

The Sacred Trees of Ireland

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This reprint in book form of a seminal article first published in 1963 is very welcome. The author, Anthony Lucas (1911-1986), started his career as a primary-school teacher and studied for a BA and MA at night in UCD. He joined the staff of the National Museum of Ireland in 1946 and worked in the Folklife Division before becoming Director in 1954. In many ways he straddled the disciplines of archaeology, history and folklife and combined all three to bring added value to his published work. He was a very thorough researcher and combed through a great number of published historical sources from cover to cover collecting references (on index cards) to many aspects of Irish life that he was interested in. Much of this research appeared in an impressive output of publications, a full list of which, up to 1975, was compiled by Professor Etienne Rynne and has been included in this book. This shows the range of Lucas's research on many aspects of everyday life in the past from food to clothing to farming practices to many types of objects made of timber. The latter included sieves, horizontal mills, dugout canoes (now called log boats) and block-wheel cars. Of particular interest to the members of the Society of Irish Foresters would be his

important book on furze: *Furze: a Survey and History of its Uses in Ireland* (Dublin 1960).

Lucas's text on sacred trees deals with the subject under a number of headings beginning with legendary trees mentioned in early Irish literature, then moving on to trees associated with churches and saints as mentioned in early sources and finally bringing the story up to the present day with rag bushes and trees at holy wells. The information is expertly contextualised and many references to such trees in all parts of Ireland are gathered together. It was not intended to be an exhaustive list, which the author clarifies clearly at the beginning. That said he did gather an extraordinary amount of information on the subject, especially from the early sources and his text has been and will continue to be an essential starting point for anyone carrying out research into sacred trees in Ireland.

One of the words for a sacred tree in ancient Ireland was *bile* and this element can be found in many place names such as *Ráith bileach* (Rathvilly, Co. Carlow, where my mother came from) and *Dún bile* (Dunbell, Co. Kilkenny, where I grew up). There were five great legendary trees in ancient Ireland, one of which was called *Bile Tortan*, at or near Ardraccon, Co. Meath. It is said to have fallen in AD 600. Another was *Eó Mugna*, which Lucas correctly associates with Ballaghmoon (*Bealach Mugna*), Co. Kildare. The adjoining parish to the north, with its ancient church, is called Dunmanoge, the old form of which was *Mugna Moshenóc*. There is no doubt but that *Eó Mugna* was located in this area of Co. Kildare possibly in or around Dunmanoge and that Ballaghmoon gets its name from a roadway that led to or past *Mugna*. A more recent author on sacred trees, C. Zucchelli (*Trees of Inspiration*, Cork 2009, xvi), claimed that there was great uncertainty about the location of this tree mentioning two possibilities: Moone, Co. Kildare and Ballaghmoon, Co. Carlow, both of which are wrong. While there is no townland called Ballaghmoon in Co. Carlow, there is one with a remarkable castle called Ballymoon, which some writers have mistakenly identified with *Bealach Mugna*.

Sacred trees or sacred groves marked many pre-Christian sanctuaries and assembly places in Ireland, as indeed in other countries, and a number of places where Irish kings or chiefs were inaugurated had such a tree or trees. On occasion these became a target for an enemy and there are a number of references in the Irish Annals to enemy raids when sacred trees at inauguration places such as Magh Adhair (that of the O'Briens in Co. Clare) and Tullaghoge (that of the O'Neills in Co. Tyrone) were deliberately cut down.

With the arrival of Christianity, the church adopted aspects of the old religion and sacred trees are recorded at church sites and associated with saints. For example, Lucas documented references to three sacred trees at Clonmacnoise: an elm mentioned in the Calendar of Oengus; an oak that fell in AD 1013 and the yew tree of Ciarán,

which was struck by lightning in 1149, killing 113 sheep that were sheltering under it. A reference that can be added to those mentioned by Lucas is to two trees at Armagh that are referred to under the year 1165 in *Miscellaneous Irish Annals* (Dublin 1947): *Dair Colaim Cille* and *Craobh Brighde*.

In documenting sacred trees at holy wells and other named trees he makes good use of more recent folklore and nineteenth-century sources such as the Ordnance Survey Letters. One that can be added is the tree at the holy well at Mullennakill, Co. Kilkenny, an example that is in Zucchelli's book. This was cut to the butt with a chain saw a few years ago, but hopefully it has sprouted again like the better-known St. Fintan's Tree at Clonenagh, Co. Laois. The latter tree, a sycamore, fell some years ago having been poisoned by the practice of pilgrims hammering money into its trunk. The Mullennakill tree, associated with St. Moling, has the distinction of being the subject of an eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century poem in Irish – *Tiobar deas Chrann Molaing* (D. Ó hÓgáin, *Duanaire Osraíoch*, Baile Átha Cliath 1980, 61).

The association of trees with funerals and burials, as documented by Lucas, brings to mind a suggestion I made many years ago. It concerned an Early Bronze Age burial monument, consisting of a penannular ditch of horseshoe plan, which was excavated at Shanaclogh, Co. Limerick. The excavator found evidence for the burnt-out root system of a tree in the gap between the terminals of the ditch and assumed that the tree was modern. I made the suggestion that the tree could have pre-dated the burial monument and that the ditch could have been dug forming a loop out from the tree with the tree completing the symbolic circle (C. Manning, A note on sacred trees, *Emania: Bulletin of the Navan Research Group* 5 (1988), 34-35). If this was the case it was surely a sacred tree. One of the references I used was, of course, Lucas's article.

This reprint has been published to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Irish Foresters and was certainly a most appropriate way of marking the occasion. This book was and remains a pioneering and indispensable study of the subject and I personally am very glad to have it in book form to replace the battered, annotated, stapled photocopy of it that I have held onto for over forty years. The book has been very stylishly produced with a beautiful cover image by Gerhardt Gallagher, a foreword by Gerry Murphy, President of the Society of Irish Foresters, an introduction, with much useful information about the author, by Hugh Crawford, President of County Kildare Archaeological Society, and an index.

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