

# Trees, Woods and Literature—10

*Grandma walked a lot. Round the garden, and usually all round the Nut wood, but if she was going to the farther away woods, Parc na Carragh, the Isabella or towards Inchy, she'd go in the donkey trap. Tommy was a dear kind donkey, but not very interested in what went on, and he wandered along as slowly as he could. When we went with Grandma we could make him trot now and again with the use of a great deal of screaming "go on outa that", and the use of ash sticks, which raised a great deal of dust from his fur, but which he treated with a certain amount of disdain. Grandma never used a stick on him. She had a spud, which she carried everywhere with her, partly as a walking stick, but she loved to attack thistles and nettles growing near her beloved young trees, and she used this spud to prod Tommy whenever he stopped in his tracks; now and again he must have felt it, as Grandma always got to where she wanted in the wood, and of course once he was headed for home, there was no need for a goad.*

\* \* \* \*

*Grandma adored the woods, and taught us such a lot about them. Every year she planted a lot of young saplings, and endlessly walked round looking at her young plantations, tearing ivy away from the older ones, and seeing that the wire netting was safely around the smaller ones to keep the rabbits away. The weather had to be very bad indeed to keep her from visiting at least the nearest seedlings. She always wore galoshes over her shoes, cotton gardening gloves over her mittens, and armed with her spud went forth daily to wage war against thistle, ivy, nettle, convolvulus and rabbits. I think one of the few times I saw her really furiously angry was when she found that several of her beautiful young larches had been cut down and taken away.*

*"If only they'd asked me", she said when she got home, "I'd have given them some timber. I've never denied anyone, as they well know, and I could have taken one here and one there and thinned them out at the same time. But to go and cut ten trees from the same spot is sheer vandalism, and I hope they will be found and punished." I had never heard her speak like this of anyone before—not even when the Black and Tans killed Malachi Quinn's young wife—shooting at everything as they drove along the road, for fear of being ambushed they said.*

From *Me and Nu: Childhood at Coole* by Anne Gregory.  
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"Grandma" is Lady Gregory, co-founder and director of the Abbey Theatre, folklorist, playwright and encourager of artists,

and Coole is the Gregory estate in Co. Galway, now part of Gort state forest. She occupied the house and estate from the death of her husband in 1892 until her death in 1932, with the intention of saving them for her grandchildren, but financial difficulties forced their sale and on 20th October 1927 "Mr. Reed, of the Land Commission, and Mr. Donovan, of the Forestry Department, came and formally took over Coole, took possession . . . Giving it into the hands of the Forestry people makes the maintenance and improvement of the woods secure." (*Lady Gregory's Journals* 1916-1930. Ed. Lennox Robinson, 1946.) She remained as a tenant for the rest of her life but after her death the house was sold for demolition.

The best known aspect of Coole is the "autograph tree" in the garden on which eminent established men of letters and artists were invited to carve their initials, successor to a series of fans which Lady Gregory had formerly used as autograph books. Growth and subsequent unsolicited carvings have not added to the value of the tree as a literary relic, and it is arguable that it would be better now to fix what remains rather than allow the living tree to continue its natural efforts to obliterate its wounds.

The old names of the woods, "The Seven Woods of Coole" were kept in use by the forest workers, at least until relatively recently.

In case any degree of callousness in the face of local suffering might be inferred from the last sentence of the passage from *Me and Nu*, it is only fair to add that Lady Gregory's great anger at the activities in general of the Black and Tans, and in particular at the shooting of Eileen Quinn are well documented in her *Journals*, cited above.