

8 Hawthorn in Ireland

A rich heritage of folklore,
fact and fantasy

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Introduction

The hawthorn tree, *Crataegus monogyna*, is not the largest tree in Ireland, nor the most beautiful, nor the most useful, but nevertheless it occupies a unique and extremely important part in the cultural history and environmental and agricultural life in Ireland, from the earliest times of human settlement to the present day. If one was to seek to file information on the hawthorn in Ireland under various important categories, it would fit very well under a range of diverse headings, including folklore, mythology, landscape, agriculture, food, medicine, literature and much more.

I am fortunate to have a small property on the Dingle Peninsula in Co. Kerry in southwest Ireland. There, in my 4–5 acres of rough marshy land, are many hawthorn trees, most of them along the old field boundaries where they were probably originally planted as hedges. They have now grown to be substantial specimens with trunks of impressive girth and no longer providing a stock-proof barrier for any animals that wish to pass from one field to the next. Some years ago, a mighty storm swept across the peninsula one night, and the following morning, I was sad to see my largest specimen lying on its side, thrown by the wind. Too large to try lifting it up again, I left it where it fell, unsure what to do. Like most Irish, perhaps I have a natural superstitious caution against cutting down a hawthorn tree. It rewarded my patience, and the following spring, it burst forth into leaf again and ignored my neglect with a spectacular show of blossoms and a heavy fruit crop later in the year. Over the years since then, it has settled into its new horizontal life and grows happily, promising me, and hopefully several generations of my successors, a resilient venerable tree to admire, and bountiful crops of haws each autumn for the birds and me to share.

Hawthorn is one of the most important small trees in Ireland and is found abundantly throughout the country in hedges, fields, scrub, waste places, along riverbanks, woodland edges and rocky places, even growing on walls where birds may have left its seeds. When it occurs in native woodlands, it is an understorey tree, but is more common at woodland edges. Hawthorn is particularly common in lowland areas but can reach altitudes of 1,000 feet (c.300 m) or more in sheltered locations. Indeed, hawthorn is regarded as being the



Figure 8.1 Hawthorn fallen and laying.

commonest tree in Ireland today. Some exceptional specimens may be found, and the current girth champion in Ireland is a specimen measured at 2.65 m in girth (8.69 feet) and 12 m tall (39.4 feet) at Springfield House, Bennekerry, Co. Carlow (Anonymous 2005). Nathaniel Colgan in his *Flora of Co. Dublin* (1904) writes about famous old hawthorn groves of Dublin's Phoenix Park containing many fine trees up to 7 feet in girth. On the Internet, I have come across several references to hawthorn trees living up to 400 years old, but the source of this information is unknown to me. *Crataegus monogyna* is a shrub or small tree, a member of the Rosaceae family, typically 5 to 14 m tall (15–45 feet). It has a dense crown and dull brown bark with vertical orange-coloured cracks. It is very varied in growth form and can occur from an erect tree to a recumbent shrub.

The younger stems have lots of sharp thorns, about 12.5 mm long. Its leaves are variable in shape, 20–40 mm (1–1.5 inches) long, obovate and deeply lobed. The upper leaf surfaces are dark green and paler green underneath. The flowers contain male and female organs (hermaphrodite) and appear in late spring, during May and early June. They occur in corymbs of 5 to 25 flowers clustered together, each flower about 10 mm in diameter, with five white (occasionally pink) petals and numerous red stamens. Each flower has a single style. Bees, midges and other small insects pollinate the flowers. In late summer the flowers

are followed by fruits, the haws, which ripen as small oval dark red fruits, about 10 mm long. They are berry-like but have the structure of a pome (a fruit consisting of a fleshy enlarged receptacle and a central core containing the seeds, e.g., an apple or pear). *Crataegus monogyna* haws contain only a single seed. These fruits are an important source of food for wildlife, especially birds such as thrushes and their relatives, and the seeds are dispersed in their droppings. The flowering of the hawthorn is one of the great spring sights in Ireland. The dense heads of the flowers are heavily scented and appear just a few weeks after the leaves appear.

