

SCOTLAND'S SACRED TREE: THE FORTINGALL YEW

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Introduction¹

The sacred tree is a fundamental symbol in the Pagan religions of the ancient world, and certain sacred trees were successfully integrated into Christian landscapes and folk religion after the conversion of Europe to Christianity in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The power of the tree as symbol is principally derived from the fact that trees can function as homologues of both human beings and of the physical universe. Thus, archaeologist Miranda Aldhouse-Green notes that “both trees and humans ... have ‘bones’, both ‘bleed’ when injured, and both trees and people stand tall and upright”.² This resemblance between humans and trees is also noted in the *New Testament*. When Jesus restores the sight of a blind man, he says, ‘I can see people; they look like trees to me, but they are walking about’.³ The *hamadryads*, classical Greek tree-spirits whose lives were coterminous with the trees they inhabited, may have been believed to exist due to this resemblance between trees and people. Trees are alive in a way that stones, however impressive, cannot be. In the landscape trees are frequently dominant and inspirational, like the giant California redwoods (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) that grow to great heights, or the ancient Huon pines of Tasmania, which can live for thousands of years. With regard to the physical universe, comparative studies of sacred trees foreground two particularly important (and related) meanings: the tree as *axis mundi* (“‘hub’, or ‘axis’ of the universe”);⁴ and the tree as *imago mundi* (representation of the world), which often took the form of a human being (reinforcing the identity of tree, world and human).

¹ My thanks are due to my research assistant, Zoe Alderton, who assisted me with the initial library searches and note-taking for this article, and to Don Barrett, whose tireless encouragement has contributed in no small way to my research over the years.

² Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Seeing the Wood for the Trees: The Symbolism of Trees and Wood in Ancient Gaul and Britain* (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, 2000), p. 22

³ Mark 8:24, in Alexander Jones (gen. ed.), *The Jerusalem Bible: New Testament* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1974), p. 56.

⁴ Lawrence E. Sullivan, ‘Axis Mundi’, in Mircea Eliade (gen. ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), Vol. 2, p. 20.

The *axis mundi* is a centre, a pole that runs through the multiple levels of the universe, linking heaven, earth and the underworld. Many images, symbols and structures, such as temples, mountains, cities, and ladders that extend through the worlds, can function as *axes mundi*.⁵ As such, the tree is a logical candidate for this role, and the pillar that represents it is an abstraction from the living tree performing the same function. The sacredness of the tree as *axis mundi* may derive from its linking of the profane human region with the abodes of the gods and the dead.⁶ Connections with the gods abound in Indo-European myths concerning sacred trees: in ancient Greek religion Zeus was particularly associated with the oak and spoke to his petitioners through the rustling leaves of the oaks in the sanctuary of Dodona; in the *Atharva Veda* the Vedic sky god, Varuna, resting on the primal waters, generated the world when the cosmic tree grew from his navel; and the Scandinavian Óðinn sacrificed himself by hanging from the tree Yggdrasill, which sustained the nine worlds.⁷ Finally, the tree as *axis mundi* also acts to map territory, and may serve as the centre of a region; this is the reason that Pagan and Early Christian Irish kings were inaugurated under a sacred tree, called in Irish *bile* (plural *biledha*).

This article considers the most famous Scottish sacred tree, the Fortingall Yew, which is claimed to be one of the oldest trees in Europe.⁸ This remarkable tree dominates a site associated with the beginnings of Christianity in Scotland and dedicated to St Coeddi (reputedly the Bishop of Iona from *circa* 697 to 712 CE). ‘Fortingall’ is believed to be derived from the Gaelic *fortair* (stronghold) and *cill* (chapel or church), and there are prehistoric monuments in the vicinity of the churchyard that suggest humans have inhabited this part of Perthshire for at least five thousand years, a period often claimed as the age of the Yew itself. Like Britain’s most famous sacred tree, the Glastonbury Thorn, the Fortingall Yew is wrapped in many layers of meaning: it connects Scotland through legend directly with the life of Jesus; it is located at the juncture of Paganism and Christianity and retains significance for both contemporary Pagans and

⁵ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image*, with M. J. Abadie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Vol. 2, p. 190.

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard Trask (Harmondsworth: Penguin Arkana, 1989 [1964]), pp. 117-118, and pp. 125-126, describes shamanic ascents of sacred trees to access the spirit realm.

