecologist who concluded that the natural succession of Britain was prevented from reaching a climax species that dominated its landscape. This was said to be due to browsing herbivores eating the tree saplings creating a savannah type landscape where large trees only grew in isolated patches.

A savannah-type landscape in Britain would support many native shrubs like hawthorn and blackthorn as well as flowering plants like buttercups and devils bit scabious and in the wetter areas cuckoo flower and ragged robin. However, evidence suggests Britain did not support large herds of grazing animals as may have been the case in mainland Europe.

Palynology also does not indicate high enough quantities of shrubs and non-woodland flowering plants to enable this to be true. Wood pasture management systems prove that would be needed at least one large herbivore to every 1 1/4 acres of land just to stop the trees returning, let alone plants from flowering.

However the above conclusion means that the former point may be more accurate, thus creating a mystery to solve. How did early man manage to clear woodland so effectively just using primitive hand tools?

The earliest evidence of land clearance is in areas known as the planned countryside. For instance the Yorkshire Wolds, an area of chalk down-land was cleared in 7000BC by Mesolithic man. They created heaths and pasture for wild beasts that they consumed for food. These areas were maintained by the continued burning of the heaths to stop the trees returning.

Later in the Neolithic period (5000BC) woodland was cleared permanently for agricultural use in areas such as East Anglia, Somerset and the Lake district. These areas had shallow, more easily cultivated soils, and were originally open-prairie farming field systems changed into small hedged fields by the enclosure acts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The first woodlands cleared therefore were on the light sandy soils of East Anglia, thin chalky soils of the Yorkshire Wolds, peaty soils of the Somerset levels and calcareous soils of the Lake District, which were more easily ploughed than heavy clay or stony soils. The heavy soils of Suffolk and Essex for instance were not used until 43AD when the demand for food was increasing all the time.

In the Iron age it wasn't so much the iron axe that enabled the cultivation of more land but more the iron plough which was able to cope with the heavier stony soils.

The reason for this inexorable taming of the countryside as discussed under the previous booklet titled 'Alder' was to feed people and land hunger seemed to be a problem as early as the Bronze age leading into the Iron age. In the Roman occupation of Britain already two-thirds of our woodlands were gone and it is estimated that woodland cover was as little as 9-15% of land cover by Norman times. Between 1066 and 1349 as much as 27 acres per day must have been cleared. This process stopped for nearly 500 years from 1349 due to the Black Death. But how was this process possible using such simple hand tools?

Early woodsmen were extremely skilled and effective with hand axes and probably could coppice woodlands as effectively then as we do today with a modern-day chainsaw but to actually clear huge trees of magnificent proportions is a different process entirely. The burning of more open woodlands of Pine and Birch amongst the moors and dales is effective in clearing woodland.

However, the structure and ecology of lowland deciduous woods is designed to last. Most woodland trees slowly decay, being instantly replaced by saplings or suckers. The bombing of woodland in the World Wars proved their ability to resist fire and as already explored you would need many grazing animals to stop their return. It is likely climate change and early Elm disease in the Neolithic period helped the process but still it all remains a mystery.

Folklore of the Willow

As the white Willow stands an indomitable presence shining with silver leaves she embodies a feminine strength flowing with the waters of life. As she produces her golden catkins and attracts bees and supports more invertebrates than any other tree except Oak its not hard to see why our ancestors would have looked to her as both noble and a muse for the poets:

*'The noble willow, burn not, a tree sacred to the poets.
Within his bloom bees are a- sucking all love his little cage.'*

Iubdan the Leprachaun (Ancient Irish Tales)

Willow takes us into the creative world of the poet who in ancient times was the remembrancer of the tribe who travelled into the inner landscape.

Poetry of the Soul.

Deep, dark, depths of life,
Treasures await, crystal bright.

*Into the cave only you can know,
Explore the poetry of your soul.*

*Flickering flames, dazzling lights,
Infinite insights take flight.*

*Within your temple, only you can see,
Every sense enlivened comfort thee.*

*Explore the landscape of your soul,
And discover a beauty only you can know.*

J. Huet 2018

Poetry is one of the key components of the British traditions as it can be used to explore the depths of the soul, giving voice to original thought and thus awakening a deeper understanding of life.

This importance of the soul was reflected in the poets of the nineteenth century such as Keats and Claire who had tragic, painful lives which perhaps enabled them to explore such depth through their poetry.

‘Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul....’