In Ireland, *Crataegus monogyna* is the only native member of its genus *Crataegus*, although several species have been introduced and grow wild or in cultivation in Ireland, mainly for ornamental purposes. Over the years, the common hawthorn or whitethorn has been called various scientific names, including *Crataegus oxyacantha* which was formerly recognized as a separate species and *Mespilus oxyacantha*. A second wild species, *C. laevigata* (formerly called *C. oxyacanthoides*) is also found but is probably not native. That species is rare except in the north-east of Ireland where it is frequent. It can be distinguished from *C. monogyna* by having shallowly lobed leaves (unlike *C. monogyna*, where they are deeply lobed). Also, *C. monogyna* has the base of its leaves with pointed lobes, whereas in *C. laevigata* they are blunt. Hybrids between the two are found, relatively frequently in the northeast, and perhaps often planted. Hackney (1992) mentions that the hybrid occurs in some quantity in hedges in the northeast, most of which date from the second half of the 19th century. He suggests that they were probably planted using quicks imported from nurseries in the southern half of England, rather than being grown from local stock. He also highlights recent hawthorn plantings along the M1 motorway, from imported Dutch stock of either *C. laevigata* or the hybrid. There is little or no folklore recorded about any hawthorn species in Ireland, other than for *C. monogyna*.

The name, *Crataegus*, is a Linnean name, published by the great Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus in 1753 in his work *Species Plantarum*. It is derived from the Greek word ‘kratos’ meaning “strength”, because of the durability of the wood and ‘akis’ meaning “sharp”, referring to the thorns that are found on some species. The name ‘haw’, is originally an Old English term for hedge (from the Anglo-Saxon term *haguthorn*, “a fence with thorns”) (according to Wikipedia) and the name is also applied to the fruits.

In Ireland, *Crataegus monogyna* is generally called “hawthorn” or “whitethorn”, and occasionally “May bush” too. Other English names that have also been used in Ireland include Bread-and-cheese, Drean bawn, Skeeoge, Skayug, Skaig; and in Irish, *Sceach gheal*, *Huath* or *Uath*, *Coirr-sceach*, *Crann sceiche* and *Scé* (Wyse Jackson 2014). The most commonly used Irish name, ‘*Sceach gheal*’ means a “bright thorn”. Geoffrey Grigson (1975) in *The Englishman’s Flora* gives a long list of vernacular names for hawthorn, including some from Ireland – Mahaw, Quick, Scrog, Scrog-bush, Shiggy, Skeeog, Sgeach. The hawthorn name occurs in many placenames in Ireland too. Mac Coitir (2003) lists 11 counties with placenames including ‘Skeagh’, and there are other variations on this placename

including ‘Skea’, ‘Skagh’ and ‘Ska’. He also mentions a most poetic placename, ‘Skeheearinky’ (*‘Sceichín an rinnce’*), meaning the “hawthorn of the dancing place”, in Tipperary.

Throughout Ireland, there are many stories told of famous landmark trees, and a considerable number of them are hawthorns. One such was the famous Beggar’s Bush area in the south city region of Dublin, which is said to have been named after an ancient hawthorn tree under which beggars and perhaps highwaymen would shelter before descending on Dublin city. The Beggar’s Bush was situated on the corner of Shelbourne and Lansdowne roads in Ballsbridge, on land that became the Trinity College Botanic Garden, established there in 1806. Up to the mid-1900s, there was an old hawthorn tree growing in the Botanic Garden that was said by some to have been from the original Beggar’s Bush (Wyse Jackson 1987).

While hawthorn is widespread as a native plant in many different habitats, it has been widely planted for several centuries to the extent that today we cannot be sure what would have been its native distribution. Hawthorn has been much used throughout Ireland as a hedging plant; it is appreciated as a stock-proof species. It is robust and thorny, and cattle and sheep are less likely to push through it when it forms a dense hedge than they are to push through other native plants that might be used surrounding a field or other enclosure. Hawthorn is therefore of considerable economic importance, particularly in its use for hedging, right up to the present day, as it provides an impenetrable barrier, especially if regularly pruned. As well as growing plants, cut branches of hawthorn, blackthorn and holly are regularly used to fill gaps in hedges to keep cattle and sheep in their fields.

