

## The flowers of death

### The Quern-Dust Calendar – Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I explained how the whitethorn or hawthorn (*sgitheach*) was seen as cursed, because in Gaelic tradition the crown of thorns placed upon Christ's head at the Crucifixion was supposed to have been made of that kind of wood. The blackthorn (*droigheann*) on the other hand was not cursed but blessed. Today, with the help of that wonderful work of reference, Iona Opie and Moira Tatem's 'Dictionary of Superstitions', I would like to open up this subject and look at it against a broader spread of traditions.

First of all though, let's be clear about the identity of these two species. The blackthorn is a bush whose bark and fruit (the sloe) are both black in colour, and whose lovely white blossom is already out at this time of year – in fact it appears before the leaves. The whitethorn or hawthorn is a large bush or tree; its bark is lighter in colour, and so is its fruit (the haw), which is white at first and turns red in autumn. Its blossom is white or pink and appears in May, for which reason it is sometimes called 'may' – not to be confused, however, with the 'mayflower', which is the marsh marigold. The saying "ne'er cast a clout till may is out" refers to hawthorn blossom and not to the month of May at all.

The fact that the blackthorn is blessed and the whitethorn is cursed goes to show that religion, superstition and folklore are seldom simple. Black is not always evil, white is not always good. In any case, the Gaelic names *droigheann* and *sgitheach* have nothing to do with black and white. What's more, the key to the very different character of the two species seems to be the blossom – and in both cases the blossom is white, or mainly white.

In Celtic tradition at least, the differing reputations of the two species appear to have to do with the time of year when the blossom appears. Blackthorn blossom appears around Easter, whitethorn blossom around Beltane (*Bealltainn*, the 1st of May). In the traditions that we have inherited from the middle ages, that seems to have left blackthorn associated with christianity and all that is good, and whitethorn with paganism, the otherworld, the fairies, and all that is dangerous.

In Scotland, in Ireland, and in parts of England where Celtic superstitions remained attached to features of the landscape, hawthorn trees appears to have marked the entrance to the otherworld. To interfere with one was thought to be very dangerous. The Eildon Tree near Melrose where Thomas Rhymer met the Queen of the Fairies, made love to her and entered the otherworld is said to have been a hawthorn.

In the same way, the Rev. George Fraser, describing the Perthshire parish of Logiealmond for the 'Statistical Account of Scotland' in 1790–01, says: "There is a quick thorn, of a very antique appearance, for which the people have a superstitious veneration. They have a mortal dread to lop off, or cut any part of it, and affirm, with a religious horror, that some persons, who had the temerity to hurt it, were afterwards severely punished for their sacrilege."

An entry in the 'Folk-Lore Record' of 1882 tells how 'a man near Kilmaganny, Co. Kilkenny, came to me in a great state of mind . . . as the previous night some one had cut a thorn-tree in a rath on his land, and some ill luck must come to him before the end of the year . . . curiously enough before Christmas he buried a fine girl of a daughter'. (A 'rath' in Ireland, often called an 'encampment' in England, is an Iron-Age ring-fort.)

Similarly, the journal 'Folklore' for 1904 records how, about 1877, a Protestant in Co. Meath was about to cut down a solitary thorn tree when he was cautioned that if he did so, evil would befall him. He went ahead anyway, but as he was cutting it down he got a thorn in his hand. He contracted blood-poisoning and died soon afterwards.

For England, 'Notes and Queries' of 1941 tell a tale from Dorset similar to the one about the rath at Kilmaganny. "The following story is extant in the village of Berwick St John, a mile due south of which is a large old encampment called Winklebury, in the middle of which there used to stand an old thorn-tree or scrag. The whole property around belonged to Sir Thomas Grove, whose son, Walter Grove, lived in the Manor House of Berwick. One day, when short of firewood, he went up with a horse and axe, cut down the scrag and hauled it back. The result of this in the village was that no chicken would lay eggs, no cow would have a calf, and no women would have babies."

