

## Forest perspectives

We have often heard that Ireland has lost its tree culture due to the low forest cover from the early Middle Ages. That this is not fully the case is shown in the paper by Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, this issue's article in the Forest perspectives series. His paper *Trees in Irish lore* collates the earliest recorded references to trees and forests, right down to the present day. There are many fascinating glimpses of the interaction of man and forest, long before the time when Ireland became a grazier society and was virtually denuded of its tree cover.

Dr Ó hÓgáin's paper was first delivered as the Society of Irish Foresters' Augustine Henry Lecture at the RDS in 2002. It is published here in full for the first time (Ed.)

## Trees in Irish lore

Dáithí Ó hÓgáin<sup>1</sup>

*Chuir Éire trí munga agus trí maola dhi* ('Ireland was wooded three times over and denuded three times over') - old saying...

In a very interesting study, entitled *Proto-Indo-European Trees*, Professor Paul Friedrich uses the various names for trees in this great family of languages in an attempt to reconstruct the history of trees in the various parts of Europe.<sup>2</sup> In his conclusion, he lists from the linguistic evidence several tree-types. Eleven of these gave food to animals and men – apple-tree, cherry, beech, oak, hornbeam, hazel, walnut, chestnut, elm, ash, and linden. Nine trees served for tools and weapons – oak, ash, yew, elm, cedar, willow, pine, hazel, and aspen. Five figured prominently in religion – birch, linden, beech, yew, and oak. Friedrich mentions in particular how the oak had widespread symbolic linkage with four strong cultural symbols – namely fire, lightning, the sky, and the high god.

When we talk about the actual role of trees in a particular culture, of course, it is necessary to examine the practical role which trees have played and to decipher the progress of imagery associated with them. We will therefore find, again and again, the ideas that trees are impressive through their height, that they dominate the landscape, that they provide food and shelter, and that they are an example of rejuvenation as they restore themselves seasonally.

### Natural giants

Perhaps most tellingly in the eyes of prescientific man, they ascend towards the heavens and in that are rivalled only by mountains. Particular mountains were considered to have the sky rest on them, preventing it from falling onto the earth, and trees could be considered to do likewise. One old belief was that the sky was held up by four great columns<sup>3</sup>, and these could be envisaged as great trees, as in ordinary Irish speech we still refer to the highest things as reaching to *cranna na spéire* ('the trees of the sky'). In addition to such an imaginary function, however, trees uniquely gave immediate protection from rain and storms. Standing as intermediaries between heaven and earth, they had special connections with the otherworld and even deflected thunderbolts away from the people.

Let us begin by taking a look at two very important words denoting trees. The usual generic term in Irish for a tree is, of course, 'crann', and this represents a special Celtic semantic development from the Indo-European *\*kwrénos*, which meant 'brushwood'.<sup>4</sup> The hazel had an importance of its own – the Irish word *coll* comes from the Indo-European word for it *\*kóslos*,<sup>5</sup> and so plentiful was the hazel in ancient Ireland that this

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2 Friedrich (1970).

3 See the references in Cross (1952), 26-7 [Motifs A841-3].

4 See Mallory and Adams (1997), 598-9.

5 *Ibid*, 260.

particular tree has given us the word *coill* for a wood. It was also a tree associated with wisdom in early Ireland – the well from which the river Boyne rose was the source of poetry and prophecy and was surrounded by nine hazel-trees.<sup>6</sup> The basic Indo-European word for a tree was *\*dóru*, which indeed is the background to ‘tree’ in English, but in Irish it gives ‘dair’, a variant of Celtic *\*darus*.<sup>7</sup> The use of this word in Celtic languages specifically for the oak reflects a very early tendency to consider the oak as the tree *par preference*.

In line with this, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the Greek writer Maximus of Tyre reported that “the Celts devote a cult to Zeus, but the Celtic image of Zeus is a great oak”.<sup>8</sup> He was not, of course, referring to the Greek deity Zeus, but to his Celtic cognate *\*Devos*. This, like Deus, Dyaus, Jovis, Tiw, etc, was a variant of the name of the Indo-European sky god.<sup>9</sup> In Celtic tradition in Ireland this Celtic *\*Devos* was called *\*dago-Devos*, meaning ‘good sky’, from which comes the name of the Irish father-deity the Daghdha.<sup>10</sup> The mystical union of this sky-father with the earth-mother was believed to bring prosperity to the agricultural world of the early Irish.<sup>11</sup>

Probably due to the influence of pre-Celtic religion in Ireland, the Daghdha tended to be identified with the sun rather than with the sky in general.<sup>12</sup> This strengthened the association of a sacred oak with the sun, a notion which was frequent among the Indo-Europeans, probably based on the ritual burning of an oak at Midsummer in an attempt to give more fire to the sun. The tall oak, connecting the sky with the earth, could be imagined as a virtual extension of the sun itself. It is therefore not surprising that an early Irish glossary gives *daur* (oak) as a synonym for *dia* (god).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a poem as early as the 6th century AD refers to the Eó Rosa (a celebrated yew-tree at Old Leighlin in Co Carlow) as *dia dronbhalc*, that is, ‘a firm strong god’.<sup>14</sup> This Irish word *dia* is, we may add, derived from the Celtic *\*devos* on which the name of the Daghdha is based. Such an image of a great tree could be envisaged as connecting in either direction – the sky with the earth or the earth with the sky.

