

Death by yew

I have some 200 seeds from a yew arranged on the a board in my studio, next to a pile of dirt, a heap of dried ferns and a couple of twigs stuck into test-tubes. The samples are on display for the benefit of some guests tonight, patrons of my project with ancient trees who have come to see how my work is developing. The seeds look innocent enough- small dark brown kernels, enveloped by a bright red fleshy aril that ripens in the fall. That part, the red "berry" of the yew, is the only part of the tree that is not poisonous, but I got to the tree too late in the season to sample its flavor. My arrangement arises some curiosity and when I tell my guests of the tree's toxic properties, an elderly woman half-jokingly asks if she can bring some seeds with her- they might, she says, come in handy when its time to go. A few days later I do some research on the yew, curious to find out just how many seeds would constitute a lethal dose. As I sift through various sites dedicated to parks, old trees, sacred trees, contemporary druids and dendroecology, I come across a couple of forums devoted to the art of suicide; discussion blogs where the pros and cons of death by yew is discussed at length by individuals with a keen interest in the matter. A few recent news items confirm the tree's inadvertent assistance to human death; a banker gone bankrupt, a depressed woman, a disillusioned teen- along with several cases of accidental, but non-lethal ingestion. Capable of killing but also of healing and rejuvenating, the European variety of yew (*Taxus baccata*) is a source of some remarkably effective compounds in the fight against cancer. Elements extracted from the conifer's leaves are used for manufacturing chemotherapy drugs, and there are records of tree's use as a medicinal plant that go back to the 11th century.

There is evidence that yews were held sacred by a number of pre-Christian cultures, with the dominant part of lore attributed to the tree coming from the British isles. Planted on sites of ritualistic and sacred significance, the trees were thought to represent qualities of the eternal, of rebirth and reincarnation and, in some belief systems, as the very tree from which the world had sprung- the yew is a pretty strong contender for the role of Yggdrasil, the world tree in Norse mythology. Inspiring bards and poets throughout the ages, William Wordsworth's poem *Lorton Vale Yew- Trees* offers a poetic take on the trees longevity:

..." *Of vast circumference and gloom profound*

This solitary tree! A living thing

Produced too slowly ever to decay;

of form and aspect too magnificent

To be destroyed..."

The slow growth of the tree is coupled with a rare ability to reinvent itself by shooting up new stems within the envelope of an old and faltering trunk. This capacity has no doubt contributed to the tree's eternal qualities of lore, but also became a reason for its near extinction in the Middle Ages: The slow-growing wood proved an excellent source of material for that era's tactical weapon of choice, the longbow, and with centuries marked by armed conflict across the borders, yews became a much sought-after commodity in Europe. The conifer is classified as a hard softwood with all the right qualities of spring and toughness to manufacture the longbows of Robin Hood-era fame. Such was the demand for yew wood, that the European stock of mature trees was pretty much depleted by the 17th century, by which time firearms had started to supplant the longbow. The fierce trade of yew in the centuries between 1200's and 1600's accounts for the tree's relative scarcity today, with the majority of younger specimen are found in parks and arboretums while their older relatives tend to grow on sacred grounds, where stewardship of the Church has provided an extent of sanctuary for the yews.

I get to the tiny village of Defynnog in Wales at dusk, having travelled from Stockholm in the morning that day. I leave my bags by the entrance to the inn where the pub is not due to open for another hour and go to have a first look at the tree. As I open the gate to the churchyard, I make out the impregnable silhouettes of a stately cypress next to a big yew in the midst of graves marked with age. I make my way around the church building and realize that the tree I am looking for is one of several yews here; the others are of almost equal stature but probably not quite as old as the 5000-year old specimen I'm here for. I slowly make way to the tree, careful not to stray in the darkness from what I gather is a path through the grass surrounding the graves. At first glance The Defynnog yew appears to be two separate individuals. Two big trunks set at about 4 meters apart share a common canopy, which becomes evident the next day when I get an aerial view from St Cynog's bell tower. From down here, though, it would take scientific expertise to conclude that the two massive, gnarly and partially hollowed out trunks are one and the same individual. An actual analysis of the tree's DNA and a ring count was made as late as this year, allowing for the claim that this most likely is the oldest tree in the UK, and possibly in Europe. "

