



YEW- TREE OF ANCESTORS

As we enter the domain of yew, we may be afeared by its indomitable presence that fills the woodland landscape as its bulbous trunk grows grotesquely into strange sinister shapes and its fallen boughs take root and rise into a dense canopy that kills all beneath it:

Poetry of Yew

*Yew; a church, a cathedral of the ancient world,
Outliving stone and tomb that have been positioned well.*

*The red barren earth beneath illuminates her imposing grandeur,
She makes no apology for the life destroyed beneath her.*

*And yet that destruction is hard won,
As she inexorably grows, conscious of every inch.*

*Alchemy of Shaman, reborn from bird,
The seed took flight before being buried in the earth.*

*Encapsulated in earth's womb before being reborn,
She knows of vulnerability, the terror of being small.*

*Many of our lifetimes have passed, to reach this pinnacle,
Her great age of fruition, indestructible.*

*A physical form of the eternal soul, the Shaman, the Bard,
Would do to know her well.*

*Judge not her lessons, cold and irresponsible,
For she dwells in eternity and cares not for the vulnerable.*

*Goddess of Power, Goddess of Age,
Goddess of Strength, Respect her Ways.*

J.Huet 2017

**Yew *Taxus baccata* (Latin) Idhadh (Ogham/Gaelic)
Idho, Yew.**

*Oldest of woods, service tree, Yew.
Strength or colour of a sick man, people or an age.
Abuse of an ancestor or pleasing consent.*

Book of Ballymote 1391

The yew and the oak probably feature more in British traditions than any other tree. Yew speaks of ancestors, death and re-birth and when you see a mature tree with its dark foliage sweeping down to the ground and taking root you can see why. Yew is Britain's oldest living tree, pre-dating many of the churches to whose grounds it belongs. The Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is said to be around 5000 years old.

However, yew is notoriously difficult to age. At one time it was thought that the church was built and a yew tree planted but carbon dating has proven the tree is often far older than the church and said to have sheltered Christian missionaries long before the church was built.

Evidence suggests that these sites were already used by the older faiths of Britain and so it is likely that to integrate a new religion they would have continued to use the same sacred site.

Ring-counting as well as carbon dating can be inaccurate for the yew as it will remain dormant for hundreds of years!

The Yew has an amazing ability to survive, often growing profusely on chalk down-lands resisting shade and pollution effectively. There is a folk tale of yew which emphasises its perfect ability to withstand disaster.

The tree is sad that its foliage is dark and uninteresting so the fairies wanting to please the tree turn its foliage to gold which the thieves then steal. They then turn its foliage to crystal and the foliage shatters in a storm; and then into large broad leaves which are eaten by goats. The yew concludes its foliage is perfect to withstand the test of time and celebrates its dark appearance.

The theme of death is often associated with yew which contains deadly poisons especially in its wilting foliage and seeds. Modern research has also uncovered the chemical taxol in yew to help treat cancer. Yew as a herb must be used with caution as it can be deadly poisonous and therefore is only used as a tincture to help symptoms of cystitis, headaches, afflictions of the heart and problems with the kidneys, gout and rheumatism. **Please do not ever try to make a tincture yourself.**

It is advised to not cut yew, however practical application seems to always win through, and this lore has not stopped yew being cut for its main use as a bow. Maybe using a tree with a deadly reputation as a weapon fits in with ancient lore as it certainly brought much success to those who wielded it. Its wood is perfect for making long bows although in Britain it is often too knotty and brittle for this purpose.

The perfect bow when made from coniferous type trees, such as yew should be slow growing. This means the most prized yew wood is that which comes from high altitudes growing in exposed windswept places.

The oldest weapon found is a crude spear of yew from the Stone Age. Yew's wood is also used for furniture, paneling, fence posts, ship masts and wine barrels.

The early ballads of Robin Hood claim his bow is made of Spanish yew. The poem below by Michael Drayton describes Robin Hood's company well and just like the early Celtic tales gives high regard to Marion as sovereignty of the woods.

*"An hundred valiant men had this brave Robin Hood,
Still ready at his call, that bowmen were right good,
All clad in Lincoln green, with caps of red and blue,
His fellow's winded horn not one of them but knew,
All made of **Spanish yew**, their bows were wondrous strong;
They not an arrow drew, but was a cloth-yard long.
But to his mistress dear, his loved Marian,
Was ever constant known, which wheresoe'er she came,
Was sovereign of the woods; chief lady of the game:
Her clothes tuck'd to the knee, and dainty braided hair,
With bow and quiver arm'd, she wander'd here and there,
Amongst the forests wild; Diana never knew
Such pleasures, nor such harts as Mariana slew."*

Michael Drayton 1563 - 1631

Yew can be used to symbolise resurrection when used on Palm Sunday and at Easter. Yew shoots have been put into the shrouds of the dead to protect and restrain the spirits. This connection with

spirits and death is a constant theme especially as the tree is often seen growing by the graves of our departed loved ones, easing their passage and acting as a psychopomp to enable their souls to unite with the deep ancestors.

Old yew trees in church yards and its traditions of resurrection and rebirth coupled with the old lore mentioning the tree as 'oldest of woods' and 'abuse of an ancestor or pleasing consent' put this tree in the highest regard, and no wonder in the stories yew is always regarded with caution. It is said to be unlucky to cut the tree and that the wood should only be taken from fallen trees.

Further stories explore the idea of yew being an entrance to the other worlds. Thomas of Erceldoune known as Thomas the Rhymer from the thirteenth century, is said to still await his re-birth in an old Scottish yew grove after visiting the faerie realms.