From the earliest of times, Ireland was a country of smallholdings and small field-plots (Evans 1957). For example, before the famine, 80% of all Irish farms were less than 15 acres (6 ha) in size. Evans suggested that most hedgerows are of no great antiquity but were planted as a result of the agrarian revolution, in different parts of the country between 1750 and 1850, when thorn hedges were planted and stone walls were constructed on land where boundaries had been more temporary or ill-defined up until then.

Eileen McCracken (1971) wrote that “The present-day pattern of hawthorn hedgerows interspersed at regular intervals with a single tree was unknown. These hedges with their individual ash, elm, sycamore, chestnut, or oak were an innovation of the late seventeenth century and did not spread far beyond the Pale until the mid-eighteenth century.” The Pale was an area of land, centred on Dublin, that stretched from Dundalk in Co. Louth to Dalkey in south Co. Dublin which was the base and center of English rule in Ireland in medieval times. McCracken continued – “From the mid seventeenth century one finds increasing numbers of leases binding tenants not only to make a substantial hawthorn hedge around his holding but to plant and maintain trees in it.”

Some field boundaries are of course very ancient – stone walls have been found buried deep within peat bogs, such as the extensive patterns of field boundaries, settlements and tombs dating from the Neolithic period at Céide

Fields in Ballycastle, north Co. Mayo (Boschiero et al. 2018). The complex hedge management practices found throughout much of Britain, including hedge laying, have been but a little part of the Irish landscape or standard traditional farming practices. Hedgerows were much used to provide firewood, particularly in poorer parts of Ireland, and would probably have been hacked and harvested in a largely uncontrolled manner. In some areas too, *Crataegus* would have been little planted for hedging, with field boundaries mainly consisting of a ditch and earth bank or mound, topped with wild brambles and gorse. Lucas (1958) described the way a gorse (or hawthorn) hedge was made in Ireland, with the seeds inserted in a twisted *súgán* rope of hay or straw, which was then laid on the top of a field margin embankment and covered lightly with soil.

Apart from its role in agricultural development, the presence of hawthorn in the Old Irish tree-list, demonstrates its importance and significance in early Ireland. *Crataegus monogyna* was one of the Class 2 trees, *Aithig Fhedo*: “commoners of the wood”, recorded as ‘*scé*’, along with alder, willow, birch, elm, wild cherry and rowan; less highly prized than Class 1, oak, hazel, ash, yew, holly, Scots pine and wild apple (*Airig Fedo*: the nobles of the wood), but one step up from the lower divisions of the wood, Class 3, that included elder, blackthorn, spindle-tree, whitebeam, aspen, juniper and arbutus. Class 4 trees, “the bushes of the wood” comprise bracken, gorse/furze, bramble, wild rose, broom, heather and bog-myrtle. Complete versions of the tree-list are found in *Bretha Comaithchesa*, the c.a. 8th century early law text on farming. The order of importance into four classes indicated the economic importance of these trees in early Ireland. Not a lot is said about the Class 2 trees. The *Bretha Comaithchesa* describes the penalties that apply to damaging one of the trees in this list that belongs to another person, where, for example, a milch cow or sheep would be due in compensation for damaging the tree, and penalties would increase in severity according to the amount of damage (Kelly 1997).

Hawthorn is also included in the Irish tree alphabet. There is a strong old Irish connection between the ancient Irish alphabet Ogham and Irish tree folklore. Ogham came into use in Ireland in about the 4th century and consisted of a series of markings that survive today cut into the edges of standing stones. Each letter consists of a series of markings and was assigned a name, often associated with an Irish tree. For example, B was *beith* (birch) and D was *dair* (oak). Originally, probably only eight letters were named after trees (birch, alder, willow, oak, hazel, ash, yew and perhaps pine). In the Middle Ages, other tree names were added to the remaining letters, resulting in a full tree alphabet (Coll 2000). Hawthorn represents the sixth consonant of the Ogham Alphabet, H, *hUath*, meaning “fear”.

Hawthorn in folk medicine traditions

Hawthorn has long been recognized for its therapeutic value and medicinal qualities. Lady Wilde (1826–1896) was a great compiler of old Irish folklore and mythology and included information on the herbal value of hawthorn in

her book *Ancient legend, mystic charms and superstitions of Ireland* (1991). She wrote that there are seven herbs of great value and power [in Ireland]; they are ground ivy, vervain, eyebright, foxglove, the bark of the elder-tree and the young shoots of the hawthorn.

