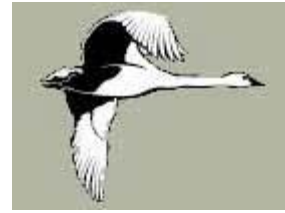


## The Trumpeter (2001)

### The Enchanted Forest

Mara Freeman



MARA FREEMAN is a writer, storyteller, and transpersonal therapist originally from England, now living in Carmel, California. She leads workshops on the British Mystery Tradition and also offers audio cassettes of Celtic pathworking and storytelling.

As the last stands of ancient forests fall beneath the chainsaw north and south of the equator in our consumer-driven world, it is relevant to contemplate the deep relationship of pre-industrialised peoples with the trees. For most of us today, “relationship”, in the feeling sense of the word, implies an event that occurs between people, or perhaps with a favorite animal. For many centuries now we have accepted the paradigm of a hierarchy of life where the vegetative world is ranked lower than the animal world, with “Man”, of course as the “Crown of Creation” on top.

But for our Northern European ancestors, as with all so-called “primitive” cultures, *all* Nature was experienced as alive, numinous, ensouled. And because most of Old Europe was covered with a vast, trackless wilderness of trees, the forest was viewed as the very cradle of life, providing as it did food, shelter and protection to a hunting and gathering people.

It is a sober and timely warning for us living in the U.S. where only a small percentage of our old-growth forests remain, to compare the face of modern industrial Europe with its ancient countenance: Italy was covered from coast to coast with dense woods of oak, elm and chestnut; the great Hercynian forest rendered Germany impenetrable in Caesar’s time; Scotland was clothed with the magnificent Caledonian; Ireland with oakwoods, the whole of Southern England with the ancient trees of Anderida.

Living in such an environment, it is no wonder the forest was perceived as the primary matrix of a tribe’s sustenance, culture and spirituality. In the ancient Northern worldview, a great tree was believed to stand at the center of the world, an *axis mundi*, its roots stretching down to the lower world, its branches reaching to the Upper world. And the role of the tree as the center of all life was mirrored in the microcosm of tribal life; when a tribe wanted to found a settlement, they would clear some land but always leave a group of trees in the middle of the clearing. The central tree was known as the “mother tree” and from it’s source stemmed the cultural life of its people.

In ancient Ireland, chieftains were inaugurated at the sacred tree, or *bile*, embodying as it did the security and integrity of the tribe. Conversely, one of the greatest triumphs a tribe could achieve over its enemies was to cut down their *crann bethadh*, or Tree of Life, an outrage which merited the most severe retribution.

Ancient Ireland itself was divided into five provinces: Connacht, Ulster, Leinster and Munster at the four corners with Meath in the middle. A Middle Irish text tells how a great being came from the Other world bearing a branch on which grew apples, nuts and acorns at the same time. His name was Treochair (Three Sprouts) and he shook the fruits onto the ground where they were taken up and planted in the five divisions, growing eventually into the five legendary sacred trees of Ireland.

We see again in this story the link between the trees and the Otherworld, a theme that is

echoed in the many Irish legends that tell of the perilous journey to Tir N'an Og by a hero who must carry a magical branch as his passport.

Perhaps hardest to comprehend for those of us to whom Nature is merely "scenery" a pleasant backdrop to the "real" drama of human life, is the breadth and depth of the relationship our ancestors had with the trees. Through the centuries of intimately living with the forest, our ancestors not only learned the myriad of practical uses afforded by the trees, but understood the spirit of each species itself. They came to know which trees were benevolent, and which manevolent to humankind: how rowan was a great protector against evil, ash would reveal the secrets of the future, and hawthorns guarded the entrance to the Otherworld, and were therefore sacred to the fairies and to be treated with great respect, as William Allingham's famous poem warns:

Is any man so daring  
As dig them up in spite,  
He shall find their sharpest thorns  
In his bed at night.