⁷ Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), pp. 20-21.

⁸ Alan Mitchell, ‘Notable Trees’, *Transactions of the Leicester Literary & Philosophical Society*, Vol. 88 (1994), p. 13.

Christians; it has literary connections with the royal family; and it has entered the popular imagination through art, literature and folklore. This article first considers the sacred tree in general, then the venerable yew trees of Britain and their connections with the Pagan and Christian religions. The focus then shifts to the Fortingall Yew specifically, assembling antiquarian accounts, folklore and popular cultural traditions to investigate its religious and spiritual importance in history, clarify its contemporary significance, and meditate upon its possible future.

The Impressive Yews of Britain

Trees, as Maurice Bloch observes, are, for humans, ‘good to think with.’ Bloch’s explanation resonates with a multitude of twenty-first century concerns, including those of environmentalists, modern Pagans, green Christians, and deep ecologists. He argues that the ‘symbolic power of trees comes from the fact that they are good substitutes for humans. Their substitutability is due to their being different, yet continuous with humans, in that they both share “life”.’⁹ In the past, as part of nature individual trees and groves of multiple trees were infused with the presence of deities minor and major; from the *hamadryads* to Zeus himself, the sky-father and lord of the Olympian gods. Trees have served to mark out physical territory, and to confer identity on the peoples who lived in within the vicinity of their sheltering branches. They functioned as meeting places for religious and political assemblies, and were places of Druidic education. For the Celts ‘[t]he oak, the ash, the yew, and the hazel were, in particular, held as sacred and central to spiritual practice’.¹⁰

Yews are found in many British churchyards, and may perhaps be a symbol of life, death and rebirth due to their capacity to live to a great age. Della Hooke notes that ‘Romano-British burials have been found close to an ancient yew at Claverley in Shropshire, and early British memorial stones, probably marking a grave, beneath a yew (or yews) at Llanerfyl in Gwynedd ... some of the oldest yews may have been planted by the very first Christians at a site, marking early saints’ cells’.¹¹ The common yew (*taxus baccata*) is an unusually long-lived tree. The circumference of the

⁹ Maurice Bloch, ‘Why Trees, Too, Are Good to Think With: Towards an Anthropology of the Meaning of Life’, in Laura Rival (ed.), *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspective on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), p. 40.

¹⁰ A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, ‘Re-claiming Place: The Millennium Forest, Borgie, North Sutherland, Scotland’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 20, No. 5 (2002), p. 549.

¹¹ Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), p. 41.

trunk of the tree grows incrementally larger each year, meaning that the girth of the tree is a reflection of its age. Because of potential inconsistencies in the measuring process and the uneven (or split) trunks common to yews, the exact age of a specific tree is very difficult to determine. Carbon dating can also be unreliable, as the oldest parts of the yew often die and are replaced by younger growth, which reinforces its suitability to symbolize death and rebirth.¹² Martin and Nigel Palmer's research indicates that the majority of yew trees in excess of 1,500 years old can be found in churchyards, 'and in most cases the churches do not pre-date the yews'.¹³ They note that most of these yews are in close proximity to standing stones, stone circles, and pre-Christian burial sites, and argue that the tree's long life and ability to survive makes it a sacred symbol of eternity.¹⁴ The yew tree is also evergreen, which may contribute to its associations with life, regeneration, and immortality.

Beliefs concerning Christian sacred trees are a synthesis of different religious ideas. Medieval Christians often adapted Pagan understandings of trees. For example, *The Dream of the Rood*, an Anglo-Saxon poem, is about the cross upon which Christ was crucified. It contains lines from the perspective of the wood itself, and also the voice of the poet 'Hoping to see that tree of glory/ And worship it well'. Chris Smout argues that those elements in this text dealing with human sacrifice and the integral part played by a tree may be seen as an attempt to translate pre-existing Paganism into the Christian faith.¹⁵ The *Dream of the Rood* possibly had a Pagan prototype, perhaps concerning the death of a god of justice and goodness, such as the Scandinavian deity Balder. The cross is explicitly called a 'tree', and the reference to the 'gallows tree' recalls the sacrificial death of Óðinn, hanged and pierced by a spear on the world-tree, Yggdrasill.¹⁶ The same collocation of motifs - Christ, Woden, runes, and plant life - is found in the Anglo-Saxon *Nine Herbs Charm*.¹⁷ The *Dream of the Rood*, although written in Anglo-Saxon, forms a bridge to Scotland, as lines from it are carved in runes on the eighth-century Ruthwell Cross.