To cut the story short, Grove planted another thorn-tree, and the place became productive once more. As the poet Allingham wrote of 'The Fairies':

*They have planted thorn-trees,  
For pleasure, here and there.  
Is any man so daring  
As dig them up in spite,  
He shall find their sharpest thorns  
In his bed at night.*

It follows that the magical powers of the whitethorn could be put to good use if treated with respect. That is what lies behind a Sussex tradition noted seemingly by the Rev. Henry Hoper, vicar of Portslade 1815–59, and published in 'Sussex Notes and Queries' for 1938–39: "Singular superstition exists at Portslade . . . and has been entertained within the memory of man . . . that a dying person can be recovered if thrice carried round, and thrice bumped against, a thorn of great antiquity, which stands on the down, ever ready to dispense its magic power to all believers."

He goes on: "A few years ago a medical attendant gave up all hopes of his patient. The Goodies [he means, ironically I think, what we might call Holy Willies] of the village obtained the Doctor's and sick man's consent to restore him to health, and having carried him round the tree bumped the dying man and had the mortification of carrying him back a corpse."

Another logical deduction appears to have been that if the whitethorn was in the care of otherworld powers such as the fairies, it was hardly going to be struck by lightning. So Thomas Lupton, in his 'Thousand Notable Things' of 1579, declares: "It is the opinion of many, that an hearbe (called Leucacanthus) that is Whyt thorne . . . is neuer

strucken nor touched with lyghtning, nor is not touched with any euyl from heauen.” Mothers in the English countryside used to teach their children the following rhyme so that they would know what to do if caught in a thunderstorm:

*Beware of an oak,  
It draws the stroke.  
Avoid an ash,  
It courts the flash.  
Creep under the thorn,  
It will save you from harm.*

Sprigs of whitethorn were also used to protect buildings, with one strict proviso: they had to remain outside. I assume the idea was that when an otherworld being came across a whitethorn, since this was the tree that marked the limit of his powers, he hesitated to go past it. In ‘The Discoverie of Witchcraft’ Reginald Scot wrote in 1584: “The popish church . . . to be delivered from witches . . . hang in their entries . . . haythorne, otherwise white [t]horne gathered on Maie daie . . . Memorandum, that at the gathering . . . the Credo is necessarie to be said . . . and also the Pater Noster, for that is not superstitious.”

In Oxfordshire a hundred years later the custom was still being practised with enthusiasm, even though fear of the fairies seemed to have been forgotten. John Aubrey wrote in his ‘Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme’ of 1688: “At Woodstock in Oxen, they every May-eve goe into ye Parke, and fetch awa a number of Hawthorne-trees, which they sett before their dores, ’tis pity that they make such destruction of so fine a tree.”

I said at the beginning that in Celtic tradition at least, the differing reputations of blackthorn and whitethorn appear to have to do with the time of year when their blossom appears – at Easter and Beltane respectively. There is another reason, however. Hawthorn blossom has a sweet sickly smell, and, as a writer in ‘The Gentleman’s Magazine’ of 1866 expressed it, “I have found it a popular notion among . . . country cottagers, that the peculiar scent of the hawthorn is ‘exactly like the smell of the Great Plague of London’.”

This sinister notion is substantiated by a voice speaking to us out of the time of the plague itself – Francis Bacon, in his ‘Sylva Sylvarum: or a Naturall Historie’ of 1627. “The Plague,” he explains, “is many times taken without Manifest Sense . . . And they report, that where it is found, it hath a Sent, of the Smell of a Mellow Apple; And (as some say) of May Flowers.”

M. Butts, the author of a book called ‘Crystal Cabinet’ of 1937, told how ‘the hawthorn-jar gave out its scent, the scent one loved and was told was dangerous; that Nurse had said would kill you if it slept beside you’. Which is, I suppose, the sort of reason why Sylvia Plath wrote in her poem ‘Bee Meeting’:

*Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?  
The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children.*

Above all, then, for whatever reason, and whether in England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales, the hawthorn or whitethorn must never ever be brought into the house. As a writer in ‘Notes and Queries’ put it in 1886, referring to Derbyshire, “If a child brought a may bough into a house some one would at once seize it and throw it out. The flowers ‘smell like death’ I have heard people say, and they . . . said that if the may withered in the house the death of some one in the house would shortly follow.”

This was exactly the experience of my wife Máire when she was a little girl in Galway in the west of Ireland in the late 1940s. Trying to please her grandmother, she gathered a posy of whitethorn blossom and brought it to her in the house.

Her grandmother leapt to her feet in a fury and threw it out of an open window.

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