

# Druids and Trees

## Arboreal

I have thrust my feet into the dark, rich earth and fed,  
I have drunk from the crystal waters of the depths,  
I have clothed myself anew, in shades of green, to greet fair Spring,  
I have been washed clean in Summer's rain,  
I have shed my raiment, now gold and scarlet, at Autumn's command,  
I have stood proud and naked before Winter's sun.

I have housed a million lives within my boundaries,  
I have watched lovers embrace at my feet,  
I have comforted the lonely child in my arms,  
I have been cut down and my body used to bring warmth,  
I have grown once more in the cycle of life,  
I have been one with the Forest, yet a single being.

I am the Tree.

This is not about the biological aspects of trees, or about how to identify them. There are a number of books around for that and some people will undoubtedly know more about that aspect of trees than I do. This is about knowledge of the spiritual and magical meanings of trees and about interacting with them as a Druid.

Druids are usually considered to be knowledgeable about trees. The very term druid is said to be derived from the words Drui meaning oak and wid meaning wisdom together the Wisdom of the Oak. Why are trees so important to druids? Well from the earliest writings about druids they were said to meet and perform ceremonies in groves of trees. Today many druids still meet in groves of trees, some in stone circles and others simply in a pub or someone's front room or a back garden. Most druids I know would be delighted at the thought of being able to regularly meet and perform rituals in groves of trees or in stone circles. The term grove is now also used to describe a group of druids that meet regularly wherever it may be. If you are working in a grove of trees it's only polite to get to know the spirits of those you are working with, including or perhaps most importantly the trees.

So how do you work with trees? Well first you need to get to know them. The best way to get to know trees is to spend time with them. It is always best when approaching any spirit to ask for permission to work with it and after any time spent with it to thank it, the same is true with trees. If you feel that you are not welcomed at that time then don't force it, try another tree or come back

another time. Personally I have never felt rejected by a tree but I have felt called to be with specific trees at particular times. Watch how the trees in your area change through the seasons. Take the time to feel how their energy changes through the year. Meditate under a tree and gather bits of broken off bark or twigs that seem to call to you. These can be used to aid meditation with a tree spirit at home. Tell your troubles to the trees and sit quietly by them allowing their messages to seep into your subconscious mind. Gradually as they come to know you they will show you or tell you what they wish you to learn from them. This may be totally unconnected to anything in any book you read. It's their message for you that matters.

For example, as I walk to work each day I pass a number of Hawthorne trees. One in particular is two trees with four trunks between them growing so closely it seems like one tree with a number of trunks arranged in a semi-circle. I have been walking past her almost everyday for about five years now. Sometimes I stop to have a few words with her, to hug her or simply to be with her for a while. I often greet her as I go past much as I would anyone else I might pass in the street that I know. At the moment the leaves have fallen and the berries that are left have turned from a rich red to a dark red that is almost black. Her energy is calm but she does not permit you to hide from yourself or the world in her presence, it must be faced. Through the autumn and winter blackbirds feast on those darkening berries until by Imbolc there are few left and those that are there look completely black. In the spring, her energy takes on a vibrant lively edge to it and beginning late April to early May, she will be covered in the most beautiful blossoms. From these her fruits will start to grow once more as her energy settles into a strong confident thrum.

Traditionally, meanings associated with the Hawthorne include fertility, cleansing, a guardian, a door to the Otherworld and happiness. For me she had a different message. She is a strong and protective tree but to me she is also very feminine, a living example of the aspects of the Goddess and the phases of womanhood. In spring she is the Maiden renewed, clothed in fresh green and shades of white and pink. In summer as the fruits ripen she becomes the Mother ready to give birth. In winter as the leaves fall and the fruits are eaten from her branches she becomes the crone, wise grandmother. All through this she is strong and comforting, offering sustenance of one form or another, her thorns giving protection, the Warrior side within us all no matter what our age. Hawthorne embodies to me a strong independent woman growing and changing with the seasons of life. She also embodies a woman who changes gradually and accepts each season as they come, not fighting to hold onto her youth or giving in to being old, just being who she is. This is the lesson Hawthorne had for me, it may not be the same for you. Maybe you will see more of her protective nature or maybe something else entirely.