Older than the Pyramids”, “the keeper of 5,000 years of secrets” , read an assortment of hyperbolic headlines that followed on the assessment of the tree. One of the sources quoted was Janet Fry, author of “ The God Tree”, which expands on the sacred origins of the yew. As I research yew trees in general and the Defynnog yew in particular, I come across the term “yew shamanism”, a concept which, as I feel my way into the space between the two trunks in the waning light suddenly seems less unlikely a proposition than when first encountered a few weeks ago.

The space between the trunks is like a world unto its own. Again, from Wordsworth’s poem:

“...-a pillared shade

Upon whose grassless floor of red-brown hue,

By sheddings from the pining umbrage tinged

Perennially, -”

Gnarly roots crisscross dark soil under a haphazard ground cover of vines- the thick carpet of grass that covers the rest of the churchyard comes to a stop roughly at the height of the tree’s canopy. The world sheltered by the yew is in perpetual semi-darkness due to the dense foliage of the tree. Peering out from this sylvan cave, I notice how the gravestones nearby all have been shifted at random angles. A large horizontal slab of a grave close to one of the trunks has been partially broken from the force of subterranean roots, and the slow but unrelenting havoc the tree is bringing on the graves is charmingly offset by vines and creepers that adorn the moss covered stones. The scenery is worthy of a Victorian gothic horror story, or, for that matter, of present-day forays into alternative rituals and philosophies. The rejuvenating capacity of the tree is visibly manifest in the fresh upright shoots that have taken hold on the lower parts of the trunk. Some are several feet long, and strive from their ancient foothold to reach light and air in what resembles a vertical nursery. I climb up on one of the the trunks to take a picture; the hazy composition that comes up on my screen is a far cry from what I had in mind when I sought out the tree for this project, but does a fair job at capturing the tree’s ongoing process of reinventing itself. Bright green fresh shoots of almost improbable verticality strive upwards with adolescent gusto with the support of a withered landscape of ancient trunk that provides shelter, structure and stability for its younger extensions.

The next day I have an appointment with Sían Miller. She is a warden at St Cynog’s church, and will take me on a guided tour of the Church and the grounds. When I first started sketching on a visit to this ancient tree, I had a celebration in mind. Having conducted more or less improvised birthday celebrations for two other old trees (10000 year-old Old Tjikko in Sweden and the 450-year old Queens Giant in NYC) earlier this year, I thought it was time to try and organize a slightly more formal event this time. I wrote to a representative of the church, without getting a direct response, and instead decided to try my luck with the local inn. I provided a brief outline of my work with trees in an email, explaining my ambition to try and organize a small choir that could help me sing “Happy Birthday” in Welsh to the tree, since I found myself out of my depth with the Welsh and the singing alike. I got lucky with the proprietors of Tanners Arms, who forwarded my request to a Julia Blazer. Julia lives down the street from the inn, and proved to be a tremendously helpful contact in the community- she single-handedly arranged for a group of singers to meet me at St Cynog’s on the day after my arrival and also made sure that I got in contact with Sían, who agreed to meet me a couple of hours before the singers would arrive.