¹² Andrew Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales* (Wales: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2009), pp. 18-19.

¹³ Martin and Nigel Palmer, *The Spiritual Traveler: England, Scotland, Wales* (New Jersey: Hidden Spring, 2000), p. 61.

¹⁴ Palmer and Palmer, *The Spiritual Traveler*, p. 62.

¹⁵ Chris Smout, 'Introduction: Trees in Scottish Life', in T. C. Smout (ed.), *People and Woods in Scotland: A History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Cusack, *The Sacred Tree*, p. 129.

¹⁷ Ralph W. V. Elliott, 'Runes, Yews, and Magic', *Speculum*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 1957), p. 257.

Ruthwell, once within the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, is now part of Dumfriesshire, and the great standing cross (now sheltered within Ruthwell Kirk, the oldest surviving building in south-west Scotland, rather than exposed to the weather) is a pillar monument that functions in the same fashion as a sacred tree, as a marker of sacred territory and a place of assembly for the faithful.¹⁸

Other tree-related beliefs are found depicted in Christian architecture in Scotland. For example, Rosslyn Chapel in the village of Roslin on the outskirts of Edinburgh has a representation that can be interpreted as a world-tree, on the so-called 'Apprentice Pillar'. The vines and grapes that represent Christ bond him again with Óðinn, in another syncretic approach to sacred plants.¹⁹ There are also a number of trees that are associated with notable individuals or events. These include Malloch's Oak in Strathallen, Perthshire, which commemorates a greedy grain merchant hanged there in a time of famine,²⁰ and the rowan planted in 1811 on the grave of the 'dwarf David Ritchie, immortalised by Walter Scott in his *The Black Dwarf* (1816)'.²¹ Ritchie, a deeply superstitious man, is buried in Manor Church near Peebles in the Scottish Borders, and believed that the rowan would protect his soul. In Scotland, trees are strongly connected with the human soul in birth and death, and have often been planted on the graves of poets and military heroes. Trees may also commemorate important events. An example is the oak planted at Dalilea House, Moidart by the Jacobite Alasdair Macdonald in 1745, to celebrate the return of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Scottish woods have also been planted in special formations to symbolize particular events, such as the wood in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute that is shaped like a crown, to commemorate the birth of Prince Charles in 1948.²²

The tree is also understood to have played a role in transporting the dead from this world to the afterlife in prehistoric religion. It has been noted that wooden coffins originate from hollowed tree trunks, which were used

¹⁸ Catherine E. Karkov, Sarah Larratt Keefer and Karen Louise Jolly (eds), *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), *passim*.

¹⁹ Smout, 'Introduction: Trees in Scottish Life', p. 5.

²⁰ Smout, 'Introduction: Trees in Scottish Life', p. 7.

²¹ Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Mysteries and Legends* (Scotland: Spur Books, 1982), p. 26.

²² Nigel Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 32.

as both boats and in burials.²³ Nigel Pennick argues that, in Celtic folklore, trees can be receptacles for an external spirit, including those of humans who have died. Trees were also believed to assist with childbirth, as they could confer spiritual support and help to absorb labour pains. This also helped ‘a human soul residing in the tree between lives to be more readily reincarnated’.²⁴ In the context of childbirth, in 1834 John Graham Dalyell recorded the tradition of ‘hallowing the parturient with a fir candle’, a ‘battoun of fir’, which may have been regarded as an instrument of benign magic.²⁵

Trees in Scotland and other regions of Europe were frequently employed as enhancive or protective tools in sorcery. Raymond Lamont-Brown writes of the use of hazel twigs and wands by witches when cursing their victims, and notes that ‘children, particularly those born in the autumn, were given the milk of hazel nuts as their first food as a protection against bewitching’.²⁶ In contrast to this black magic, the elder and the rowntree (the rowan or mountain-ash) were used against sorcerers and witches to render their spells ineffective or to defeat spells that were in operation. Elder trees were planted in gardens specifically to protect the household ‘from evil spirits of the air, and holly nurtured for good dreams for those who dwelt within. Conifers were cultivated for a happy old age.’²⁷

