

Forest Perspectives

Some modern-day “Sacred Trees” in Ireland

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Trees are the longest living species on Earth and, consequently, have been seen by most cultures and societies as a link between the past, present and future, of being worthy of reverence and many have been held as sacred. Following my review of *Our Future in Nature: Trees, Spirituality and Ecology. Well-being and Peace* (elsewhere in this issue of *Irish Forestry*), I was intrigued by the apparent contradiction that, despite our largely secular society, we continue to hold a strong attachment to the many sacred trees scattered throughout the country. In Ireland, sacred trees were traditionally associated with a holy well. It is likely that this association arose when Christianity arrived in Ireland. Prior to that, the trees may have been part of pagan worship groves.

Here are some examples of modern-day “sacred trees” which remain in popular use today. The first is the Rag Tree at Clonfert Cathedral, Co. Galway. There was a well close by which was dedicated to St. Brendan. Though it was probably a native species such as ash or oak initially, a horse chestnut is used as a rag tree today and it is festooned with votive offerings (Figure 1). In the past this tree was reputed to possess a cure for warts, but nowadays it is used to cure sick children – which may help to explain the array of items there now.

The second example is the Money Tree at Clonenagh, Mountrath, Co. Laois (Figure 2). There was a holy well nearby which was dedicated to St. Fintan. However, many years ago, the farmer began preventing people from visiting St. Fintan’s Well which was on his land, whereupon the well miraculously transformed into this tree. It became known as The Money Tree in later times because people would hammer coins into its bark having invoked St. Fintan’s help in their troubles. Felled by a storm in 1994, it is small wonder that Laois County Council shied away from planting a replacement tree there during National Tree Week the following year! In hindsight, that was just as well because the tree suckered immediately and today, 25 years later, it is in rude good health and is back in business accepting coins.

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Figure 1: *The Rag Tree, Clonfert Cathedral, Co. Galway.*



Figure 2: *The Money Tree, Clonenagh, Mountrath, Co. Laois.*

Surely the oddest of all these trees is the Dodie Tree at Donadea Forest Park, Co. Kildare (Figure 3). Though established only twenty years ago, a tradition has developed of parents hanging their children's soothers/dummies/pacifiers on the tree in the belief that it would help wean the children off them. Today, the tree is so laden with soothers, bottles, etc. that the artefacts have now spread to a nearby tree. This is undoubtedly a sacred tree for the modern age! Initial attempts to remove the artefacts



Figure 3: *The Dodie Tree, Donadea Forest Park, Co. Kildare.*

proved fruitless as they were returned the following week. It just proves that you'll never beat a tradition... not even a recent one!

Finally, to UCD with its Resilience Tree which was transplanted close to the lake at the centre of the campus in 2019 (Figure 4). The plaque beside the tree explains: "This tree is a visual representation of positive mental health, hope and resilience. Trees are resilient to changing seasons and changing times, just as we are more resilient than



Figure 4: *The Resilience Tree, UCD, Dublin 4.*

we know, in challenging or in difficult times, we find strength and capacity within.”

The Resilience Tree seeks to promote a dialogue about the positive things we do to look after our mental wellbeing. The coloured ribbons represent individual expressions of self-care, things we do to maintain perspective, express emotions, and to stay connected. There is a box of coloured ribbons nearby and one is asked to take one and share something you do to “mind your mental health” by writing it on the ribbon and tying it to the tree. It then advises, “Be kind to yourself”. What more can be said?

While it is true to say that, in recent years, institutional religion has fallen out of favour as a mediating resource in the daily contract between us and the world we live in, trees, however, appear to renew our sense of wonder at the on-going interaction between the spirit, the earthly-pagan, and the pragmatic worlds. One has to wonder if there is a constant shadow of humanity that persists or whether the social norms and vulnerabilities that such trees serve are significantly different today.