Nine balls of these mixed together may be taken, and afterwards a potion made of the bog-water and salt, boiled in a vessel, with a piece of money and an elf-stone. The elf-stone [an ancient stone arrowhead] is generally found near a rath; it has great virtues, but once lifted up by the spade it must never touch the earth, or all its virtue is gone.

(Wilde 1991)

An earlier reference to the recognition of its medicinal value in Ireland is included in Caleb Threlkeld's (1726) book *Synopsis Stirpium Hibernicarum* in which he said "The Haws are accounted *Diuretick*, good for the *Stone*, *Gravel*, and *Pleurisy* [emphasis added]".

Their berries are very nutritious and are mildly sweet and have a tart, tangy taste. Hawthorn berries are used in traditional medicine in many countries and culture, such as Chinese traditional medicine. They have been widely used as an herbal remedy for hypertension (high blood pressure), cardiovascular and coronary artery disease and as a restorative after heart attacks (it is said to relax and dilate the coronary and peripheral arteries, which helps blood flow to the heart and improves blood circulation in general). It is also said to be a useful treatment for raised cholesterol levels and for digestive problems (indigestion, flatulence, colic and the sensation of feeling full). Chemical constituents of hawthorn include flavonoids, tannins, saponins, rutin and cyanogenic glycosides.

Hawthorn bark was steeped in black tea and the liquid that resulted was used to treat toothaches in Co. Leitrim and also as a remedy for burns (Allen and Hatfield 2004). Shaw (1998) noted its herbal use to treat heart ailments, including coronary artery disease, angina, hypertension and heart failure. Early European herbals recommend hawthorn for stomach colic and diarrhoea. It was used to treat diarrhoea in cattle too in Ireland – there is a record of its use to treat diarrhoea in bullocks in Co. Longford (Allen and Hatfield 2004). Devlin (2011) gives a warning on its use however, mentioning folklore from Tipperary that warns that eating haws will give you yellow jaundice.

The first mention of its effect on the heart is by Quercetanus, the personal physician of King Henry IV of France, who concocted an 'anti-age syrup' from the plant (Vogel/Bioforce AG 2012). O'Regan (1997) reported a story of a medical doctor in the late 19th century in Co. Clare who treated hundreds of patients with a secret remedy that turned out after his death to be a tincture made from hawthorn berries. He had used it to treat angina, coronary thrombosis, palpitations, chest pains and other heart disorders.

A tree of many uses

In addition to its use in traditional medicine, hawthorn has had a long history of use for many purposes in Ireland. Its timber is hard and was certainly used for firewood. For example, ancient charcoal samples of hawthorn wood have been identified at various sites associated with outdoor cooking in Ireland. I have read some lore that hawthorn wood was said to have been used by witches to make their broomsticks, and of course, they appear as magic wands in the Harry Potter books. In the books, hawthorn, “makes a strange, contradictory wand”, referring to it as “full of paradoxes” between life and death, but this wood can help with “healing magic, but they are also adept at curses” (Rowling 2015). These are contradictions and paradoxes that are very much a part of Ireland’s hawthorn folklore tradition too. A cut branch of hawthorn was used in some parts of Ireland as a simple harrow, dragged along the ground to remove the weeds in a field, or to help sow seeds (Lucas 1958). While it was and is still taboo to cut down a sacred tree, it is acceptable to cut the same species for example for firewood in a hedgerow. I have not found much related to the specific uses of its timber in Ireland but in Scotland, Milliken and Bridgewater (2004) mentioned that its wood has been used to make durable cogs and teeth of mill wheels and other machinery, and tool handles too, as it is tough and fine grained. The leaves of hawthorn have been used to dye fabrics a dark blue colour (Danaher 1964). The branches of hawthorn were burnt and made excellent ashes for bleaching cotton (Rutty 1772).

In ancient Ireland, hawthorn would have been used as a food source, even though its fruits are not particularly sweet or tasty. It crops heavily and is often more widely available later in the autumn than many other native fruits. Geraghty (1996) noted that haw seeds have been found in excavations of Viking Dublin dating back more than 1,000 years. The same author mentioned the old saying used in Ireland, “When all fruit fails then welcome haw,” suggesting that it was probably a useful ‘last resort’ fruit. Haws are best collected late in the season when they become more palatable and a little bit sweeter. The seeds have also been found in medieval deposits in Kilkenny (Lyons 2016).