A case in point may be the archaeological discoveries at Eamhain Mhacha (the hill-fort of Navan, a few miles west of Armagh city). This site was inhabited since the neolithic era, but traces of earlier structures were erased by ploughing before the major settlement there, which began in the 7th century BC. These Bronze Age inhabitants erected a palisaded enclosure on the top of the hill, with wooden huts inside it. At the beginning of the 1st century BC a whole new and larger enclosure was raised, within which were four concentric rings of oak posts and a circle of timber uprights towards the centre. In this circle again was a large oak-post sunk into a hole. It is thought that the whole inner structure may have

6 Gwynn 3 (1913), 26-39, 286-8; W Stokes in *Revue Celtique* 15, 315-6, 456 & in *Irische Texte* 3, 195.

7 Mallory and Adams (1997), 598.

8 *Dissertationes* 2.8 [8.8].

9 For sources relevant to this postulated sky-god, see Ó hÓgáin (1999), 59-61, 226. The forms of his name include Indic Dyâus, Latin Deus, Greek Zeus, Celtic Devos. Jupiter is from *Iu* (< Greek *Zev*, cognate with Umbrian *Iuve* i.e. Jove) + *Piter* (cognate with *Pater*); while Tyr (an alternative name for Odin) is from an earlier *Tiv-*.

10 See E Windisch in *Irische Texte* 1, 463; C-J Guyonvarc’h in *Ogam* 11, 284-5 and 12, 49.

11 See the episode of the Daghdha in Gray (1982), 44. See also Ó hÓgáin (1999), 59-64.

12 On this issue, see Ó hÓgáin (1999), 59-60, 137-40.

13 W Stokes in *Revue Celtique* 1, 259.

14 Henry (1978), 145.

been roofed. There are no traces of human habitation, and there is therefore scarcely any doubt but that the function of the site was ceremonial.

Curiously, at some stage the inner structure was filled with limestone blocks and its walling burned, and finally it was sealed by covering it over with sods.<sup>15</sup> It has been suggested that this destruction was a ceremonial act carried out by the devotees themselves, or more simply the destruction may have been done by an enemy group. It is difficult to say but, at any rate, the striking circular plans, the use of great oak posts, and the sealing off of the whole building, leave little doubt but that those responsible for both construction and destruction were in awe of the site and regarded it as sacred.

That the site had a mystical importance emerges also from the literature, which – in addition to celebrating the place as the headquarters of the ancient Ulstermen – uses the term ‘Eamhain’ in general as a designation for otherworld places. Scholars are generally of the opinion that a reference which long predates any writing in Irish is the first mention of the actual site – this being the reference to *Isamnion* in his description of the country by the Graeco-Egyptian geographer Ptolemaeus in the 2nd century AD.<sup>16</sup> If so, the original form of Eamhain would probably have been Celtic ‘Isomnis’ – *is* meaning ‘strong’ or ‘sturdy’ and *omnis* being a plural variant of the word *omon* with a meaning such as ‘tree-bole’ or ‘post’.<sup>17</sup> The development of this toponymic within archaic Irish would have been of the following order: *isomnis* > *ihomniah* > *eumania*. This latter form is in fact attested in early Irish literature as the designation of the Ulster capital,<sup>18</sup> and from it the standard form Eamhain derives.

What interests us particularly here is that the tree-posts at the site were of oak, and that the great central post may have been a ritual variant of the great world tree linking the earth with the sky. Standing at the sacred centre of the community’s territory, it would have been a symbol of the prosperity of the tribe or sept, with important ceremonies centring on it. That such continued long after the destruction of the site is clear from the several references to the *óenach* or assembly of Eamhain in Christian times.<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning that the legendary Ulster warriors, whose headquarters was Eamhain Mhacha, were known to mediaeval literature as the heroes of the *craebh ruadh*. This designation has been rather simplistically translated as the ‘red branch’ by 19th century writers. The mediaeval writers, however, explained it as being the name of the palace of the legendary Ulster king, Conchobhar, and described that palace as an edifice constructed on red poles.<sup>20</sup> It may not

15 D A Simpson in *Emania* 6, 31-3; and other sources listed in Ó hÓgáin (1999), 171-3, 243.

16 See T F O’Rahilly (1946), 12-13; J Pokorny in *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 21, 127 and 24, 120; A Mac an Bhaird in *Ainm* 5, 11.

17 For *is*, meaning ‘energetic’ – which may have been a borrowing by the Continental Celts from the Illyrians – see Walde / Pokorny, 1 (1930), 4; Pokorny, 1 (1959), 299-301. For *omon*, meaning ‘tree-bole’ and later ‘oak’, see *ibid*, 1, 177 and Royal Irish Academy Dictionary (1913-1975) – s.v. ‘omna’.

18 Hennessy and MacCarthy, 1 (1887-1901), 66-7.

19 References in Gwynn, 3 (1913), 20; E Windisch in *Irische Texte* 1, 81, 255; D Binchy in *Ériu* 18, 126.

20 References in Van Hamel, (1933), 20; W Stokes in *Ériu* 4, 26-7 & in *Irische Texte* 2 (2), 135; Cecile O’Rahilly (1970), 131; Gwynn, 4 (1924), 128, 130.

be too imaginative for us, nowadays, to consider this as a faint memory of the actual posts at the ritual centre.<sup>21</sup>

The toponymic Eamhain came to be given the meaning of an otherworld or mystical place, the word being used especially in the case of the otherworld island Eamhain Abhlach ('Eamhain of the Apples').<sup>22</sup> This was a version of the isle in the west to which the Celts believed their ancestors went. There are several other examples of the motif in early sources, but the specific island in question here seems to have developed from ideas of the British Celts concerning the Isle of Man. We may presume that, on picking up this tradition concerning the Isle of Man, the early Irish considered the island as a double of the great sacred centre on land.<sup>23</sup> Its association with apples reflects a general tendency in early Irish and other European sources to imagine the otherworld as a place where delicious apples could be had. From this Celtic version of the Hesperides, of course, came the Arthurian island of Avalon, which meant also 'the place of apples'.