The dead, too, required protection from malevolent sorcery, and the combination of trees planted in churchyards was often devised to assist with this protection. People recognized the importance of this activity; it was common for Scots in the early modern period to make provision in their will for trees to be planted on their graves for protection, as in the case of David Ritchie, mentioned above. Rowan trees were popular, as they were believed to keep witches away, but most churchyards featured ‘an amalgam of seven trees; the holly and the pine, the ash and the elm, oak, yew and hazel’, which were understood collectively to provide effective protection.²⁸

It is generally accepted that the presence of sacred trees within medieval and modern Christianity reflects the continuation of pre-Christian

²³ R. U. Sayce, ‘Canoes, Coffins, and Cooking-Troughs’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. 79 (1944-1945), pp. 106-111.

²⁴ Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*, p. 24.

²⁵ John Graham Dalyell, *The Darker Superstitions of Scotland* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1973[1834]), p. 404.

²⁶ Lamont-Brown, *Mysteries and Legends*, pp. 24-25.

²⁷ Lamont-Brown, *Mysteries and Legends*, p. 25.

²⁸ Lamont-Brown, *Mysteries and Legends*, p. 26.

traditions, despite the fact that the new religion sought to extinguish Pagan beliefs and practices. The widespread deforestation that took place in the early medieval period involved the destruction of sacred trees, such as that cut down by Saint Martin of Tours in the fourth century and the ‘Oak of Jupiter’ in Hesse that Saint Boniface felled in 724 CE.²⁹ The presence of yews in churchyards is a particularly prominent example of the survival of sacred trees, and the next section discusses the yew’s connections with death and rebirth in greater detail. Roland Bechmann has observed that the Christian church controlled tree veneration by channelling it into ‘respectable cults’; thus, many holy trees have statues, votive offerings, or crosses, attached to them nowadays.³⁰ Ralph Elliott states that the use of yew foliage in Palm Sunday rituals is another such example, as the yew’s symbolism of death and immortality is particularly appropriate for this Christian festival.³¹

The Fortingall Yew in History and Legend

Today the Fortingall Yew presents as badly damaged, and it has been described as such for centuries. In 1769 Thomas Pennant noted ‘the *remains* of a prodigious yew-tree, whose *ruins* meafured fifty-fix feet’.³² In 1777 it was observed to be ‘decay’d’.³³ In 1840 it was called ‘a wreck of departed grandeur’.³⁴ In 1868, Leo Hartley Grindon lamented that the trunk of the Fortingall Yew had fallen in and what remained was ‘little more than a shell’.³⁵ These sources, which reflect the craze for measuring ‘superlative trees’ among leisured gentlemen in the eighteenth century,³⁶ reveal an ongoing interest in the welfare of the tree and its enduring importance as a botanical specimen in the United Kingdom. More recently, in March of 2000, the tree underwent ‘delicate trimming work’ to save it after rot, fire,

²⁹ Willibald, ‘Life of Boniface’, in C. H. Talbot (ed. and trans.) *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954), pp. 45-46.

³⁰ Roland Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, trans. Katharyn Dunham (New York: Paragon House, 1990[1984]), p. 279.

³¹ Elliott, ‘Runes, Yews, and Magic’, p. 259.

³² Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, 4th edition (London: B. White, 1776[1769]), p. 103 (emphasis added).

³³ John Lightfoot, *Flora Scotica*, Vol. II (London: B. White, 1777), p. 627.

³⁴ J. S. Henslow, *Le Bouquet des Souvenirs: A Wreath of Friendship* (London: Robert Tyas, 1840), p. 177.

³⁵ Leo Hartley Grindon, *The Trees of Old England* (London: F. Pitman, 1868), p. 68.

³⁶ Smout, ‘Introduction: Trees in Scottish Life’, p. 7.

and vandalism had threatened its very survival.³⁷ With regard to the contested issue of its age, the prosaic botanical facts are that the ‘trunk of the Fortingall Yew is approximately 5.4 metres in diameter. Many estimations of age have been made, ranging from 1,500 to 5,000 years’.³⁸ It is likely that at least some of the damage is due to ritual use. The folklorist Katharine Briggs asserted that Beltane fires, celebrating the Celtic festival of 1 May, were lit in the middle of the Fortingall Yew,³⁹ while archaeologist Lloyd Laing has verified that Beltane fire-leaping (a ritual ensuring fertility and the conception of a child to couples who successfully cleared the flames hand-in-hand) continued in the village of Fortingall until 1924.⁴⁰

