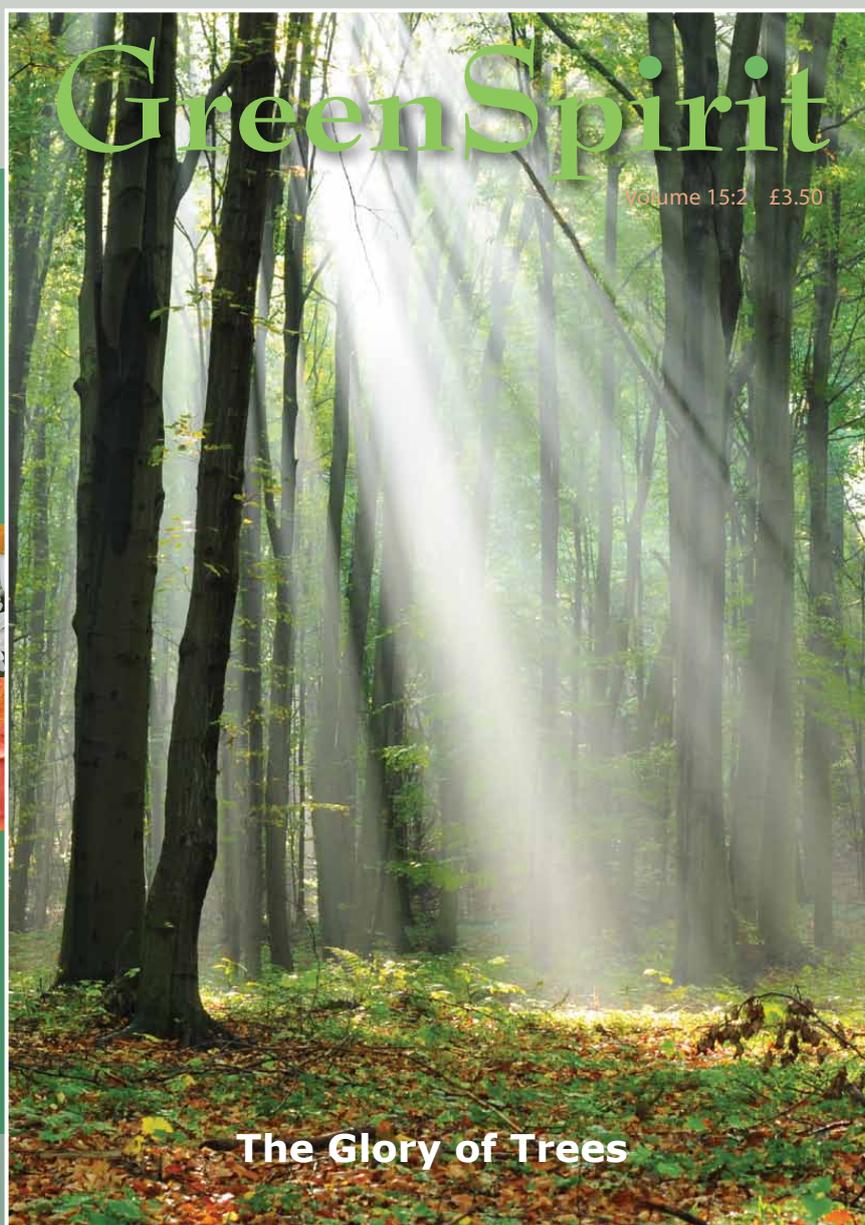


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The Oak Child

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“I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree”

This is the start to the poem ‘Trees’ by Joyce Kilmer, which has always touched me ever since I read it as a child. Recently, I heard it on the radio sung by Paul Robeson in his rich, deep, brooding tones. Memories of childhood, which I thought I’d forgotten, came flooding back...

...How old was I when I could crawl up into the belly of that old oak standing alone in the playing fields? Eight, nine, ten years old, something like that. I was small then although it was still a bit of a squeeze to make my way from her roots to the top of her trunk where I would finally emerge. I didn’t rationalise it then but to me the hollow oak was always a ‘her’.

I can remember the mouldy, musty, damp smell of the hollow oak, even during the long hot dry summer holidays of my selective memory. The oak with a very large root system and deep tap root survives well in dry environments. With the poetic and allegorical pretensions of an adult I would describe being inside the oak as feeling the ‘embrace of her womb’, but to me as a child it was a place to hide. She was a hollow oak tree and that was magical enough for me.

I knew nothing of evolution, the age of the Earth or the deep time of the universe, but I knew that my oak tree had special powers and could transport me across the cosmos. I used to play this game of imagining myself inside a living spaceship which just happened to be made of oak. The hollow insides became a control panel and I could close up the root entrance and the trunk exit and take off into the solar system. She would transport me at great speeds and with her huge prehensile branches deflect passing meteors or comets. I could land on any planet and explore. On a number of occasions I would be chased by aliens, but my oak tree would rescue me and carry me back to Earth. One of my favourite trips was through time (Dr Who had just started then) and I would go into the past and help people escape (usually young boys like myself) from wicked barons, soldiers or evil wizards or witches. Everything was possible then.