### Trees and tribes

While on the subject of mystical understandings, it is as well to mention that certain Celtic tribes referred to themselves as devotees of particular trees. In northern Gaul there were tribes called by names such as Dervones ('oak-people'), Eburovices ('conquerors by the yew'), and Viducasses ('agile woodsmen').<sup>24</sup> The most striking example in Ireland is the Eoghanacht, the leading dynasty in Munster from the 4th or 5th century AD until the Middle Ages. The origins of this tribe are obscure, but it would appear that they were one of two main branches of a people called Venii, whose mythical ancestor was one Ovogenos ('sheep-conceived'). The Venii were well established in the south of Ireland in the 2nd century AD, perhaps having been recent arrivals there from south-west Britain or Brittany. At some stage, a strong section of them broke off from the rest and began to move northwards, establishing a kingdom west of the Shannon. These retained the lore of an ancestor called Ovogenos, while the group who apparently were their kinsmen in the south substituted for it the form Ivogenos ('son of yew'). The latter may indeed have been a name given to a real early leader of the sept. There must have been a ritual reason for it, as the cult of the yew-tree was known in Ireland as this time, as evidenced from its occurrence in the common personal name Ivocatus ('yew-battler'). At any rate, alteration of this type to their ritual genealogy would have underlined the desired separate identity for the two septs.<sup>25</sup>

With the development of Celtic into Old Irish, the tribal name Ivogeni became Eoghanacht, and their ritual ancestor Ivogenos came to be known as Eoghan.<sup>26</sup> The image of the yew-tree as the sept's talisman continued, however, as is clear from a legend written down in the 8th century AD. This uses Christian imagery, purporting to tell of the establishment

21 The colour attributed to the poles would, of course, be mediaeval fiction. The word *ruadh* ('red') was a mistaken interpretation of *rudh* in the compound *rudhraighe* (literally 'lordly ones'), the designation of the leading group among the ancient Ulstermen.

22 Examples and discussions in Mac Mathúna (1985), 33-43; Kuno Meyer (1912), 78; W Stokes in *Irische Texte* 3, 193.

23 On this, see further Ó hÓgáin (1999), 150-2.

24 For these tribes in history see index to Ó hÓgáin (2002).

25 For the words \*Ivogenos, \*Ovogenos see O S Bergin in *Ériu* 11 (1932), 142 & 12 (1938), 224-5; J Pokorny in *Celtica* 3 (1956), 306-8; McManus (1991), 102-3; McCone (1996), 25, 131.

26 For Eoghan as a mythical ancestor, see O'Brien (1962), 618-9.

of the sept's great headquarters at Cashel, which may indeed have been a Christian foundation. The legend, however, uses other older lore, as will appear from a synopsis. We read that a nobleman of the sept, called Conall Corc, was exiled abroad for a while, but that he determined to return to his patrimony. Arriving in Munster with his wife and children, he was caught in a snowstorm and could only decipher the great Rock in the distance. On that very same day, a local swineherd had a vision of a yew-tree on top of the Rock, with angels ascending to an oratory in front of it. The swineherd told this to the local king, whose druid explained that this meant that the kingship of Munster would be centred there and that the first person to light a fire under the yew-tree would be king of the province. The local king wished to go at once, but the druid advised him to wait till morning. Thus it happened that Conall arrived at the rock before him and, quite unaware of the prophecy, lit a fire there. When the locals arrived and submitted to him, Conall understood all, and within a week had established himself as king of Munster. The place was accordingly known as Caiseal Coirc ('the castellum of Corc').<sup>27</sup>

Notwithstanding the role of the legendary Conall Corc, the real ritual ancestor of that dynasty was the eponymous Eoghan, and the sacred yew-tree was his symbol. There were in fact three branches of the Eoghanacht – that at Cashel, another in the east Limerick area centring Knockainey, and another at Loch Léin (the Killarney Lake).<sup>28</sup> All three groups had traditions of yew-trees,<sup>29</sup> but the east Limerick one is the most dramatic. Knockainey (Cnoc Áine) was the mystical seat of the sept's tutelary goddess Áine,<sup>30</sup> and she is described as daughter of the otherworld man Eoghabhal, whose name meant simply 'fork of yew'.<sup>31</sup> A variant of the septal name Eoghanacht was Fir Í (from Celtic \**veri iwi*, 'men of the yew'), and this name was personified as a son of Eoghabhal called Fear Í or Fear Fí.<sup>32</sup> This character was said to have been a musician who lived in a yew-tree at the waterfall on the river Maigue at Caherass.<sup>33</sup> Undoubtedly referring to the same tree, another tradition claims that *cíthea a scáth thíos isin uisce go follas, agus ní fheictear hé féin for tír* – that is, that the yew itself could not be seen at that place, only its reflection in the water.<sup>34</sup>

It is clear that the Eoghanacht envisaged their spiritual ancestor as residing in the yew, and we may enquire as to how such a notion came about. It is appropriate to mention, first of all, that the general tendency among the ancient Celtic tribes was to regard their tribal deity as their natural ancestor. The account we have just given of the Eoghanacht sept accords exactly with that tendency, and we may suppose therefore that they envisaged their god as synonymous with the yew-tree. That species of tree is particularly noted for its longevity, for its great height, and for the pliability and strength of its timber, thereby rendering it a suitable symbol for a dynasty. It may be that its special connection with a

27 V Hull in *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 56, 937-50. For the Conall Corc legends in general, see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 105-7.