John Keats 1818

John Keats tragically short life was filled with loss and his choice to dedicate his life to poetry over a medical career was brave indeed, especially as he failed to experience his success and recognition in his own lifetime. However maybe the joy of following his true path transcended many of his woes as

he states in his poem Sleep and Poetry:

‘O for ten years that i may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed’

In the Celtic tradition we discover the poet was exalted above any other profession and even Chiefs, Kings and Queens bowed to their supremacy - why?

The value of the soul was paramount and poetry was considered to be its expression taking us to the fruits of immortality in the Otherworlds.

It may seem strange in the modern world to give such importance to the arts but as the poet Leo Kermorvan reminds us in the poem *The Return of Taliesin* written in the 19th Century - 'the soul remainth ever the same' and we are indeed fundamentally the same as we have always been; and feeling conveyed through art still moves us deeply. It is probably only in the last century that material and worldly gain has taken precedence over concerns of the soul and spirit.

The Kennings of the Willow tree take us into the realms of death linking willow to bees, grief and loss:

Willow, the colour of the lifeless one
owing to the resemblance of its colour to a dead person.
Hue of the lifeless.
Beginning of loss, willow.
Strength of bees.

Book of Ballymote 1391

Bees represented a connection to the Other-worlds and also were considered an inspiration to community life as they work together as a whole to benefit the swarm.

The Queen bee represented the Great goddess in Classical traditions, often referred to as 'birds of the muses' bestowing eloquence and honeyed words. Bees as knowers of ancient lore are connected to the underworld. The female power and poetry they represent are not just about beauty and love but also take us deeper into the mysteries.

In Celtic lore the old women of wisdom, as already explored in the Rowan booklet, may be gnarled and twisted just like a Willow but command respect and bestow wisdom. In fact it is the old crones like the

Cailleach and the Morrighawn who are the guardians of wisdom and the mysteries of death.

The early poet's initiation into their arts was through a deep connection to darkness and the deep wisdom of the earth.

Willow invites us to acknowledge our grief and suffering and be aware of the destruction we unleash onto the green world. Owning up to the part we play in harming nature need not be a depressing or guilty process but an empowering, compassionate and ultimately freeing process.

The poet's art was learned in the dark side of the year once the harvest was gathered in. The arduous training was conducted in dark cells sometimes likened to imprisonment. This enabled the poet to awaken the inner light which is spoken about in Shamanic traditions all across the world.

It is only by entering the darkness, feeling grief and truly acknowledging the darker aspects of ourselves that we can discover the strength of bees which is the entrance to the 'Delightful land of honey and wine.'

This land is the perfection of your own inner light within you that the Irish call the Glefiosa, the bright knowledge, the dawning of which can be helped through Willow and a tranquil mind.

*May the mind be still like a tranquil pool,
May only gentle ripples disturb its serenity which are the appropriate responses to actions.
Both received and undertaken with every thought and deed consciously acknowledged.*

*May the mind be still, allowing one spark to ignite a fire within,
that grows with passion and awakens belief in oneself.*

May the mind be still, and allow your life to be tranquil.

J.Huet 2017

Celtic traditions encouraged Willow trees to be planted at burial sites so that the spirit of the corpse can rise into the sapling above, Willow probably being a preferred choice as it is said to ease the passage of the soul at death, a psychopomp- a guide for the soul to find their place after death. To wear Willow is to grieve openly and the tree I suspect encourages us to be open to our deeper emotions.

Witches' brooms may be bound with Willow to dedicate the broom to the goddess and the moon. Its leaves, bark and wood may be burnt as incense for similar reasons.

Celtic lore speaks of Willow connected to in-between states and otherworld experiences. Her connection with water (as already discussed) enhances that as water represents that more fluid otherworldly state, the cycle of life and death and our returning to the source. Gypsies cut Willow on Green George day (23rd April) to propitiate water spirits, bless the crops, herds, and pregnant women, and to heal the young and old.

The Sumerian goddess Belili rules over the moon, love and the underworld and therefore is connected to Willow as are other powerful goddess archetypes such as Hecate and Cerridwen. Women were warriors and leaders in Celtic Society and often trained the young men in battle. The old adage of the Willow bending in the wind rather than resisting it comes to mind as we recognise the power of the feminine source.

Ecology of Willow

Our largest Willows are the white and crack Willow that can reach 80ft in height. The Willow species, rather like the Whitebeams, consists of an array of specialist species some of which only grow in Scotland or in Northern areas of England.