While fertility rituals are applicable to a tree that embodies the notion of eternal life, the religious beliefs connected to the yew tree that have survived longest and are most influential are those connected to funeral rites.⁴¹ This is applicable to the Fortingall Yew, and provides a useful entry point to the discussion of why the yew has such a strong connection with death and the afterlife. Elliott, when sifting the connections between runic magic and the yew tree, posits that through ‘a combination of runes with yew wood magic efficacy was believed to be enhanced’, something that might occur in a variety of ways, such as the use of yew wands for divination.⁴² In terms of the argument of this article, the most important argument that Elliott makes is that there is a sound biological basis for the yew’s connection to death and rebirth; as ‘its somber [sic] appearance, together with its poisonous qualities, suggested associations with death and funerary rites, while at the same time its evergreen nature made it a symbol of immortality’.⁴³ The yew, as a poisonousness evergreen, embodies a tension or contradiction that is a natural fit with both the Pagan Druidic notion of rebirth and the Christian belief in life after death.

There is evidence that the Fortingall Yew featured in funerals conducted in the parish church. In 1849, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge recorded an ‘old custom’, in which ‘the dead to be

³⁷ Cited in David Kavanagh (ed.), *A Country Pillow Book* (United Kingdom: Dram Books, 2006), p. 18.

³⁸ P. A. Thomas and A. Polwart, ‘*Taxus baccata* L.’, *Journal of Ecology*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (June 2003), p. 498.

³⁹ Katharine M. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002[1967]), p. 99.

⁴⁰ Lloyd R. Laing, *The Archaeology of Celtic Britain and Ireland, c. AD 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 29.

⁴¹ Elliott, ‘Runes, Yews, and Magic’, pp. 259-261.

⁴² Elliott, ‘Runes, Yews, and Magic’, pp. 251, 254.

⁴³ Elliott, ‘Runes, Yews, and Magic’, p. 252.

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carried through the hollow, solemn-looking tree, in their passage to the resting-place where the rich and the poor rest together, and where the last remains of our mortal bodies shall slumber until the morning of the Resurrection'.⁴⁴ The egalitarian conclusion of this narrative suggests that this rite of passage positioned the yew as a liminal zone through which the deceased passed, after which he or she participated in the *communitas* of the pious dead. A similar text, *Beauties and Wonders of Vegetable Life*, produced by the Religious Tract Society, also records funeral processions passing through the tree. It contained a poem:

The funeral yew! The funeral yew!
How many a fond and tearful eye
Hath hither turned its pensive view,
And through its dark leaf sought the sky.



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Plate 1. A Funeral Passing Through the Fortingall Yew⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *The Life of a Tree* (London: S. & J. Bentley and Henry Fley, 1849), pp. 188-190.

⁴⁵ The Religious Tract Society, *Beauties and Wonders of Vegetable Life*, (The Religious Tract Society: London, 1866), p. 37.

This text suggested that the immortality glimpsed through the natural world, here exemplified by the Fortingall Yew, should lessen the Christian's grief for the pious dead. The author(s) cite Biblical verses to this effect (1 *Thessalonians* 4:13-14 and 2 *Timothy* 1:10).⁴⁶ These funeral rites are interesting in that the dead pass through the tree, whereas it was considered unlucky for a living person to sleep beneath one. With regard to the prevalence of yews in churchyards, and their unquestionable connection with the dead, Elliott records a macabre Breton superstition that 'out of the mouth of each corpse buried in the churchyard there grows a yew root to support the customary large ... yew. Care is taken not to cut down these churchyard yews or to pick their leaves'.⁴⁷ Thus, the corpses of the faithful are the source of the yews; the yews are, in a certain sense, members of the community, manifestations of the deceased parishioners. This notion, though it occurs in a Christian context, is close to Pennick's Pagan folkloric notion of the souls of the dead awaiting rebirth in the bodies of trees, referred to above.