28 For the history of the Eoghanacht, see Byrne (1973), 165-201.

29 The yew on the Rock of Cashel – Hull, *op cit*, 942; Imleach Iubhair ('Umbilicus at the Yew' i.e. Emly) – Heist (1965), 290; Achadh Dá Eo ('Field of the Two Yews', i.e. Aghadoe) – Hogan (1910), 8.

30 For Áine, see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 20-2.

31 O'Daly (1975), 38-41, 76-81; O'Grady, 2 (1892), 2, 575. See T F O'Rahilly, 288-90.

32 O'Daly, 40-1, 58-61, 76-81; Gwynn, 4 (1924), 58; O'Grady, 2, 575.

33 O'Daly, 40, 80.

34 Printed in Todd (1848), 220.

great ancestor developed from a custom of planting a tree over the burial mound of a leader – when the tree grew, the descendants of that leader would naturally imagine it to contain the spirit of the dead person.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, after each shedding of its leaves the tree restored itself, and this could be taken when appropriate as reflecting the tribe's fortunes. We can therefore see why it was considered a disastrous defeat if a rival group cut down the tribal tree,<sup>36</sup> and why it is still believed wrong to interfere with a tree growing on a tumulus or even in a graveyard.<sup>37</sup>

The other supposed branch of the Venii, which moved northwards, took over the fertile and prestigious plain of Meath in the 4th century AD. They still claimed descent from an ancestor called Ovogenos (by then pronounced Ughan), but they used the title Condos (meaning 'wise head') for their leaders.<sup>38</sup> This title became Conn, and the sept therefore came to call themselves Connachta. They developed a legend that they had had a great king called Conn Ceadchathach, whose career was used to reflect their rivalry with the great southern sept. Accordingly, lore grew up which claimed that Conn Ceadchathach had fought a war against Eoghan Mór, legendary leader of the Eoghanacht, as a result of which these two worthies divided Ireland between them into two halves.<sup>39</sup> Nor were the Connachta slow to turn tree-lore to their own advantage. By the 8th or 9th century AD they were claiming that a great seer of old called Fionntan mac Bóchna, who had survived the Biblical flood, got a handful of berries and sowed these in the ground at different places.<sup>40</sup> From these berries grew up the five great trees of Ireland, which we shall enumerate presently.

## Trees and kings

More specifically, the Connachta sept claimed that on the night of the birth of Conn, as the beginning of a great new era, the landscape of Ireland took on its modern shape. Among the wonders to appear was a great oak tree which had been hidden for ages – this tree was growing on the plain of Mughain (in the south of modern Co Kildare). It was claimed to be 'the son of the tree of Paradise', and it gave three yields of acorns each year.<sup>41</sup> The symbolic connection of Conn with trees is underlined again in a source from the same period, which states that during his reign "a hundred clusters grew on each stem, a hundred nuts in each cluster".<sup>42</sup>

Tradition claims that Conn had as his initial rival the mythical Leinster king Cathaoir Mór. We may surmise that this name Cathaoir (from Celtic \**Catuveros*, 'man of battle')

35 Several motifs in folklore may be survivals of, or connected with, this idea e.g. spirits or souls of the dead surviving within trees, trees bleeding when cut, trees being co-eval with their planters, people confiding their secrets to trees, voices and strange sounds heard from trees. For such motifs, see Ó Súilleabháin (1942), 280-1; Plummer (1910), I, cliii.

36 See A T Lucas in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 68 (1963), 21, 25-6.

37 *Ibid*, 21, 33-4, 42-4; Ó Súilleabháin (1942), 280-1.

38 See T F O'Rahilly, 184-92, 281-5; Ó hÓgáin (2002), 204, 211-3, 218.

39 For this, and references, see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 116-9, 182-3.

40 Vendryes (1953), 4-5; R I Best in *Ériu* 4, 151; K Meyer in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* 1, 35; For Fionntan in general, see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 224-5.

41 Vendryes (1953), 4-5; Jackson (1938), 51.

42 *Ibid*, 26. A similar image of plenty became associated with the reign of another legendary Connachta hero, Cormac mac Airt – see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 126-7.



was in reality a title given to ancient kings of the Laighin or Leinstermen, who were indeed displaced from Tara by the Connachta in or about the 4th century AD.<sup>43</sup> Whereas lore of this mythical Cathaoir is extant from as early as the 6th and 7th centuries AD, the only account connecting him with a tree is found in an 11th-century poem. Here we read that, in the prime of his life, Cathaoir dreamed that a beautiful lady appeared to him. She was pregnant for a long time and then gave birth to a son. Cathaoir next dreamed that he saw on a great hill nearby a fragrant golden tree which gave all kinds of fruit and from which most pleasant music came. On awakening, Cathaoir called his druid, who interpreted the dream for him. The lady was the Sláine (river Slaney), her son was the harbour of Loch Garman, and the great hill was Cathaoir's own power. The wonderful tree, a protection from storms, was Cathaoir himself. Its music was his "noble eloquence when appeasing a multitude", and the wind which shook down its fruit was his great generosity.<sup>44</sup>

This poem, like texts in some other European literatures, makes use of the Biblical account of the tree seen by the Babylonian king Nabuchadnezzar in a dream, which personified that king himself.<sup>45</sup> There is, however, something of very old native Irish tradition involved in the description of Cathaoir as a tree 'branching wide, full of fruit – yourself in your kingship over sweet Banba, and over every dwelling in Ireland.' In this, he is the ideal Irish king who protects his followers. The very word for a king, *righe*, incorporates this function, for it is based on a root meaning to 'stretch out', and indeed the word *righe* is still used for the forearm in Irish. The arm of the king, ceremonially stretched forth, parallels the spreading branch of a tree, and as a tree is protective so also should the proper king be.<sup>46</sup>