There are many different interpretations in books of what trees can be used for magically and different meanings associated with them. One of the best books for this that I have found is Jacqueline Memory Paterson's *Tree Wisdom*. To give you an idea of the depth of meanings that can be associated with each tree I am going to look at three particular trees linked with three aspects of the Druid path. These are the Birch, which is the particular symbol of Bards, the Yew, symbol of the Ovates, and the Oak, symbol of the Druids.

## **Birch**

Birch was one of the first trees to emerge from the glacial age. It is native to Britain and flourishes on light soils. Birch is often known as the Lady of the Woods and when seen in moonlight She looks mysterious and lovely. "As birch is one of the first trees to leaf in the spring it is known as the tree of inception." (Paterson, p94) It is also one of the first to reclaim an area of woodland. It is also known as a tree of cleansing and new beginnings. It is this aspect of beginnings that links it to the Bardic grade as in most druid traditions the first step on the path is that of Bard. The other link to the path of the Bard is that of creation or generation of new things as all Bards are involved in some way in creating art be it poetry or prose, song or story, painting, sculpture or whatever the art form. In Ogham it is the first letter Beith and in Runes it comes in Tyr's eight and is called Beorc. The cleansing properties of birch have been used for many generations in the past for birch rods used on prisoners and on unruly children. Birch is linked to the planet Venus and to the Moon, the Young Goddess, Healing and the colour white. Traditional broomsticks are made from Birch twigs and some link the Birch moon to the period of time following Samhain. In the Nordic tradition Birch is the symbol of the Earth mother and represents the feminine powers of growth, healing and the natural world. It is linked to both Frigg and Freya. It is also linked to the northern lights and through them to Arianrhod. It's also linked to the Anglo-Saxon Goddess Eostre and the Celtic Goddess Brigid. The word Birch is said to come from a Sanskrit word meaning "a tree whose bark is used to write upon" and it is said that some of the first writings were written on birch bark. "The first versions of the ancient Indian *Vedas* were written on birch bark and in ancient Ireland, the 'mother of learning' (as Birch was sometimes called) presides over the alphabet". (Hageneder, 2000, p98) Various origins of the words Beith, Bith or Beth, the Gaelic words for Birch, are given as meaning "existence", "enduring", "world" and "shinning one". Magically birch can be used to invoke the qualities of love and beauty into all workings. Strips of the bark when burnt give a clear blue flame and scent the air aiding concentration.

## Yew

The yew is a slow growing evergreen. It's also known to be poisonous. Yew grows in an unusual way in that as it gets older branches grow down into the ground to form new layers to the trunk, it can continue to grow even when the original and central trunk has rotted away leaving a hollow centre. In this way it renews itself. It is now known that Yew trees can live thousands of years. Because of this ability to renew itself and because of its sheer age it is linked to Death and Rebirth. It may be that in both ancient Hindu and Celtic cultures the Yew was associated with higher knowledge and wisdom. It is both the link to death and the link to higher knowledge that connect the Ovate grade to the Yew because the Ovate works with death and rebirth and knowledge from beyond or divination. Many Yews in the British Isles are found in churchyards again linking it to death and the life beyond although most of the oldest ones were there long before the Churches. Interestingly "nearly all of the other remaining yews exceeding four thousand years of age, are found to the north of the circular tumulus." (Hageneder, 2000, p229) He goes on to describe how the orientation of yews planted by ancient sites changes over time. Hageneder also links the Yew to Yggdrasil stating on p230 that the "Old Norse *barraskr* denotes 'needle-ash,' and it is described as evergreen. However, the Ash bears no needles nor is it evergreen." In Greece and Italy it was sacred to Hecate. In some Celtic legends the yew tree is said to spring into growth upon the graves of lovers linking their graves, and thus them, in death as well as life. Yew is linked to the planet Saturn and to the colour blue. In the Ogham it is known as Ioho and in Runes as Yr in Hagall's eight. Iona which has strong links to rebirth and reincarnation is said to have originally been called Ioho or Ioha linking it to the Yew. Yew sticks can be used for divination either by themselves or inscribed with ogham symbols. Sprigs of yew can be used to aid in purification especially at midwinter.