A food-store of nuts, berries and game, a pharmacopeia of medicines, wood supply for shelter and the kindling of sacred fires, temples for druidic ritual and shamanic journeys—the forest was all of these to the early island inhabitants. But two inexorable, interlinked forces were soon to put an end to the gentle dominion of the trees: the Church and the Plough. The time-honored attitude of reverential and grateful interdependence with the living Earth, although still embraced by the early Celtic Church, was roughly overthrown by the patriarchal Church of Rome. Bishops and priests carried on the devastation first wrought by the early Roman invaders who had felled the sacred groves and slaughtered the druids. There was little room for communion with the natural world in a religion that separated spirit from matter.

A picture in a twelfth-century manuscript poignantly illustrates this state of affairs: a Catholic bishop, St. Amand, blesses a woman who is felling a tree with an axe. From the top of the tree, two woodland spirits start up in horror at the destruction of their home. The legend tells that the woman, who was both blind and pagan, (the two being obviously linked) has her sight restored at her conversion to Christianity. Meanwhile, agriculture replaced the old hunting and gathering subsistence and the forest no longer represented the primary sustainer of life. By the late Middle Ages the woods were a place of fear for most people, harboring the terrors of outlaws, footpads and those strange remnants of forest folk, the Wodwoses, or Wild Men and Women. Dwellers of town and court turned their backs on the trees and created the "garden" which originally referred to a walled enclosure, to allow them to enjoy the tamer beauties of nature controlled.

The two-headed Leviathan of capitalism and imperialism gobbled up the great forests for house building, shipbuilding, and finally and ironically for charcoal to smelt the iron which would replace wood as a key material in construction.

And yet the forest still remained as a palpably numinous force in the psyche of the country people from the Middle Ages right up to this day. The Green Man, irrepressibly sprouting foliage from ears and mouth, sprang to life under the loving hands of the woodcarvers who built the great cathedrals; even the World Tree reappeared in medieval drama—thinly disguised as the Cross. Throughout the centuries trees continued to play an important role in marking seasonal festivals, as we hear in the carol by Robert Herrick which begins:

Down with the rosemary and bays,  
Down with the mistletoe;  
Instead of holly, now  
upraise The greener box, for show.

And of course, English villagers still celebrate May Day by dancing round the Maypole—which was once a newly cut tree, brought from the woods so that the tree-spirits could bestow blessing on the village.

As reverence for the sacred trees has been replaced by fear and superstition, folk-tales still alive in the twentieth century tell of trees that walk at night, or that lurk on the roadside to ensnare the unfortunate traveler; or drop a heavy branch on a woodcutter's head. One of the most haunting of these tales was told to folklorist Ruth L. Tongue in the 1930s, and is called "The Green Ladies of One Tree Hill". It tells of three brothers who inherit their father's farmlands. On the land is a mysterious hill on which stand three tall trees: on moonlight nights singing can be heard and three green ladies dance there. Before the father dies, he instructs his sons always to lay a posy of late primroses at the foot of each tree every Midsummer Eve, for "our luck lies up there." His admonition is ridiculed by the two older sons: only the youngest carries on the custom, and his brothers cannot understand why his small, poor plot of land flourishes so well. Irritated by seeing him up on the hill, the oldest goes to cut down one of the trees, but is killed when it topples down on him. The second brother attacks another tree, and also loses his life when a great branch falls on him. The youngest brother is left to prosper with all three farms thanks to his yearly primrose offering, and lives close by the hill where "the lonely green lady . . . sometimes . . . would dance alone to a sad little tune on moonlit nights."

The lonely spirit of a solitary tree dancing in the moonlight is a poignant image that serves to remind us of the beauty and numinosity lost forever when the enchanted forests of the British Isles fell beneath the axe. Hopefully it is not too late to save North America's great forests, but if this is to occur we need first return to the sacred communion with Nature our ancestors enjoyed, a world-view succinctly expressed by that great British visionary, William Blake, in his pronouncement that "everything that lives is Holy".

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