This symbolism of a king as a great protective tree is common in Indo-European languages, but is particularly marked in Irish, where another word serves to identify the two. This is *bile*, from the Celtic *bilios*, which originally signified a large tree but has come to mean also a social champion. Although this word *bile* is now obsolete in spoken Irish, it is perhaps the most frequent word to describe a large tree in the literature and it is well attested in placenames throughout the country.<sup>47</sup> It is much used in praise of individual leaders in encomiastic verse. Since the tree was a symbol of protection, the man whose function was the protection of the tribe was closely associated with it. Thus, kings and chieftains were inaugurated by their people underneath the great tribal tree. This custom survived into the Middle Ages and later. Under a remarkable tree in Clooney, Co Clare, the O'Briens were inaugurated as kings of Thomond; the Ulaidh kings were inaugurated at Craobh Tulcha, a wide-spreading tree near Glenavy in Co Antrim; the Maguires had for the same purpose a thorn-tree at Lisnaskeagh fort in Co Fermanagh; while a number of inauguration trees are referred to at the O'Neill inauguration site at Tullaghogue in Co Tyrone.<sup>48</sup>

Within this same context we can discuss the custom of deriving personal names from trees. The ancient Celts on the Continent and in Britain did this, as for example in the case

43 See K Meyer in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3 (1913), 45; Ó hÓgáin (2002), 204, 211.

44 Gwynn, 3 (1913), 174-83. For Cathaoir in general, with references, see Ó hÓgáin (1990), 76-7.

45 *Book of Daniel* 4.4-27.

46 See Benveniste, 2 (1969), 9-42; Ó hÓgáin (1999), 153-4; Royal Irish Academy Dictionary – s.v. 'rige', 'rigid'.

47 A good selection is given in Lucas, 16, 36-9, 52-4.

48 Lucas, 25-6. See also Plummer, 1 (1910), civ.



of the individuals called Eburos ('the yew-man'), Deruacos ('man connected with the oak'), Viduogenos ('conceived from the tree'), Dervogenos ('conceived from the oak'), Vernogenos ('conceived from the alder').<sup>49</sup> In early Ireland we find similar personal names - for both fictional and historical persons - such as Mac Caerthainn ('son of rowan'), Mac Iubhair ('son of yew'), and Mac Dara ('son of oak'). The name Mac Cuill ('son of hazel') is indeed given by the mediaeval writers to a leading personage among the divine people, the Tuatha Dé Danann - one of a trio, the other two of which were Mac Cécht ('son of healing') and Mac Gréine ('son of the sun').<sup>50</sup> A particular Gaulish god bore the name Ollovidios, meaning simply 'great tree'.<sup>51</sup>

## Trees and places

In the case of placenames, the associations with trees can be derived either from tribal names or - more usually - from the existence of a prestigious tree at the location. A very long list could be given here, but a few will suffice. For instance, Magh Bhile ('the plain of the tree') in Cos Down and Donegal; Maigh Eo ('the plain of the yew'), anglicised as Mayo; and the several places called Cnoc an Bhile, Ráth Bhile, etc. Newry, of course, is an *tílur* ('the yew-tree') or - in extended form *Iúr Cinn Tráichta* ('the yew at the head of the strand'). Its anglicised form probably comes from reference to the actual town which grew up there - viz Baile an Iúraigh. In this form the nominative was Iubharach, from Celtic 'Eburacum' ('place of the yew-tree'). In Britain this placename Eburac- became York, either from a yew-tree growing there or from the settlement there of the Gaulish tribe called Eburaci ('devotees of the yew').

On the eastern verge of ancient Celtidom, Strabo described how the Galatian judicial council assembled at a place called Drunemeton ('great sanctuary') in Asia Minor.<sup>52</sup> Several places in the western Celtic world were also referred to by this word 'nemeton', indicating that these were sacred centres. Instances are Nemetodurum (Nanterre in France), Nemetobriga in Spain (now Puente-de-Navéa), Medionemeton in Scotland (now Kirkintilloch), and Vernemeton between Lincoln and Leicester in England.<sup>53</sup> The word 'nemeton' is based on the element *\*nem-* ('sky'), indicating the divine status of the firmament, and many such shrines are thought to have been situated in forest clearings.<sup>54</sup> This tendency towards arboreal settings appears also from the Greek *némos* for a wood and the Latin *nemus* for a forest sanctuary.

The Irish form of the word is 'neimheadh', and this is a designation used for several sites - for instance, one in the Fews Mountains in Co Armagh, one at Downpatrick, and one apparently near Newgrange in Co Meath.<sup>55</sup> The word was sometimes prefixed with *fíodh* ('tree') to indicate such a location, and a sacred tree itself could be referred to by this word.<sup>56</sup> An Irish poem from the 7th century AD states a prohibition against cutting down

49 MacCulloch (1911), 202.

50 For these various names, see Macalister, 5 (1956), 14-7, 78-9; Plummer, 1 (1910), cliv-clv; Lucas, 22; Henry, 233; Comyn (1902), 222.

51 Ross (1967), 225-6; Green (1992), 166.

52 *Geographicon* 12.5.