The fruits of the hawthorn are edible raw but are not particularly tasty and are more commonly made into jellies, jams and syrups and wine. Haw jelly is a delicious and delicately flavoured alternative to red currant jelly to serve with meat. To prepare jelly from the berries (haws), the fruits are trimmed of their stalks, washed, stewed and strained before being boiled with sugar and bottled. Haws can be mixed with other hedgerow fruits (rosehips, crabapples, blackberries and other fruits) to make ‘hedgerow jam’. In Scotland, haws have been used to a limited extent for commercial purposes, for the preparation of jams and preserves, usually as part of fruit mixes (Milliken and Bridgewater 2004), but I have not heard of any such commercial use in Ireland. The fruits can be mixed with flour to make a nutritious bread, a good source of Vitamin C. For example, Hilton (2007) suggested that dried fruits can be ground and added to flour used in baking. The fruits are rich in antioxidants. Rutty (1772: 85) mentioned such

usage and said that, “The ripe fruit is sold in our market [presumably in Dublin], and eaten by the poor, and reduced to meal, may be a substitute for bread in time of scarcity.” Hawthorn flowers are also edible and can be added to fruit salad or used to flavour puddings such as custard and junket. Hawthorn buds and young leaves can be included in salads (Phillips 1983, recommends them in a salad with beetroot or potatoes). They have a nice, fresh flavour with very little bitterness if picked just as soon as they open from the buds in spring. Mears and Hillman (2007) suggested that the flesh of haws can be processed and used as food by crushing the fruits and removing the skins and seeds to leave an edible gelatinous mush. The flowers can be used to make wine and a liqueur (Ó Céirín and Ó Céirín 1978). Fruits have been used to make wine and can be added to brandy and other spirits to make liqueurs. Hawthorn blossom steeped in brandy with some added sugar makes an unusual liqueur. Young hawthorn leaves and buds were picked by Irish children and eaten, called ‘Bread-and-cheese’.

Hawthorn – a rich folklore in Ireland

The folklore related to hawthorn in Ireland and elsewhere is rich and diverse. It is frequent both in popular folklore and in mythology. In Ireland, on one hand, the tree is revered for its beauty, utility and sacred connections; on the other hand it is approached cautiously because of its connections with death, the underworld, bad luck and mischievous or malevolent little people, the fairies. The image of a hawthorn tree standing alone in the center of a field surrounded by grass or a crop is a powerful symbol of the special nature of the hawthorn in Ireland, even today. One might expect that in these days of modern agriculture, that such impediments to the plough or combine harvester would be swept away. In addition to standing as lone trees in a field, fairy trees often acted as boundary trees for fields or corner posts, helping to define limits between one landowner and another. Of course, some may say these trees are retained as they can provide shelter for stock against the worst of Ireland’s weather, but the reasons why such trees have survived go beyond any practical or rational reasons. Today those who have care for the land increasingly recognize that trees, wildlife and all forms of biodiversity are to be nurtured and appreciated, rather than cleared for any perceived small increase in agricultural yield. But even today in ‘Modern Ireland’ there is a recognition that there are cultural and superstitious reasons not to interfere with these trees. Many don’t really believe the superstitions associated with the so-called Fairy Trees (or Fairy Thorns), but why take the chance?

I recently embarked on a totally non-scientific survey of the folklore about hawthorn that has been posted on the internet, delving into numerous sites and blog posts from Ireland or about Ireland to gather what I could about contemporary folklore associated with hawthorns as fairy trees. Nine pages of manuscript notes were the result. While the information provided was varied and inconsistent, and from time to time somewhat eccentric, some key themes emerged. First of all, lone hawthorn trees were generally associated with the

fairies, known classically in Ireland as the *Sídhe*, “wee folk” or “little people”. These trees are said to be amongst their entry points to the ‘otherworld’ or meeting places. The many stories repeated that damaging or destroying such trees risks the wrath and revenge of the *Sídhe*, with a lifetime of bad luck, or worse (Dalton, 2018). Secondly, that they have a strong link to religious beliefs; the power of the hawthorn for healing still conveys widespread respect for the hawthorn. One blogger wrote: “My Dad RIP planted a whithorn (sic) tree and said ‘there, its your tree since you’re jinxed’. I was shocked and hurt by it. Not a luck person. Yes, I met the Ban sidh and she gave me a gift” (Sullivan 2021). Thirdly, the hawthorn should never be taken indoors, as it is a presage of death (Curtis and Whelan 2019).