The four main tree species are:

- 1/ Crack Willow (*S.fragilis*)
- 2/ White Willow (*S.alba*)
- 3/ Bay Willow (*S.pentandra*)
- 4/ Almond Willow (*S.triandra*)

The fourteen small tree/shrub species are:

- 1/ Sallow, Goat Willow (*S.caprea*)
- 2/ Grey Willow (*S.cinerea*)
- 3/ Purple Willow (*S.purpurea*)
- 4/ Common Osier (*S.viminalis*)
- 5/ Eared Willow (*S.aurita*)
- 6/ Tea-leaved Willow (*S.phylicifolia*)
- 7/ Dark-leaved Willow (*S.myrsinifolia*)
- 8/ Creeping Willow (*S.repens*)
- 9/ Downy Willow (*S.lapponum*)
- 10/ Woolly Willow (*S.lanata*)
- 11/ Whortle-leaved Willow (*S.myrsinites*)
- 12/ Mountain Willow (*S.arbuscula*)
- 13/ Net-leaved Willow (*S.reticulata*)
- 14/ Dwarf Willow (*S.herbacea*)

Willow wood is light and tough and has been used for rafters and floors and a certain white Willow species for cricket bats. The stems/branches are strong and very flexible making them ideal for weaving baskets, hats and making coracles.

Willow as already mentioned provides early nectar for many species and is actually in the top three trees which support the most invertebrates, the other two being Oak and Birch. Many species of caterpillars and insects will feed upon its leaves which will in turn attract birds and provide nesting sites.

Herbal uses of Willow

Willow is a great medicinal healer containing Salicylic acid, the main ingredient in aspirin. Its leaves and especially its bark can be used to ease rheumatism, headaches and other inflammations in the body.

In our next profile we will explore the folklore and mysteries of the Ash tree, as well as the development of traditional woodsmanship and its benefits.

Summaries and resources for the Willow Tree

The alder tree in the last essay called us to be guardians of the earth through the protection wielded by the power of the Morrighnia and Bran, the guardians of the land.

The willow invites us to connect with our ancestry, with the house of the dead. It is only in more modern times we see this as a 'spooky' or 'sinister' proposition. Connecting with our ancestry is a key element of tradition throughout the world.

Caesar wrote that the 'Dis pater', the Lord of the Underworld and the concept of the 'first ancestor' from whom we all descend from was the key belief of the ancient Celts.

In Irish mythology it is Donn the Elder brother of Amergin who is a strong candidate for the first ancestor of the Gaels, this means he is the Underworld Lord who has opened the door for souls to rest in the heart of the world. As with many examples of Underworld Lords such as Odin and Gwyn ap Nudd he leads the wild hunt riding out from Cnoc firinne on his white steed blowing his horn. He gathers the clouds to make rain, and thunder and lightning accompany him. He rides to Dursey Island-passing through Beara territory to the house of the dead and takes the souls through Bull rock to the Western Islands of the setting sun.

He is courteous and kind to those who he protects but quick to anger if shown disrespect. Donn is from the race of the Milesians who in the Irish Mythology are the first of the Gaels to inhabit Ireland and therefore are the ancestors from which all Gaels descend.

The seven Milesian Queens are I feel of equal importance for they are the human sovereignty of the land and as such should be honoured. They are Tea, Fial, Fas, Liben, Odba, Scota and Scene.

*The Seven Queens guard the way, grey, dark and mossy
To the dark tower, the feasting hall, beneath the hill of ancestors.
For truth not told, offerings not given, the way is barred.
A single rider, a white horse and a horn gathers the dead.
An entrance to Manannan's Country of smooth dark rock.
Seven Queens guard the way to Tech Donn.
Tea, Fial, Fas, Liben, Odba, Scota and Scene,
Seven Queens guard the way of Donn Dumhach.*

J.Huet Imbolc 2022

Ancestral work is close to home and as of such can be painful as our ancestors are not necessarily kind or good people. Healing the hurt of our ancestry is important work but we can also reach beyond our near ancestors to the deep ancestors that ultimately, we all descend from. In this tradition we can reach back to the Milesians but equally we can use this lore to reach back to the deep ancestors of all traditions.

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

Do you know your family tree?

Are you able to honour or connect with your near ancestors?

Do you have an affinity with a spiritual lineage or ancestry?

Would you like to connect with ancestors in your past that share your ideals or aspirations?

Would you like to connect to the deep ancestry of our shared past?

Deepening your connection to Willow

To deepen your connection with willow you may wish to visit her along a river or stream where she connects us to the qualities that nurture and awaken the green world. Imagine a green light or primordial goddess entering your body through your feet and then travelling up your body enlivening and energising you.