53 Piggott (1974), 54-7; Dottin (1915), 505; Chadwick (Cardiff, (1966), 13-4.

54 See especially Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h (1986), 226-31.

55 Hogan, 554 - s.v. 'nemed'; Royal Irish Academy Dictionary - s.v. 'neimed'.

56 Royal Irish Academy Dictionary - s.v. 'fid'; Lucas, 27-8.

such trees,<sup>57</sup> and an Old Irish glossary states that it was in the *fíodhneimhidh* 'that the seers used to perform their rituals'.<sup>58</sup> Another word in early Irish for such a site was *défhidh*, meaning literally 'divine wood'.<sup>59</sup> We can, accordingly, relate the imagery of sacred sanctuaries in Ireland to those of the Celts abroad.

The ancient Celts had a goddess called Dea Advinna in the Ardennes and another called Dea Abnoba in the Black Forest, and in Celtic areas of northern Italy a type of fairies was known as Dervones or 'oak-spirits'.<sup>60</sup> The forest was regarded as a particularly otherworldly place by these Continental Celts. The Spanish writer Pomponius Mela claimed that the druids taught their students in 'secluded dales'.<sup>61</sup> This practice is again referred to by another Spanish writer in Latin, Lucan, who in sarcastic verses addressed the druids: 'To you alone it is given to know the truth about the gods and deities of the sky, or else you alone are ignorant of this truth; the innermost groves of far-off forests are your abodes.'<sup>62</sup> On this issue of groves, Pliny gives his famous, if rather dubious, account of the Gaulish druids' ceremonies in the forest. We will not refer to it here, beyond remarking that the basic situation described by him is quite plausible: 'They choose groves formed of oaks for the sake of the tree alone, and they never perform any of their rites except in the presence of a branch of it... In fact, they think that everything that grows on it has been sent from heaven and is a proof that the tree was chosen by the god himself.'<sup>63</sup>

It is strange that no lore seems to have survived in Ireland concerning actual forest spirits. Perhaps the common motif of poets and musicians encountering the fairies in sylvan settings and gaining inspiration from them is an echo of such. There is one little story told in an Old Irish text (dating from the 8th or 9th century AD) which is of interest as it may preserve some ancient Celtic narrative tradition of the forest, although its imagery has - as you will notice - been fused with an international narrative plot, that which occurs in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Old Testament.<sup>64</sup> The story tells that the great hero Fionn mac Cumhaill had a servant called Dearg Corra. A paramour of Fionn made advances to this servant, who rejected her, and she in revenge claimed that he had tried to rape her. Believing the false charge, Fionn banished the servant from his presence, but later while hunting came across him again in the forest. Dearg Corra was sitting in a tree, eating a meal along with a blackbird, a trout and a stag. His identity was hidden by a druidic 'cloak of concealment', but he was recognised by Fionn, who had magical knowledge.<sup>65</sup> It may be that Cernunnos, the horned Continental Celtic deity, patron of animals, is reflected here, for Cernunnos was represented iconographically in a seated position, surrounded by various animals.<sup>66</sup>

57 D A Binchy in *Celtica* 9, 156-9; Henry, 144, 233.

58 W Stokes in *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie* 1, 272.

59 Royal Irish Academy Dictionary - s.v. 'défhidh'.

60 MacCulloch (1911), 198; Vries, (1961), 90, 117; Dottin, 112, 316.

61 *De Situ Orbis* 3.2.18-9.

62 *Pharsalia* 1. 450-8.

63 *Historia Naturalis* 16.249.

64 *Genesis* 39:7-23.

65 K Meyer in *Revue Celtique* 25, 344-9. See also E J Gwynn in *Ériu* 11, 152-3 and Ó hÓgáin (1988), 46-9.

66 For Cernunnos, see Mac Cana (1970), 42-8; Ross, 421-3, 517; Thevenot (1968), 144-52; Green (1986), 190-9.

## Trees and saints

The term *fiodhneimheadh*, meaning ‘a sacred place of trees’, which we have already discussed, survived from pre-Christian times into the Christian culture of Ireland. It is noticeable that many of the sites of early Christian foundations were in fact earlier cultic sites, and in his very scholarly paper entitled ‘The Sacred Trees of Ireland’ Dr A T Lucas suggests that the presence of trees was an important element in the changeover. Thus the early Irish laws explain the term *fiodhneimheadh* in a very Christian way as *fiodh cille*, and the word *neimheadh* itself came to be used as a term for a consecrated place such as a small chapel or oratory. There was indeed, a sacred grove at Armagh, site of St Patrick’s most important foundation, and it could well be that this grove predated the saint’s presence there. It can hardly be doubted that St Brigid’s Christian foundation was originally the site of an oak cult, as the Christian toponymic Cill Dara (‘church of the oak’) suggests.<sup>67</sup>

That this association of saint with tree persisted is clear from a story in the mediaeval literature concerning St Ruán of Lorrha in Co Tipperary. According to this, Ruán had a wondrous tree growing near his monastery, the sap of which provided full sustenance for all who tasted of it. The other saints of Ireland grew jealous of him on account of this tree and of his holiness, but he reconciled them to himself by entertaining them with a fine feast, which he miraculously produced.<sup>68</sup> On a wider plain, many claims are made throughout Ireland that particular woods and trees were originally planted by the patron-saint of the area in question.<sup>69</sup>

Nowhere is this fusion of pre-Christian with Christian elements brought out clearly than in the tradition of St Colm Cille, whose great foundation in Ireland was of course at Doire (meaning ‘oak-wood’). It was said that Colm Cille had left a curse on anybody who unnecessarily felled a tree in that wood, and in illustration of this the Annals indeed record how a man wounded his foot with his own axe when cutting a piece of wood at Derry in the year 1188.<sup>70</sup> Later tradition claimed that Colm Cille changed the design of his church there from facing east so as not to interfere with the trees, and it was said that the most frightening thing to him was ‘the sound of an axe in Derry’.<sup>71</sup> Other saints also were fiercely opposed to interference with their forests. A fanciful life of St Kevin claims that he was so enamoured of the forest at Glendalough that he left the promise of ‘hell and short life to anyone who should burn either fresh or dry wood from this forest till doom’.<sup>72</sup>