## Oak

The mighty Oak is known as the Father of the Woods and is considered to be the king of trees. It grows in lowland forests and it a very distinctive tree. It is sacred to the Gods Lugh, Dagda, Taranis, Thor and Zeus and to the Goddesses Diana, Demeter, Ceridwen and Brighid. It is linked to the planet Jupiter but also closely associated with the Sun. Its colours are black and dark brown. The earliest spirits of Greek mythology were the oak tree spirits known as Dryads. Oaks are often struck by lightning but survive symbolising spirituality which is well grounded but reaches to the heights. The roots of the oak are as deep as the branches are tall. Oak trees are seen as a doorway to the mysteries and to the other worlds and it is this which particularly links them to Druids because

among other things Druids walk the paths to otherworlds to learn, to heal and to serve their communities. The oak also gives courage, strength and protection. It is a tree of the height of Summer and many green man carvings are of oaks leaves. The most famous link between druids and oaks is that of the mistletoe when it grows on the oak. This is quite a rare combination and ancient druids are said to have seen the God residing in the oak and that the white mistletoe berries symbolised the semen of the God. They would collect the berries at the winter solstice by lopping off the mistletoe with a golden sickle (probably not pure gold but perhaps gold plated or maybe just bronze), representing the moon. Because the mistletoe does not root itself in the earth it was said to fall from the heavens and so to keep it's magical properties it was not allowed to fall to the ground, but was caught in a cloth. When laid upon the altar it brings fertility to the Earth by symbolically representing the semen of the Sun God given to the Earth Goddess, renewing her fecundity. Magically oak can be used at any of the major festivals and is particularly used for Midsummer fires. An acorn necklace can be made and worn during magical workings to aid in contacting the feminine deities associated with the oak. When gathering herbs that need to be free from the touch of human hands it is traditional to use oak sticks to touch the herbs.

These are just a few of the many links you can find in books for these trees. However, the Birch I know best emphasised a message for me of the importance of new beginnings and that every day can be a new beginning. Oak showed me how it can be a doorway not only to other realms but into the next stage of my own life. Yew taught me that while time and the cycle of existences stretches out behind us and in front of us, it is important to focus your energy on living in the present.

You can study a range of books for meanings of various trees. You can learn such meanings off by heart but it is much better to get to know individual trees yourself. Whatever any tree teaches may not be something you find anywhere else but it will be a message for you so don't second guess yourself or dismiss what they have to teach you. Trees can be individuals too so don't expect that every Birch or Rowan or Ash will have exactly the same message for you as another one. Not only can they be individual but it may be that you will be given different messages at different times depending on your needs and circumstances. In my opinion it is in listening to what the trees have to tell you that you tap into the true wisdom of the trees, books may help but getting to know the trees themselves is better.

## **Further Reading**

Hageneder, F. (2000) **The Spirit of Trees: Science, Symbiosis and Inspiration** Belgium: Floris Books

Hageneder, F. (2001) **The Heritage of Trees: History Culture and Symbolism** Belgium: Floris Books

Murray, L. & C. (1988) **The Celtic Tree Oracle: A System of Divination** London: Connections Book Publishing

Paterson, J.M. (1996) **Tree Wisdom** London: Thorsons

## **For Identifying Trees and Practical uses**

Aas G. and Riedmiller A. (2001) **Trees of Britain and Europe** London: HarperCollins

Coombes A. J. (1992) **Trees** London: Dorling Kindersley Books

Phillips R. (1978) **Trees in Britain, Europe and North America** London: Macmillan

Polunin, O. (1977) **Trees and Bushes of Britain and Europe** Herts: Paladin