It was noted earlier that the Fortingall Yew, similarly to the Glastonbury Thorn, is a holy tree that links modern Britain with the life of Jesus and the world of the New Testament. The Glastonbury Thorn, according to 'Somerset tradition', was originally the staff of the tin-merchant Joseph of Arimathea, which burst into flower when he thrust it into the soil of Wearyall Hill; a powerful symbolic enactment of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (in that what was dead was miraculously restored to life). It was claimed that Jesus had visited Glastonbury as a child in the company of Joseph, and that they had erected a church to the Virgin Mary. This esoteric Christian belief was referred to in the preface to William Blake's great poem 'Milton', best known today as the popular hymn 'Jerusalem'.⁴⁸ The Fortingall Yew is associated with a myth concerning Pontius Pilate, described as the son of a local woman and a Roman ambassador. He is said to have played under the tree's branches as a child.⁴⁹ Later, it is claimed, he studied with the Scottish Druids. His question to Jesus, 'What is truth?' is claimed as a seminal conundrum of

⁴⁶ The Religious Tract Society, *Beauties and Wonders of Vegetable Life*, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁷ Elliott, 'Runes, Yews, and Magic', p. 253.

⁴⁸ Justine Digance and Carole M. Cusack, 'Glastonbury: A Tourist Town for All Seasons', in Graham Dann (ed.), *The Tourist as a Metaphor of the Social World* (Wallingford and New York: CABI International, 2002), pp. 263-280.

⁴⁹ Dinah and Ben Hatch, *Scotland with Your Family: From Peaceful Highlands to Cosmopolitan Cities* (London: Wiley, 2008), p. 123.

‘Druidic wisdom’.⁵⁰ Palmer and Palmer admit that ‘[t]he legend is very unlikely to be true but that is not what matters’. Rather, they argue that the enduring sacred nature of the site (as indicated by its association with the Pilate narrative) is the important factor. This demonstrates that the Fortingall Yew may function to some degree as what tourism academic David Brown calls a ‘genuine fake’, where one may feel the presence of the sacred even if he or she suspects the narrative of Pilate to be fictional.⁵¹

This legend of Pilate’s youth and education in the shadow of the Fortingall Yew further links Scotland’s sacred tree to the Glastonbury Thorn. In the Victorian era many ‘traditions’ were instituted in order to link the much loved Queen Victoria to a multitude of communities in Britain. When the Glastonbury Thorn on Wearyall Hill was brutally attacked on 8 December 2010, the *Telegraph* journalist Richard Savill noted that each year ‘a sprig from another Holy Thorn tree in the town is cut for the Queen, a tradition which dates back more than a hundred years’.⁵² Queen Victoria loved the Scottish highlands, and in particular the region of Perthshire around Atholl and Breadalbane. The legend of Pilate and the Fortingall Yew featured in the royal-themed poem ‘The Queen’s Visit’ (1869), by the prominent Belfast-born Irish poet, antiquarian, barrister, archivist and Presbyterian, Samuel Ferguson (1810-1986). Ferguson shared the Queen’s passion for Scotland, and many of his poems appeared in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. He wrote of the Fortingall Yew:

Within those Roman lines, well-nigh
Two thousand years ago,
Occurred, what must affect our race
While floods of time shall flow.
For then, the legend says, was born,
Beside the frowning pass,
False Pilate – he whose judgment seat
By Judah’s temple was.
Whose yielding will, time-serving ways,

⁵⁰ Palmer and Palmer, *The Spiritual Traveler*, p. 265.

⁵¹ Palmer and Palmer, *The Spiritual Traveler*, p. 61. See also David Brown, ‘Genuine Fakes’, in Tom Selwyn (ed.), *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth-Making in Tourism* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), pp. 33-47.

⁵² Richard Savill, ‘Vandals Destroy Holy Thorn Tree in Glastonbury’, *The Telegraph*, 9 December (2010), at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/religion/8192459/Vandals-destroy-Holy-Thorn-tree-in-Glastonbury.html>, accessed 21 December 2010.