Stories about the origins of the *Sídhe* in Irish mythology tell that when the Milesians or Gaels arrived in Ireland, they fought and eventually replaced the existing inhabitants, the Tuatha Dé Danann, who were defeated in the battles that took place. They became the *Sídhe* and retreated (or were banished) underground to the ‘Other World’. Their entrances and gateways from the Other World were said to be these fairy trees, as well as burial mounds, underwater and fairy forts, all of which were protected by their powerful magic. It was said to be very perilous to sleep under a fairy tree or take a nap in a fairy fort because of the risk of being swept away to the Otherworld by the fairies.

Ring forts are, in reality, medieval or older farming homestead enclosures, perhaps where cattle or other stock were protected from cattle raiders or wolves (the last wolves in Ireland were recorded in the 1700s). The internet stories say that when people moved from these ring forts, the fairies made them their new homes. Hawthorn trees in or surrounding these forts are a very common sight today. As a child growing up in rural Co. Kerry, our home was overlooked by a ring fort on a promontory above us. The fort was dense with hawthorn, blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*) and Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) trees. We always treated this fort with respect and understood that we were in a place of great antiquity and with a special spiritual and perhaps a somewhat menacing atmosphere.

Again and again, on the Internet, the same stories are told of those who suffered because of removing or interfering with a hawthorn fairy tree. A story about John DeLorean, the American car manufacturer is often repeated. In the 1970s, DeLorean set up a manufacturing plant for his company at Dunmurry, near Belfast in Northern Ireland. In 1982, workers from the plant claimed that the business suffered ongoing bad luck and was eventually closed because a ‘faery thorn bush’ had been disturbed during construction of the factory. It is even said that John DeLorean drove the bulldozer himself to remove the tree because none of the workers would touch the tree. Subsequently, the management were said to have taken the removal of the tree seriously and attempted to mitigate the bad luck by planting a similar bush.

Road building projects in Ireland are frequently said to have been rerouted because of fairy trees on the proposed path of a new road. One such is the celebrated Fairy Tree of Latoon near Ennis. This tree was said to be especially important because it was the meeting point of travelling ‘wee folk’ from all

around the world, or in other versions of the story, where the Munster fairies met those from Connacht. The preservation of this tree was championed by Edmund (Eddie) Lenihan, an Irish author, storyteller and folklorist. In 1999, Lenihan stood up to road builders in Co. Clare who had wanted to cut down a special whitethorn tree and he succeeded in altering the road project to spare the tree. Shortly afterwards, unknown vandals tried to destroy the tree and cut off all of its limbs. However, it has since recovered and is growing well on the roadside in Latoon, Co. Clare.

Hawthorn, like so many folklore tales, has a lighter benevolent side and a darker side too. Stories have been told that young women who rinse their faces in the morning dew of hawthorn leaves on the 1st of May will always have a beautiful complexion “and for ever after handsome be”. Hawthorn flowers were given to newly married couples for good luck. Nevertheless, other folklore warns against bringing hawthorn blossom into the house, because it is unlucky and would cause a death in the family.

Bealtaine is the traditional Irish festival recognizing spring at its peak and welcoming the arrival of summer. It was (and to some extent still is) celebrated in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man. The Bealtaine Festival is regarded as a classic Celtic festival, halfway between the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice, and exactly six months away from Samhain on 1st November, the Celtic New Year. My informal Internet survey told me that on 1st May, traditionally, doors and windows outside homes were hung with hawthorn branches to ward off evil and bad luck. Spring was a time when new milk from cattle was welcomed following the birth of calves, and it was feared that the milk and butter would be stolen by the fairies. The hawthorn decoration was thought to act as a protective talisman against the fairies.