In reality, of course, such was not simply a pious saintly injunction – it was a survival of the pre-Christian notion among the Celts that a forest was sacred. It is a little ironic, and quite amusing, to consider that the opposite view prevailed among Christians working in Celtic areas abroad. Thus, church sources in early Christian Gaul condemned the belief that certain trees were too sacred to be cut down. St Martin of Tours, indeed, was allowed to destroy a Celtic temple, but the people would not permit him to attack a much venerated pine-tree which stood beside it.<sup>73</sup> The reversal of Christian attitudes to favour the sacred

67 On the historicity of St Brigid, see Lucas, 32; Ó hÓgáin (1999), 202-4.

68 Plummer, 1 (1922), I, 320-1 [translation = 2, 311-2].

69 Lucas, 27-40. See also Plummer (1910), I, clii-clv.

70 Hennessy and MacCarthy 2, 212-3.

71 O’Kelleher and Schoepperle (1918), 82-5.

72 Plummer (1922), I, 127.

73 MacCulloch (1911), 204.

tree in Ireland is enlightening in terms of the unique nature of Irish Christianity, which was rural in character and blended more easily into pre-Christian tradition.

### **The great ones**

The most celebrated of the great old trees of Ireland was the Bile Tortan, which was situated at Ardraccan, near Navan in Co Meath. It was in the territory of a tribe called the Uí Tortan, and it is significant that both tree and tribe bore the same name. We may presume that, accordingly, Tortu was the name by which the ancestor deity was referred to in that district. It is described as an ash-tree, and it fell in the 7th century AD. The mediaeval placelore cites much of the lore concerning this tree, which is both enlightening and fanciful, and it is as well to synthesise it here. We read that the men of Tortu used to assemble around the huge tree, which gave them protection from storms. It towered above the forest, being fifty cubits in thickness and three hundred cubits in height. It gave out a deep sound during storms, as the wind tore leaves from it. After standing there for centuries, age began to take its toll and the tree began to lose its colour. It was finally knocked down by the wind, crushing one hundred and fifty men. After the tree's collapse, the plain of Tortu lost much of its prosperity. One very mystical account echoes the notion of a world tree, stating that the Bile Tortan existed since the beginning of the world, and that its branches reached to the very sky, being full of fruit and of singing birds.<sup>74</sup>

Around the same time, as we read, fell the Eó Mughna, termed the 'Yew of Mughain', although it seems to have been in fact an oak. It was situated – as its name shows – in the area of Mughain, in present-day Co Kildare. The placelore claims that this tree was thirty cubits in girth and three hundred cubits in height, that over a thousand people could shelter in its shadow, and that it produced annually nine hundred sackfuls of acorns. Quite extraordinarily, it bore fruit no less than three times a year and, even more extraordinarily, gave three kinds of fruit – namely acorns, nuts, and apples. The motif of such a fanciful yield parallels the varied fruitage given by the Elysian trees in Classical mythology, and may indeed be a direct borrowing from that source. Even stranger was the cause given for the tree's collapse – that, having been satirised by the well-known poet Níníne, it withered away and then fell southwards over the plain of Ailbhe in south Kildare. The story was that Níníne composed the satire after a demand of his was refused by the local king.<sup>75</sup> Needless to say, this is scarcely historical, and the poet Níníne seems to have lived in the 6th century, a few generations earlier.<sup>76</sup>

It is said that another great tree, the Craobh Uisnigh, fell in that same period in the 7th century. This was an ash, and was situated at Uisneach in Co Westmeath, reputedly the exact centre of Ireland,<sup>77</sup> from which we can surmise that it was especially symbolical of the world-tree. Although the Craobh Uisnigh crashed, this tradition lived on for a long time, for an aged thornbush in the townland of Loughanstown in that same county was

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74 Bieler (1979), 162-3; Stokes (1887), 185; Stokes in *Revue Celtique* 16, 279; Gwynn 3, 148-9 & 4, 240-7, 440-1; Hennessy (1866), 77.

75 For the sources on this tree, see Henry, 145; Gwynn, 3 (1913), 144-9, 505; Stokes (1905), 258-9 & in *Revue Celtique* 15, 420 & 16, 279; Vendryes, *op cit*, 4.

76 For the sources on this tree, see Henry, 145; Gwynn, 3 (1913), 144-9, 505; Stokes (1905), 258-9 & in *Revue Celtique* 15, 420 & 16, 279; Vendryes, *op cit*, 4.