Gave up to death and shame,
At Jew's request, the Holy One,
Of ever-blessed name.
Beyond, – Glen Lyon House appears,
And, 'neath the frowning rock,
Fam'd Fortingall, whose aged yew,
Still braves the tempest shock.⁵³

Fortingall Yew in New Age Beliefs and Contemporary Popular Culture

The Fortingall Yew's great age and evocation of eternal life has been inspirational for a number of 'New Age' writers and spiritual teachers. It remains a pilgrimage destination, powerfully attractive to those who seek sites of spiritual power in Britain.⁵⁴ Martin K. Ettington's 'how to' guide for personal immortality cited the Yew as an 'inspirational organism',⁵⁵ and Jean Shinoda Bolen's manifesto for social rejuvenation, *Like a Tree: How Trees, Women, and Tree People Can Save the Planet* (2011) saluted the Fortingall Yew as a notable sacred tree.⁵⁶ The New Age shaman Grandfather Michael has described the yew as the most knowledgeable of trees, and one possessed of transformational wisdom. He argued that various botanical aspects of the plant held great symbolic meaning, and used the Fortingall Yew as an example. Grandfather Michael explained that the early flowering of the Yew is a source of wonder in the New Year, in the middle of the northern European winter, and thus evidence for its overcoming of death.

Further, the Yew's poisonous quality reminds humanity that 'if respect is not shown in a ritualistic or revered way' harm may result. In addition to its longevity, Grandfather Michael asserted the tree is sacred because of the depth of its roots, which draw 'the Great Mystery through Mother Earth'. He claimed the Yew was the centre of Druidic ritual, and that no building was erected near it because 'no structure could hold or contain the energy of the Dryads when they began resonating together'. Grandfather Michael asserted that even the early British Christians noticed

⁵³ Samuel Ferguson, 'The Queen's Visit' (1869). See also Colin Graham, 'Hireling Strangers and the Wandering Throne; Ireland, Scotland and Samuel Ferguson', *Estudios Irlandeses*, No. 4 (2009), pp. 21-31.

⁵⁴ See 'A Sacred Celtic Pilgrimage to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland,' in *Journeys with Soul*, at <http://www.journeyswithsoul.com/scotland-itin.html>, accessed 8 November 2011.

⁵⁵ Martin K. Ettington, *Immortality: A History and How to Guide: Or How to Live to 150 Years and Beyond* (USA: Martin K. Ettington, 2008), p. 55.

⁵⁶ Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Like a Tree: How Trees, Women, and Tree People Can Save the Planet* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2011), p. 114.

this power and were afraid to destroy the Fortingall Yew, which is why they built churches near Pagan sanctuaries. He explained that the ‘dogmatic and fear-controlling Christian religion caused the faith of the ‘ancient teachers’ of the yew trees to be abandoned. However, he opined that the Dryads simply retreated within their yew trees and may be approached by those who understand them. Grandfather Michael advocated approaching the yew trees in a respectful manner like a child coming to a ‘senior elder’.⁵⁷ In these teachings the Fortingall Yew is presented as a symbol of the ancient past, wherein the tree is a means by which the Scottish landscape may be examined through a specifically non-Christian lens.

The Fortingall Yew has subsequently featured in adult literature, children’s novels, and a multitude of online sources. Its relevance to ‘alternative’ belief systems is also evident in fiction. For example, in celebrated Scottish novelist Iain Banks’ *The Crow Road* (1992), the protagonist Prentice McHoan’s Aunt Charlotte consummated her marriage under the Fortingall Yew, as she wished to conceive a child under the tree as she felt something so ancient ‘must be suffused with a magical Life Force’. This portion of the narrative occurs in 1969 and is connected to ‘the dear old daft old hippy days’. Aunt Charlotte is described as a ‘wacko’ for her belief in the Yew’s powers.⁵⁸

The tree has also been connected to fairies in various ways; for example, Katharine Briggs cited it as an example of a ‘fairy plant’.⁵⁹ The Fortingall Yew features in Kate Forsyth’s young adult fantasy novel *The Puzzle Ring* (2009) in which this theme is developed through the plot device that fairyland may be accessed through a gap in a yew tree.⁶⁰ Teresa Moorey’s version of the Yew Fairy, connected with the ‘deathlessness’ of the Fortingall Yew and posted on the Pagan website *The Goddess Tree*, contains a surprisingly similar view to older Christian perspectives of the tree, albeit phrased through a different interpretive framework. Moorey writes of the Yew Fairy that, ‘[s]he can bring you close to loved ones who have passed on. She also brings a sense of perspective, for all our concerns are dwarfed by the passage of the centuries’.⁶¹ This passage is replicated on

⁵⁷ Grandfather Michael, *There Is No God: Journey of an English Shaman* (Canada: Trafford, 2006), pp. 41-42.

⁵⁸ Iain Banks, *The Crow Road* (London: Abacus, 2004[1992]), p. 60.

⁵⁹ Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, p. 99.