Biddy White Lennon and Evan Doyle (2013) write about hawthorn in their book on wild food: “Since Celtic time [it] has been the flower of The Spring Festival, marking the start of the farming year – La Bealtaine. In Irish folklore May Eve and May Day is a time when the *sidhe*, the fairies, are about, as excited as humans at the coming of new milk and butter and liable to steal farm produce for themselves – one reason why people left lone hawthorns for the fairies.”

The eve of Bealtaine is a night associated with malevolent activities by the fairies and amongst some rural people, is still regarded as a night to stay at home safely indoors. At the festival of Bealtaine, ‘it is said that’ women would hold a twig of hawthorn blossom to attract a husband. Sprigs of hawthorn blossoms in the hair at weddings, or in bouquets, were to symbolize a union of love. Mac Coitir (2003) described how women hoping to marry would hammer nails into a hawthorn tree growing in a stone circle at Longstone Rath, near Naas in Co. Kildare. Wilde (1887) and Wood-Martin (1902) described an account of a marriage in Co. Kerry, in 1830, written about by Lady Wilde:

A large Hawthorn tree that stood in the middle of a field, near a stream, was hung all over with bits of coloured stuff, while lighted rush candles were placed here and there amongst the branches, to symbolize, no doubt, the

new life of brightness preparing for the bridal pair. Then came a procession of boys marching slowly with flutes and pipes made of hollow reeds, and one struck a tin can with a stick at intervals, with a strong rhythmical cadence. . . . A boy followed, bearing a lighted torch of bog-wood. After him came the betrothed pair hand-in-hand, a large square canopy of black stuff being held over their heads. . . . The procession then moved on to a bonfire, evidently the ancient altar, and having gone round it three times, the black shroud was lifted from the bridal pair, and they kissed each other before all the people, who shouted and waved their branches in approval.

(Wilde 1887: 147)

Outside the home, a hawthorn bush was transformed into a May Bush at Bealtaine, decorated with seashells, eggshells, trinkets and other materials. The strips of cloth and decorations were to appease the fairy guardians who live in it. May poles, an important part of spring folklore traditions in England around which people would dance, were originally made from hawthorn.

Beyond their use for a May Bush, many lone hawthorn trees have been transformed into 'Rag Trees' (or 'Wishing Trees') throughout Ireland. These will often occur beside a holy well, or at an ancient site of some antiquity, often with religious connections. The rags originally were usually cloth strips taken from the clothing of a sick person and tied to the tree as a petition to a local saint or deity. As the cloth rotted away, so did the sickness. People left a wide variety of items – prayers written on small folded pieces of paper, personal tokens and gifts (such as toys, socks, beads, photos, balloons, ribbons, strips of fabric and so on), in the hope of being healed, attaining good fortune or having a prayer answered. These decorated trees continue today and are relatively common throughout Ireland. Today, the materials tied on to the trees are often made of plastic and not biodegradable, so we cannot be sure of the impact this may have on the efficacy of their prayers! Lucas (1963) surveyed 210 holy wells in Ireland and recorded their associated trees. One hundred and three had hawthorns growing beside them, 75 had ash trees and the rest were random species.

While the May tree is associated most closely with the fairies, today these rag trees are more connected with Christian religious sites and the prayers that visitors and pilgrims leave for themselves or loved ones. Pagan and Christian traditions have become intermingled and the hawthorns (and blackthorns) in church grounds are both symbolic of pagan and Christian traditions, representing an interesting crossover between two systems of belief and practice. One can see this also at holy wells, baptismal sites and water springs too, where these trees are (or were) revered for their spiritual qualities and physical healing properties. There are an estimated 3,000 holy wells in Ireland (Lysaght 1979).

These important shrubs have also been called 'Mass bushes', and although they are generally hawthorns, other species can be found, sometimes ash and more rarely oak, willow, elder, holly, rowan, alder, elm, yew and [non-native] fir (Synnott 1979). A link for the Christian tradition was a story that Christ's crown-of-thorns worn at the crucifixion was made from hawthorn. The cross

on which Christ was crucified was also said to have been made of hawthorn wood (Mac Coitir 2003). This connection between the hawthorn and Christianity helped to strengthen its link with the Christianity, emerging from paganism and its important healing power.