*'True Thomas lay on a grassy bank,
And he beheld a lady gay,
A lady that was brisk and bold,
Come riding oer the fernie brae.
Her skirt was of the grass-green silk,
Her mantel of the velvet fine,
And on every lock of her horse's mane
Hung fifty silver bells and nine.
True Thomas he took off his hat,
And bowed him low down till his knee:
'All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!
For your like on earth I never did see.'
'O no, O no, True Thomas,' she says,
'That name does not belong to me;
I am but the queen of fair Elfland,
And I'm come here for to visit thee.'*

As well as Thomas, other Shaman-type poets like Sweeney Gilt and Merlin are said to take shelter and acquire all their knowledge in the yew grove. Fionn MacCumhaill and his loyal warriors in Celtic lore

are said to have met their end in a yew grove on Samhain eve.

This places yew in the Celtic tradition as one of the most sacred trees, the tree of eternity transcending time and able to give the gift of invisibility to one who uses it. A tree that can take us into the depths of the faerie or the Sidhe realms and therefore connect us to the very essence of the land.

In Irish mythology this connection is further enhanced as in the lore of the five sacred trees, yew is one of the trees that are used to separate Ireland into its five provinces. The King summons the oldest and wisest man in Ireland to his court to share out the land fairly and it is the great bard already mentioned in the hazel essay Fionntan MacBochna who is summoned, who lived from the beginning of the first invasion of Ireland up until the sixth century taking the forms of the salmon, eagle and stag, witnessing the stories of the land through the oldest animals.

He informs the King that he would meditate on the issue and as he does so Trefuilngid Tre-eochair appears to him who is said to control the rising and the setting of the sun. He gives Fionntan the seeds of the five sacred trees mentioned in the poem below.

Eo Mugna, great was the fair tree, High its top above the rest,

Thirty cubits it was no trifle,

That was the measure of its girth.

Three hundred cubits was the height of the blameless tree. Its shadow sheltered a thousand.

In secrecy it remained in the north and east

Until the time of Conn Ceadchathach.

A hundred score of warriors, no empty tale, Along with ten hundred and forty

Would that tree shelter, it was a fierce struggle, Until it was overthrown by the poets.

How fell the bough of Daithi?

It spent the strength of many a gentle hireling, An Ash, the tree of nimble hosts,

Its top bore no lasting yield.

The Ash of Tortiu, take count thereof, The Ash of populous Uisneach.

Their boughs fell, it was not amiss, In the time of Ead slane.

*The ash of Tortiu, take count thereof,
The ash of populous Uisneach.
Their boughs fell, it was amiss, it was not amiss,
In the time of the Sons of Ead Slane.*

*The Yew of Mugna, it was a hallowed treasure,
Nine hundred bushels was its bountiful yield,
It fell in Dairbre sothward,
Across Magh Ailbe of the cruel combats.*

*The Bole of Ross, a comely yew,
With abundance of broad timber,
The tree without hollow or flaw,
The stately bole, how did it fall?*

Here we have the five trees in order of the poem the first is Eo mugna which is a gigantic oak whose roots extend into the otherworld supporting Connla's well which is a place of entry into the deep mysteries. The tree stands guard over the mysteries.

The ash of Daithi and Tortiu are next in the poem and then the final two are both yews. The key trees therefore that stand as guardians for the provinces of Ireland are oak, ash and yew.

SUMMARIES AND RESOURCES FOR YEW

As we now enter the mysteries of the yew we bring together our learning of tree lore which is not about facts or references to trees in stories, but a deep acknowledgement of the ancient principles

conveyed through the symbology of the archetypal tree.

The trees uphold a deep earth connection which can take you into other realms of understanding as you sip from the primal wells of knowledge. This understanding is never limited by concepts attached to individual trees but pulses in the heart of creation where all concepts join as one.

Meditate with the yew and connect to all the trees studied so far.

DEEPENING YOUR CONNECTION TO YEW

As we bring together our knowledge of the trees and we connect with the yew let us bring together other aspects of the tree lore we have been studying.

As you sit under the yew tree imagine a well, this is the pool of Connla which lies in the heart of the Celtic soul surrounded by nine hazel trees laden with bushels of nuts. A rowan tree stretches up before it, with a canopy full of white flowers and bright red berries bound together by the darkness of the moon-lit sky. Oak roots stretch around the well securing and binding its foundations with the power of the Green world and apples shimmer in the distance beckoning us to brighter realms and far-off Isles that reach beyond to shoreless seas and vast expanses.

In the centre of the well is a giant yew tree growing downwards into the well. Climb down the yew to enter into your soul landscape. Allow any thoughts, impressions or visions to come to you. You may wish to follow a path into the green wood and here you can visit any of the trees you have studied so far.

Create a memory grove, visualise or feel the presence of each tree in turn and add memories of its qualities that you can use to remember when you return. It could be an image that embodies the tree's

qualities, you may recite a poem at each tree or visit an animal or plant at each tree. Give value to your imagination and learn the lore of the green wood within you just as the Bards would have. Remember it is what the tree means to you personally that is most important. Enjoy, play and feel the presence of the trees through your imagination.

PRACTICAL TASKS

I would advise much caution when working with the yew as it is highly poisonous. Meditate first and then you may find some dead wood under the tree's boughs. You can take this home once you have asked permission and you may wish to leave it just as it is or sand it to a finer finish. This will be your talisman and your connection to the world of trees and your deep ancestors.

Always wash your hands after touching or working with yew.

This month meditate as much as you can on what you have learnt so far and allow the mysteries of yew to permeate your life.

We have now studied the key Celtic trees so we shall continue with two additional native trees we have not studied yet which do not feature so much in Celtic lore but are still revered in the hearts of people, they are the lime and beech.