⁶⁰ Kate Forsyth, *The Puzzle Ring* (Australia: Pan, 2009), p. 57.

⁶¹ Teresa Moorey, ‘The Yew Fairy’, *The Goddess Tree*, at <http://www.thegoddess-tree.com/trees/Yew.htm>, accessed 8 November 2011.

the New Age website *The International Starseed Network* as part of their guide to fairies and elves.⁶² Finally, the imaginary product 'Fortingall's Yew Oil' features in an erotic story in which the ointment is used to soothe a man who grows wings and discovers he is of fairy origin.⁶³

This range of fictional and New Age sources reveal that the Fortingall Yew has inspired a number of New Age beliefs, in which certain notions are persistent. The Fortingall Yew has been considered a ritualistic gateway to otherworlds and a point of connection with the dead. Its evident longevity has been consistently inspirational, mentioned with equal fascination from secular scientific texts, to those in which the characteristics of fairies are discussed. This tree remains an important marker of sacred place and a focus for philosophical reflection.

Conclusion: The Fortingall Yew Present and Future

A. Fiona D. Mackenzie has written about the ways in which contemporary Scots have interacted with forests to assist in the development of an authentic identity and to contribute to the notion of cultural belonging in the Celtic context. She argued sacred trees function as 'historically mobile icons that invoke contemporary discourses of bio-diversity and sustainability'.⁶⁴ Although her focus is more on the forest as a site of visual art and aesthetic experience, it could be contended that the sense of belonging that she associated with the forest is at least quasi-religious. This is because the social scientific study of religion is largely understood in terms of individual and communal identity, and the narratives and practices that bind people together, spiritually and in terms of tradition and 'elective affinity'. Thus, the role played by sacred trees in contemporary secular society, in which they are respected in much the same manner that senior members of the community, involves the maintenance of a sense of place, history, and continuity. Bechmann has suggested that they create are important markers in a sense of eternity as several generations may interact with the same tree. They are also important markers in history.⁶⁵

⁶² 'The Yew Fairy', *Starseed Network*, at <http://www.starseeds.net/group/fairiesandelves/forum/topics/yew-fairy>, accessed 8 November 2011.

⁶³ Cincoflex, 'A Fairy Tale,' *Cincoflex's Realm*, at <http://www.cincoflex.net/im/ft/fairy2.html>, accessed 8 November 2011.

⁶⁴ Mackenzie, 'Re-claiming Place: The Millennium Forest, BORGIE, North Sutherland, Scotland', p. 548.

⁶⁵ Bechmann, *Trees and Man: The Forest in the Middle Ages*, p. 276.

Thus, the Fortingall Yew, ruined and ancient as it is, is a link between the present and the distant past for a range of contemporary communities. Christians are profoundly aware that Glen Lyon, in which it grows, 'is closely associated with the Irish abbot and scholar Saint Adomnan' of Iona, and the Yew is thus a direct witness to the missionary activities of the early medieval Celtic saints.⁶⁶ Secular commentators like Chris Smout have conceded that such ancient and meaningful trees are 'deeply moving to the human spirit'.⁶⁷ Neo-Pagan and New Age scholars, such as Nigel Pennick, have argued that even in a secular world trees mediate between the upper and lower worlds and functions as a microcosm of the universe, and that 'a notable tree is often the outward manifestation of the otherwise invisible spiritual qualities of a place'.⁶⁸ Yews have a remarkable ability to regenerate, in that their great trunks split and create huge openings through the tree, such as that seen in Fortingall churchyard, yet new foliage grows and the trees may persist for many hundreds more years. Debate as to whether the Fortingall Yew is 1,500 or 5,000 years may never be resolved, as even the botanists cannot determine the precise age of the tree. However, the tremendous importance of the Yew's great age, its status as a witness to history and its promise of immortality, make it a profound and powerful symbol for the humans who live with it, both past and present. The Fortingall Yew is thus both Scotland's sacred tree and a sacred tree that is arguably of great importance for the whole of humanity. In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, a century that promises to be dominated by the environment and humanity's urgent need to contain its rapacious treatment of nature, the future of the Fortingall Yew is deeply imbricated with the future of humanity itself.

⁶⁶ Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Smout, 'Introduction: Trees in Scottish Life', p. 7.

⁶⁸ Pennick, *Celtic Sacred Landscapes*, p. 32.