THE CULTURE AND SPIRITUALITY OF WOODLANDS

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Abstract

There was once a deep-rooted connection between people and trees. Ireland is almost unique in the developed world in experiencing near-total deforestation within living memory. In the process, we lost our intimacy with nature, which we are only now tentatively re-establishing.

We have some evidence of our ancient ancestors' spiritual relationship with trees, and we find that they possessed a richness missing from modern Irish life, of practicality combined with respect and reverence.

Our recent history - of colonisation and dispossession, of hunger for land - became a potent folk memory, which permeated our attitudes towards the way we treated nature up to the present day.

This generation is less affected by the old folk memory. The economic 'spring tide', which has lifted our boats, insulated us from the harsher side of nature, and it gives us some breathing space to look more sympathetically on the many gifts trees and woodlands give us.

But other powerful forces are also at work. Now, nature tends not so much to be fought against as dismissed, in the midst of an unprecedented development boom. We are also losing that link with farming and the soil — so important for a healthy relationship with nature.

Ireland's young tree movement is trying (and sometimes bravely succeeding) in promoting a new tree culture, a culture of ownership of something we had previously considered as not belonging to us; a challenging task for a nation preoccupied with prosperity and materialism.

This paper examines our past and present relationship with trees and woods and explores our hopes and expectations for the future.

Main text

The way we think about trees and woods will tend to determine the way we treat them. The actions of a utilitarian society will be very different from those of a society in which trees and woods fulfil many functions. The title of the paper I have been asked to write includes the word 'culture'. If we have to mention culture, in the broad sense of the word, we have either lost it or are on the way to losing it. For culture is something essentially unconscious. It is about that which we are or that which we do. We should not have to dissect and analyse it. I think it is appropriate to think in these terms, because for as long as I have known Ireland, it has been a society which lacks a tree culture.

Having lost that tree culture, efforts are being made to reclaim it, or to make a new culture. The Native Woodland Conference can be seen as one element of this campaign. We are not trying to pretend that we have a particular culture, as we do at a broader, national level. We already freely admit that we have lost our tree culture and that we must begin again from scratch.

The tragic loss of Ireland's tree culture happened many centuries ago. The story is one that has been told many times, of an island's woodlands which were already seriously depleted even before the more concerted assault by the colonising power began in the 1500s. It is a story of an island's timber reserves which became so depleted that, in just one century, Ireland ceased to be a net exporter of timber and became a net importer. Ireland is in an almost unique position in Europe: it has undergone almost total deforestation. Was this the result of Ireland's domination and exploitation by England? If we had retained our Gaelic laws and customs and were in charge of our own destiny, might we be facing the same situation? It is quite possible that we might.

Wood was our ancestors' chief resource. Ancient writers wisely observed that forests always recede as civilisations develop. The Roman poet Ovid, for example, wrote that during the '*Golden Age*' before civilisation began, '*even the pine tree stood on its own hills*', but when the Iron Age succeeded it, '*the mountain oak and the pine were felled*.' This trend is explained simply by the fact that trees have been the staple fuel and building material of almost every society for over 5000 years, right up until coal and then oil and concrete displaced it from the mid-1800s onwards. Without vast supplies of wood from forests, the great civilisations of Sumeria, Assyria, Egypt, Greece and Rome, China, Western Europe and North America would never have emerged.

In his book *The Forest Journey*, John Perlin (2001) observed that:

> *'Wood is the unsung hero of the technological revolution that has brought us from a stone and bone culture to our present age.'*

The result of generations of exploitation without replenishment has been the total annihilation of the ancient wildwood and the almost total destruction of our native forests, of which only tiny remnants remain. This exploitation continued even as the island was being reforested with plantations. It is continuing even today, as developments nibble away small areas of native woodland. For a long time, trees and woods were treated at best indifferently and at worst in a hostile way. It has proved extremely difficult to protect these remnants where they are owned privately rather than by the State. Native woodlands are still treated as the poor relation in current State policy. Why has it been so difficult to conserve even these tiny remnants, considered by many conservationists to be the most important part of our national heritage?