St Cynog’s church consists of a conglomerate of structures that have been added to one another in times of need and prosperity. Like most present day rural parishes, the once gaslit pews are rarely used to full capacity; the warden is, however, no less enthusiastic about the parish and the building we are in. It is easy to see why. St Cynog’s has a good feel to it- an inviting atmosphere in the nave that must have been the intent of clergy and builders alike when constructed; yet this warm familiarity is something I rarely experience in rooms devoted to the sacred. They can be awe-inspiring, serene, overwhelming and sometimes intensely Baroque, but rarely do church interiors come across like this: As a place of worship and community both. The community aspect gets even more evident as we ascend the bell tower. I am actually quite surprised that the ropes dangling from the ceiling in the ringing chamber on the tower’s first floor are not only used on Days of Outmost Dignity and Holiness, but that the bells here are rung manually- always. By laymen no less. Sían is one of six bell ringers in the village; one for each of the bells that rest in their up-side down position in the room above us. Coming from a country where manual bell ringing by and large must have gone out of fashion well before my birthdate, this somehow ties into the presence of a really old tree outside. When people from all walks of life volunteer to do something as ...unmodern...as ring the bells on a regular basis, surely this must reflect some ability for resilience in other areas of daily life as well. I sense a correspondence between the bells and the yew, but the exact application of this connection eludes me.

Perhaps I will suggest composing a piece of music to be played annually for the yew, 5000+ strikes of the bells arranged in a meditative sequence... Or ask someone like Brian Eno to write a piece for the estimated 1300 yews aged 800+ years in churchyards in England...Or maybe not- Sían tells me of how the bell ringers at Armistice Day in 1918 locked themselves up in the bell tower, and, fueled by the festive spirit of the moment and whatever they had been drinking, would not stop ringing the bells until forcibly ejected from their sonic chamber. The bells of St Cynog were then muted for almost 30 years, presumably until the deed had slipped into the domain of the clergy's oblivion and/ or forgiveness.

The climb up the bell tower goes by a narrow stone staircase with scant light from deep set windows adorned with ancient cobwebs. As we get to the next to last landing, I am cautioned to mind my step and my head, as there is no handrail in the last flight of stairs and the door leading onto the roof is very low. I am reminded of entering a Japanese tea room as I stoop and step out onto the lead-clad roof of the church. The tiny door opens up to a full panorama of the hills and valleys beyond. A circular outline of what is believed to have been a site of sacred significance in Celtic times is still visible from up here; as is the unbroken canopy of the tree with its two pillars for trunks amidst a sea of tombstones. The crenellations that adorn the top of the tower look military enough, but the warden assures me that no shots or arrows were ever fired from these- the tower was constructed in the aftermath of a long period of conflict, and the military details seem to owe more to a combination of fashion and custom among the builders of the day than anything else.

The singers arrive shortly thereafter, and we set up in a spot in front of the tree that feels intimate yet respectful for the occasion. Happy Birthday in Welsh sounds a bit more earnest than it does in Swedish, owing perhaps to the tonal capacities of the singers, who really seem to mean it when they address the celebrant. The song is followed by a traditional Welsh song, after which we briefly pause and invite the silence of the churchyard back in. I had thought of numerous possibilities for this event, involving, among other things, the ritualistic watering of the tree with a giant funnel to precede the singing, but decide to leave this element for another occasion. To sing to a tree on a clear and crisp day like this in early December is a treat in and by itself, and having made sure I got the performance on tape we retreat into the warmth of the vestry for some tea and cake. I have ordered a Bara brith from the village baker; a variety of fruit cake with the appropriate density and dignity to celebrate an ancient yew. I am truly amazed and grateful that the participating singers have taken time out of their day to do this with me. As we talk in the combined vestry/ community room of the church, I get the sense that although my request perhaps was a little out of the ordinary, the people gathered here take a genuine interest in local heritage and their old yew tree. When we prepare to break up the party, I slice off a chunk of the heavy loaf and pocket it to disperse some crumbs by the tree.