The mystic oak

Like Yggdrasil, the World Ash of Norse mythology, the oak tree was also an Axis Mundi, a link between earth and the cosmos. The oak, being one of the tallest and largest

trees in the wood (it can be over 100 feet tall and more than 30 feet round), and having a low electrical resistance due to high water content, is prone to dramatic lightning strikes. It was believed by many of the peoples of Northern Europe that the thunder god, Thor, came to earth during these storms, thus uniting heaven and earth. The oak was sacred to him. It is not uncommon for oaks to be hollow and as such they have sometimes been visualised as a way to other realities. Southern Europe also held the oak tree to be sacred. The ancient oaks at Dodona in Greece were said to be a place of oracle and divination and dedicated to Zeus, that other wielder of lightning and storms. It is not surprising, therefore, that oaks were seen as divine doors to other worlds.

The mysterious people we call Druids, who were around before the Romans arrived in these Isles, also revered the oak tree. Though little is known about them the oak seems to have played a major part in their rituals. This is not surprising as the oak can live up to 1,000 years, is one the strongest of trees and has over 300 species. Its wood has very many uses and is known to survive fire, drought and attack by pests. One derivation of the word Druid is said to mean ‘oak-knower’ or ‘oak seer of truth’. As a young boy playing in his hollow oak, I didn’t consider myself a Druid, but in my own way I knew the tree was my doorway to adventure.

The immortal oak

Nature is full of wonder and surprises. Take the example of the tiny Gall Wasp. She lays her eggs on oak leaves and the biochemicals secreted by the larvae produce a reaction in the oak tree. A large swelling develops which is known colloquially as an ‘oak apple’. This manufacture of the tree is a marvellous thing, though the biological pathways are complex and not entirely clear. Not only does it provide protection for the growing wasp larvae, it also helped to write history. Literally. Oak apples are incredibly high in tannins and when boiled up with iron salts and filtered they produce a very dark, permanent ink. This ink, called iron gall ink, became the standard writing medium in the West for well over 1,400 years and many hundreds of thousands of manuscripts were created using it. As iron gall ink is corrosive over time manuscripts have to be conserved. A good example is the Codex Alexandrinus held at the British Library, where I worked for a number of years. This is reputed to be the oldest complete Bible and dates from the 5th century CE, very early in the Christian era. Many of



Darwin's letters from the round world voyage of the Beagle were also written in iron gall ink, which is a particularly nice evolutionary link.

Little did that small boy know, travelling through time and space in his oak tree, that a tiny wasp on a huge oak produced one of the main ways for us to record our history.

The bio-diverse oak

The true magic of an oak is not in its history or mythology but in what it really represents to the Earth today. Trees are the largest living organisms on the planet and collectively help us all to breathe, provide a home for millions of diverse species, hold water and help prevent erosion, provide us with sustainable timber and firewood (if cropped correctly) and produce much food and medicines for us all.

The oak tree is one of our most important woodland trees. They support hundreds of species of insects, birds, rodents, mammals, fungi, mosses and a bewildering array of micro-organisms. The oak is reputed to support more species than any other woodland tree: at one published count she supports 284 species of insect and 324 species of lichen. She is an ark of biodiversity. Back then, hiding in her trunk, I would carefully try to avoid all the beetles, tiny worms, spiders and other nameless creepy crawlies. Sometimes I would hear noises inside and see piles of carefully excavated wood dust, perhaps of some tiny creature also setting up home.

However the real mystery of all trees, indeed most plants, lies beneath the surface of the soil. A symbiotic web of root and fungi called mycorrhiza, supports and is in turn supported by the plant. The tree provides complex carbohydrates to the mycorrhiza and receives, by way of exchange, many nutrients needed for growth. Mycorrhiza also facilitate a more efficient uptake of water than by roots alone and confers some resistance to disease. The oak has

a very extensive mycorrhizal network and is one of the trees that are dependent on this fungal symbiosis for its very survival. Healthy oaks mean a healthy forest. Though mycorrhiza was first studied in the late 19th century, it is only within the last 30 years that we are beginning to see its real interconnectedness with the natural world. Much of the universe is hidden to us and that is the same of this invisible plant kingdom. Poetically we might say that the oak tree is a 'universe in a forest of universes' because of its interconnected relationship with mycorrhiza. The ecologist James Merryweather put it more bluntly when he commented that a tree without mycorrhiza is a dead tree.

Many years and a lifetime later I was given the opportunity to reconnect with the spirit of my oak child. Sitting next to a large oak one summer I wrote my own homage to the tree I love. She was my Axis Mundi, my centre of the cosmos.

Tree Meets Me

Robin speak to me of oak
Tell me her name.
Is it growth, the how of her
Is it love, the why of her
Is it now, the where of her.

Oak speak to me of Robin
Why does he move me so.
His song rings through your arms
And rings through me.
He is an echo from your past
He is a siren to your future
He is singing now.

Why do you shine so
With your patterned trunk,
Lifting up the moss and
Growing your world.
A community of beings rest in you
A galaxy is born because of you.

Useful Reading

- Hageneder, F. *The Heritage of Trees: history, culture and symbolism*. 2001. Floris Books.
- Tudge, C. *The Secret Life of Trees: how they live and why they matter*. 2005. Penguin Books.
- Merryweather, J. *Meet the Glomales: the ecology of mycorrhiza*. 2001. British Wildlife 13: 86-93

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