Societies which have undergone great technological change have also tended to destroy their forests (except possibly Japan), whereas traditional societies have tended to conserve their forests. Throughout the world, wherever traditional societies or their remnants survive, a common theme is their respect — and reverence — for forests. The reason seems to be that trees and forests are integral parts of their spirituality.

An example of this traditional attitude towards trees is the Haida, the indigenous people of the Queen Charlotte Islands in Western Canada. Their trees and forest ecosystem are under threat from the logging industry. Western red cedar is the loggers' favourite because of its excellent timber qualities. But it is also at the heart of the Haida culture. Their belief is that the first peoples who lived on the islands thousands of years ago turned into cedar trees. They recognise that the spirit of these peoples is still in the trees and whenever they go into the forest to harvest timber, they understand there is a life force for which they ask permission to cut down a tree. Like with many indigenous societies, they possess an approach to forests and to nature in general which combines utility with respect.

Insofar as we understand the culture and traditions of our own ancestors, this was the case in Ireland as well. At a time when the forest was more abundant, and when wood was such a vital resource, it is no wonder that the forest was perceived as the primary matrix of our ancestors' sustenance, culture and spirituality. A mythology and folklore about each individual species of tree developed from these material and spiritual needs.

Our ancestors learned, through centuries of intimate living with forests, not only a myriad of practical uses for each tree but also understood the spirit of each species of tree itself. They came to know which trees were benign and which were benevolent. For these early peoples, the forest was a food store, a source of medicines, firewood, shelter and the centre of their spiritual world.

The time-honoured attitude of reverential and grateful interdependence with the living earth, although still embraced by the early Celtic church, was gradually superseded by a belief system which separated the 'spiritual' from the 'material'. The idea that human beings have dominion over the earth and its creatures is Judeo-Christian. It was propagated by successive rulings of the Christian church which made it heretical to venerate objects like trees. Trees were once highly regarded in ancient Irish societies. The Brehon laws had a hierarchy of fines to be paid by anyone who cut down a tree without permission. If the last native forests were finally devastated by the colonisers from the 1500s onwards, the Christian church did nothing to stop them and might have endorsed their actions.

I was brought up in an orthodox Irish Roman Catholic atmosphere, but also with a background in natural history. This stimulated me to ask why there was no mention of reverence for Nature within the Irish church. Why should Nature — on which we depend for our sustenance and our ultimate survival — be almost completely ignored?

My answer to this was that the educational and cultural backgrounds of members of the church did not include such interests. Additionally members of the dominant church came from a wider society which held a similar attitude. However, although organised religion has lost the power and influence in society it once possessed, there is still an indifference to Nature. This is compounded by our unfortunate history, in which trees and woodlands were associated with the privileged classes.

The phrase, "You can't eat the scenery" is often quoted and, indeed, if Nature is seen merely as a pleasant backdrop to that which is seen as the real drama of human life, I don't see us making much headway in advancing a true conservation culture. If we are to succeed in reversing centuries of indifference and exploitation of native woodlands, we need to re-align or re-focus our efforts.

We have tended to promote the ecological value of our native woodlands, and of course, this is undeniably true. Most campaigners come from a scientific background, so this approach is understandable. But it will not be enough. John Feehan (2004) explains how we need to approach the problem, when he spoke during a presentation on conservation of biodiversity:

> "*We need to reach a point of being able to say: This enhances my world, enhances my life, makes the world a better and richer place, with same kind of reason and sincerity as we would say a better health service or transport system makes my world a richer place to live in."*

This means that we have to make native woodland conservation, and conservation in general, something that ordinary people can relate to in a deeper way. And education and ethics are at least as important as science.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, as we think, so do we act. The challenge to this generation of conservationists is to make conservation meaningful and to instil reverence for the richness of native trees and woodlands. The best way we can do this is by harnessing the skills and talents that are undoubtedly out there; to bring as many people into intimate contact with Nature as possible, preferably from an early age. In this context, the People's Millennium Forests Project and the Woodlands of Ireland group have made a brave start in democratising native woodlands and their conservation.

References

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