As storytelling goes, an ancient yew provides an excellent backdrop for narratives that seek to promote a particular village or place as a place of interest. On my first night at the inn, one of the other guests inquires if I am here for "the tree", having noted that I hardly could belong to the entourage of fox hunters that were dining at the inn. I felt a bit embarrassed to admit that, yes, indeed I was, but quickly added that I was here as an artist (and not as a mere tree-loving tourist) and that I had come here to sing Happy Birthday to the tree. "All the way from Sweden then?" he asked. At this moment I hesitated, because what in my mind had seemed like an undertaking far superior to gawking at a tree, suddenly appeared every bit as moronic as, say, going to New York for shopping, or to Dubai to ski. My ending up in this remote village of Wales in the beginning of December is, however, on par with bargain-hunting in New York and indoor skiing in the desert in that it requires a journey in order to attain something unavailable at home. It comes with the territory when working with trees- they stay put; you have to go to them. The narrative that brought me here ("oldest tree in Europe!") makes me every bit a voyeur, but I am also hoping to gather something from the general context of the tree itself; to get a feel for what it's like to live here, to work and raise a family- and perhaps to glean what the future may hold for this rural valley in Wales.

Later that night, Julia and her husband come in to the pub for a beer, and I am happy to finally meet her in person after all the work she has done. Her outlook on life in the village is quite optimistic- she runs a small business called A Good Day Out that offers its clients the opportunity to go on a trek with sheep, to clean stables, nurse hedgehogs and lay hedges, among other things- in short: all the excitement you could not possibly have in an urban context. The business model is a bit special, in that it retains part of the proceeds for a good cause directly associated with the activity itself- for instance spending a day working on a hedge generates money for a community hedgerow project. Her venture is a good example of how to implement sustainable strategies in the local community, with the added advantage of exposing out-of-towners to a

variety of customs and traditions. The pub slowly fills up with fox hunters, and I can't help to wonder which phenomena will survive into the next century- hedge fund managers spending their weekends dressed up for ritual chases, community volunteers tending to endless stretches of hedgerows, or the slow but persistent growth and regeneration of the perennially green yew tree at St Cynog's in Defynnog.

A few weeks later I'm on a ferry across the brazenly cold Baltic. In a windowless cabin, I leisurely watch what I gather is a modern prequel to the traditional Robin Hood narrative. They shoot a lot of arrows in this movie; archers lining up by the hundredfold to send swarms of arrows along deadly curvilinear trajectories. The drone of this airborne weapon as it descends on target is deliciously hypnotic- a humming tune that is somewhat rudely interrupted by a nauseating sound effect as the shaft pierces flesh and shatters bone. The sound of an approaching catastrophe...Pirate Prentice up on the roof listening for V2 rockets against the backdrop of a blacked-out skyline, St Paul's near invisible in the haze.....Wordsworth's gloomy canopies... preparing indie brunch with out-of-season banana pancakes... The constant hum of ventilation and powerful engines below hum me to the edge of sleep, and right before I slip into dreams I have a moment of clarity:

We have all heard the snap of the bow and the drone of the approaching arrow, but take refuge from the plights of climate change, loss of biodiversity and environmental havoc by dividing time into an infinite series of motionless points; points in time where nothing changes, and we can comfortably carry on with our lives. The paradox of an arrow forever suspended in flight was devised by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea some 500 years BC and strikes me as a fitting image of the mindset of contemporary society. Coupled with a more contemporary expression called *cognitive polyphasia* (defined as the capacity to subscribe to conflicting ideas), Zeno's paradox becomes a powerful tool of mass delusion. Potentially useful for problem solving, this capacity seems counterproductive when applied to climate change, as it allows a large number of people to do nothing...because there is no change, no need to worry...Yes, I know the arrow is there, and I have seen the trajectory, but mind you I have a busy itinerary that needs attending to- first...

I came across the term *cognitive polyphasia* in Alastair McIntosh's book "Hell and High Water- climate change, hope and the human condition", in which the author calls for a movement towards a cultural psychotherapy. From what I gather, McIntosh suggests that we look into spiritual solutions to what intrinsically is a spiritual problem. Singing to a tree might not make the earth cool off, but I do believe that time spent under ancient canopies make it a little more evident how qualities of resilience found in an individual tree can go beyond the reach of its roots and aid in the sustenance of the human soul.

Links: A Good Day Out: <http://www.gooddayout.co.uk>

Hell and High Water- Alastair McIntosh: <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com>