A.C. Haddon and C.R. Browne (1894) refer to an interesting tradition from the Aran Islands, Co. Galway. They wrote: “Pin-wells and rag-bushes are still frequented, and on the night before emigrating people will sleep in the open, beside one of the holy wells, in order that they may have good fortune in the country to which they are going.”

This link between the hawthorn and Christian stories is well illustrated too by the ‘Glastonbury thorn’ that is associated with a supposed visit of Joseph of Arimathea to England in the 1st century. Joseph of Arimathea was responsible for the burial of Jesus after his crucifixion. The legend is that when he stuck his staff in the ground at Glastonbury in Somerset, England, it took root and grew into a tree. This tree, a hawthorn, is said to bloom only on Christmas Day, and in other stories, to bloom twice in one year. There are several trees growing adjacent to Irish holy wells that are said to have grown from walking sticks belonging to a variety of saints. One example is in Listerling parish in Co. Kilkenny, where a thorn tree is said to have grown from St. Moling’s walking stick (Mac Coitir 2003).

Another good example of the intermingling of stories in Irish folklore is about the Irish Leprechaun that buries his crock of gold at the end of a rainbow. The Internet tells me that “a popular story among Irish children is that the ‘wee folk’ (fairies) would hide their pots of gold near the trunks of hawthorn trees” (Chavis and MacDonald 2022). In order to see the gold, it was necessary to go to the tree at the stroke of midnight and sit on a three-legged stool (made of ash wood).

Hawthorn blossoms have an associated folklore that is worth exploring too. The Internet tells me that these blossoms “are said to be highly erotic to men”. Another writer said that the creamy white blossoms have a hypnotic, faintly repugnant scent, said to smell like the Great Plague of London – the bubonic plague of 1665 to 1666. Nevertheless, the blossom “is said to aid love and fertility, as long as it is kept outside!” (Schneidau 2019). The smell of the flowers, to attract insects for pollination, has a faintly ‘carrion-like’ aroma, caused by the chemicals they release, including triethylamine. Triethylamine is one of the first chemicals produced by a dead human body when it begins to decay, and gangrene has a similar odour. The aroma of hawthorn blossom is also associated with sex and said to possess the musky smell of semen (McGarry 2020).

Finally, a well-known term in Irish history is the ‘hedge school’, created particularly during the period when Britain’s penal laws were in effect, from 1723 until 1782, directed at Roman Catholics. At that time, these laws prevented Roman Catholic schools from operating. While the term ‘hedge school’ suggests that these were convened outdoors, in reality, the basic education they provided was generally indoors, in a house or barn, so sheltering under the shade of a spreading hawthorn is more mythology than fact. The hedge schools

taught basic writing, reading, grammar and maths, in Irish and English, and occasionally Latin too. During the 1820s, they received up to 400,000 students each year but declined in the 1830s with the formation of the National School system (Adams 1999).

Conclusions

One of the richest sources of manuscript information on folklore in Ireland during the last century is the remarkable Schools' Folklore Scheme, now known as the Schools' Manuscript Collection, which ran from July 1937 until December 1938. This scheme was initiated by the Irish Folklore Commission, in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation by National Schools in the Republic of Ireland. Some 100,000 children in 5,000 primary schools throughout the 26 counties acted as folklore collectors, gathering information and stories from their parents, grandparents and neighbours. The results of the scheme included about half a million pages of manuscript, which are now bound into 1,126 volumes housed in the library of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin (UCD). When I searched the Schools' Manuscript Collection for the words 'hawthorn' and 'whitethorn', I found 746 entries for the former and 701 for the latter, from almost every corner of Ireland. A further 149 entries were found when I searched its Irish name 'sceach'.

At a time when traditional knowledge on plants and their uses is disappearing fast worldwide, it is heartening to note that there is still a rich lore of stories about a plant such as hawthorn living on in contemporary Ireland. Much more is there for research amongst the wealth of historic manuscripts and literature in Irish and English, helping to ensure that future generations will not lose the lore, knowledge and stories on which our present culture has been built. For all the reasons given in this article, it is clear that hawthorn is one of the great treasures of the Irish landscape, a genetic resource of inestimable value, past, present and future, and a fascinating topic for future research. In the Irish Schools' Manuscripts alone, I have a further 1,596 stories still to read!

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