

Trees, Woods and Literature – 23

Describing Giant Trees

Today, a tree is likely to be described by a Latin name and a series of numbers representing its grid reference, girth, height and crown spread. Although useful, this pared-down approach gives little impression of the true magnificence of a mature tree. Perhaps we could interest more people in trees by using some of the almost mythical language of earlier writers. After reading the following descriptions, who wouldn't want to visit these three giants, climb inside the Doniry Ash, sail a boat made from the Portmore Oak, or assemble 72 horses under Ballygamboon's apple tree.

It would be unpardonable not to mention the Doniry ash, on the road between Loughrea and Portumna. When I saw it in 1803, it was in a state of great decay. It was so large, that I was informed a weaver worked at his loom in it, and his family lived with him in it. It was surrounded with iron hoops, which I hope have preserved it. When Mr Hardy saw it some years since, it measured at four feet from the ground, 42 feet in circumference; at six feet high, 33 feet round. About 25 years before Mr Hardy measured it, a school had been kept in it.

An ash tree in Co. Galway, described by Hely Dutton (1824; pp. 442-443)

The Great Oak of Portmore was blown down about 1760. To the first branch from the ground was 25 feet, and the circumference measured 14 yards! A single branch was sold for £9; the stem for £97; and the principal part of the remainder, bought for £30, built a lighter¹ of 40 tons' burthen. Many articles of furniture were made of it, and are held still in great estimation.

¹ a type of barge

An oak at Portmore, Co. Antrim, described by Hume (1853; pp. 251)

Here is an orchard in which are single apple trees, that have produced 3 hogsheads of cyder each; the diameter of the opposite boughs of one tree was measured, the extremities of which were 50 feet asunder, which, if considered as the diameter of a circle, the superficial content will be 1964 square feet, or 218 square yards, which is the quantity of ground that this tree covers; and if we suppose that a horse when standing, takes up the space of ground equal to 3 square yards, then there may stand no less than 72 horses under the drip of this apple tree.

An apple tree at Ballygamboon, Co. Kerry, described by Seward (1795)

Selection and note by Ben Simon,
Forest of Belfast Urban Forestry Initiative,
4-10 Linenhall Street, Belfast

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