77 For references, see Lucas, 18. On the importance of territorial centres in Celtic cultures, see Le Roux and Guyonvarc'h, 217-26.

claimed by local inhabitants over a thousand years later to mark the ‘navel of Ireland’.<sup>78</sup> The other two great trees of early Ireland were the afore-mentioned Eo Rosa and the Craobh Dháithí. The Eo Rosa (‘Yew of Ros’), stood at Old Leighlin, Co Carlow. The rather imaginative account of its fall is that the saints of Ireland coveted its timber for church-building and gathered around it to fast and pray for its collapse. The prayers caused its roots to move, but only the prayer of St Lasairian was powerful enough to actually bring the tree down.<sup>79</sup> The Craobh Dháithí seems to have been named from the famous king of the western Connachta tribe in the 5th century AD, Nath Í or Daithí. It stood at Farbill in Co Westmeath, which placename derives from the tribal name *Fir Bhile* (‘men of the tree’), which actually meant the tribe devoted to this particular tree.<sup>80</sup>

The veneration of individual great trees continued for a long time, and vestiges of it can still be noticed in popular practice. Old trees at holy wells, in churches, and in graveyards, are held in high regard, and it is regarded as almost sacrilegious to interfere with them. Echoes of older pre-Christian tradition may be identified in the widespread belief that a tree which stands alone in a field, especially if it is a white-thorn, should never be felled – such a tree is called a *crann sí* or ‘fairy bush’. Many stories are told of people who interfered with these trees, and who suffered some misfortune as a result. The timber of a tree which grows beside a holy well is especially efficacious – people often take chips of such timber with them for protection when going on journeys abroad, and it is said that the timber will not burn in a fire. A common migratory legend tells of a person attempting to cut down such a tree for fuel. He imagines that he sees his house on fire and runs to extinguish it. Finding that he was mistaken, he returns to his work at the felling; but the illusion is repeated and he rushes home again a second time, to find his house still intact. He again resumes the felling and cuts down the tree, but when he goes home this third time he finds that his house is indeed burnt to the ground.<sup>81</sup>

The protective quality of the old great trees was not just against the weather, but also against lightning – a natural enough supposition, as lightning would first strike the highest object in the landscape and the tree would therefore function as a rudimentary lightning-conductor. We find this function being shared since mediaeval times with church buildings, for it is often said that lightning will not strike within hearing distance of the bell of a particular church.<sup>82</sup> Christian culture has, however, reciprocated by making its own contributions to Irish tree-lore. Such is from the ordinary stock of European Christian lore, such as the attribution of various aspects of the landscape to imagined events in the life of Christ. It is said, for instance, that the elder sheds its leaves early and the ivy is evergreen because the former refused to shelter the refugee Jesus whereas the latter willingly did so. With a slightly more poetic touch, the fuchsia which grows plentifully on the bushes in many parts of Ireland is called *deora Dé*, ‘God’s tears’ as he observes the wayward world.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Lucas, 48.

<sup>79</sup> O’Hanlon, 4 (1875ff), 218.

<sup>80</sup> W Stokes in *Revue Celtique* 16, 279.

<sup>81</sup> See Lucas, 40-1, 46-7; Ó Súilleabháin, 463, 469.

<sup>82</sup> See Thompson (1955-1958), motif D2141; Ó Súilleabháin, 403-4; Ó hÓgáin (1985), 61, 327.

<sup>83</sup> This term is now general in the Gaeltacht of West Kerry.

### A community of trees

Some words should be said about the qualities residing in some trees, according to popular lore. Although the oak was especially associated with Continental druids, and seems to have been to the fore in early Ireland also, it is less stressed than other trees in post-mediaeval tradition. The rowan-tree, in Irish *caorthann* and popularly known in English as 'mountain ash', was regarded as having particular magical powers, and one old source calls it *fíodh na ndruadh* ('the tree of the druids').<sup>84</sup> In the mediaeval literature wizards are described as using branches of it, or timber from it, to weave spells;<sup>85</sup> and we read that the Irish druids slept on rods of rowan in anticipation of a vision.<sup>86</sup> It was usual until recently for a sprig of rowan to be kept in the house in the belief that it prevented fire, or to be put in the milk-pail and around the churn to prevent magical milk-stealing. If tied into the halter of a horse, it protected it from the 'evil eye' and from other misfortunes, and if placed in the collar of a greyhound, it guaranteed speed at racing.<sup>87</sup> The power of the hazel was also preserved in later folk tradition – for instance, a hazel-rod was believed to be efficacious against spirits and various misfortunes.<sup>88</sup>

On the other hand, the whitethorn (usually called *uath* in Old Irish and *sceach gheal* in the modern language) was considered a dangerous bush, closely connected with the fairies, and nobody would bring a sprig of it into the house.<sup>89</sup> An old Irish text describes how a group of poets would gather at a whitethorn bush in order to chant a satire against their enemy.<sup>90</sup> Miscellaneous motifs could attach to various trees in folk tradition – for instance, the willow was often regarded as lucky while the alder was unlucky<sup>91</sup> – and many and various were the uses made of trees and plants in folk medicine.<sup>92</sup> The ash is, of course, highly appreciated as the material for making hurleys, and in modern parlance 'the clash of the ash' has become a synonym for the national game. A great friend of mine, who was both a hurler and hurley-maker, once told me that the old generation considered the female ash to be superior to the male for making hurleys, because the female had more give in it.<sup>93</sup> More spring! Or more tolerance, perhaps!

84 K Meyer in *Archiv für Celtische Lexikographie* 2, 298-9.

85 See in particular the 16th-century Fianna text *Bruidhean Chaorthainn*, edited by Mac Piarais (1908) and also Joyce, 1 (1903), 236-7; MacCulloch, 201.

86 Plummer (1922), 1, 34-5 [translation = 2, 33-4]; Dinneen (1908), 348-50.

87 Lucas, 45.

88 Ó Súilleabháin, 282.

89 See Ó Súilleabháin, 282-3.

90 W Stokes in *Revue Celtique* 12, 119-21. See also Le Roux / Guyonvarc'h, 176-7; Mary Claire Randolph in *Folk-Lore* 53-54, 362-7.

91 Ó Súilleabháin, 281-2.

92 *Ibid.*, 281-8. On this, see also Logan (1972).

93 Told to me about twenty years ago by the late Pádraig Ó Caoimleáin (Paddy Quinlan), a native of Bottomstown, Co Limerick.

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