

THE ROWAN - TREE OF FOLKLORE, LEGEND AND PRACTICAL USE

By James Macnaughton

*“Oh, Rowan Tree! Oh, Rowan Tree! Thoul’t aye be dear tae me.
Entwined thou art wi’ mony ties o’ hame and infancy.
Thy leaves were aye the first o’ spring, thy flow’rs the summer pride,
There wasnae sic a bonny tree in a’ the countryside.
Oh! Rowan Tree.”* (Words by Lady Nairne)

As mentioned by Peter McNaughton, our Red Banner Editor, in the April 2013 Newsletter Edition, JoAnne Anderson suggested that the music for the old Scottish song “The Rowan Tree”, much liked by



her husband Kevin, might make a suitable official tune for Clan Macnaghtan. At the N.E. Florida Highland Games in February 2013, when Clan MacNaughton was the “Honoured Clan” and our Clan Chieftain, Sir Malcolm Macnaghten, honorary Chief of the Games for the 2013 N. E. Florida Games, the Clay County Sheriff’s Office Pipes and Drums piped them into the arena very movingly with “The Rowan Tree”. Later, at the Annual General Meeting of the clan, it was proposed by JoAnne, duly seconded and unanimously passed that this should be the Clan Macnaghtan’s official tune.

Lady Marianne Macnaghten and John B. McNaughton plant a Rowan tree and unveil a plaque on the grounds of Dunderave Castle, while piper in background plays, in commemoration of Clan Macnaghtan Association of Scotland at the Farewell weekend, August 2004.

As Peter wrote, the legend of Fraoch Eilean does involve a Rowan Tree: Dubh Loch Castle was situated near a group of Rowan Trees, now only one remains and a Rowan Tree was planted with a commemorative plaque by Lady Marianne Macnaghten, mother of our Chieftain and John B McNaughton, President of the Scotland Macnaghtan Clan Association at Dunderave Castle in 2004, when the original Scottish Clan Association held its last official meeting and was finally wound up and dissolved. In ancient myths and legends it was regarded as the Mother of all Trees and plants, and so it is perhaps worth looking at it in more detail.

NAMES

Sorbus Aucuparia grows throughout Northern Europe and also in the N.E. of North America (Sorbus Americanus). The word “Rowan” is derived from the old Norse name for the tree – raun- from “raudnian” (getting red) and in the Gaelic it is “Caorann” (pronounced chaorann) or “Ruadha-an” (the red one). It is, of course, also called the Mountain Ash, although it interestingly is a member of the rose – not the ash family, and it has many other folk names, such as Quickbeam, Rune Tree, Sorb Apple, Witchbane, Wicken Tree, and Thor’s Helper.

LEGENDS AND MYTHS

In Greek mythology Hebe, the Goddess of Youth, dispensed rejuvenating ambrosia to the Gods from her magic chalice. Demons apparently captured this chalice and the Gods sent an eagle to recover it. The feathers and drops of blood which the eagle shed in the ensuing fight with the demons, fell to earth, where the feathers turned into the leaves and the drops of blood into the berries of the Rowan Tree.

Rowan tree in fruit.

Ancient Finnish mythology tells of the Goddess “Rauni”. She came down from heaven to an earth barren of plants and took the form of a Rowan Tree. Things hotted up considerably when she and Ukko, the God of Thunder, got together for – let’s say – an “interesting” interlude, which resulted miraculously in the creation of all the plants of the earth. So, all plants and trees are descended from the Rowan Tree as a result of it being struck by a mighty bolt of divine lightning. Or so they say.



RUNES

For over 1,000 years Germanic/Norse tribes used a type of alphabet called “RUNES” – so called because “rune” means magic or secret. These ancient letters, believed to be of divine origin, were traditionally carved into pieces of Rowan Tree wood and their use was restricted to an elite who used them as magical signs for charms and amulets. An inscription on a Swedish Runestone reads: - “I, master of the runes, conceal here runes of power. Incessantly plagued by maleficence, doomed to insidious death is he who breaks this monument.” A dire warning. Later on, by the Middle Ages, runes on sticks or bones had inscriptions of a more everyday nature – prayers, messages of affection, business letters, so were turned into a common writing system.

WOOD

Rowan Tree wood was the prescribed wood on which runes were carved, because it is strong and hard, so eminently suitable. It was also used for tool handles, walking sticks,

spindles, spinning wheels, milk pails and stools. Its bark was used for tanning and to dye materials black.

BERRIES

The glorious red berries – a potent protection against enchantment because of that colour (see para. on Protection following) – were distilled into a strong spirit by the Celts in Scotland, brewed into an ale by the Welsh, and the Irish used them to flavour mead. No wonder there are so many Rowan Trees all over Britain! They were also made into a jelly and to this day this is used to accompany game.

PROTECTION

A traditional Celtic ballad says: - “Crying that witches have no power, Where there is Rowan Tree wood”, and, as mentioned above, the Rowan Tree has long been believed to offer protection from enchantment and evil spirits. Rowan Trees were often planted on each side of the entrance to a house, and I well remember my grandfather’s house, Edragoll, in Aberfeldy, which had an arch of Rowan over the front gate. Our own home, Corriebraich, had a Rowan Tree on each side of the back gate. Likewise Rowans were often planted in churchyards to send away evil spirits. In Wales people wore a cross carved from Rowan, and the Scots carried equal-armed crosses made from Rowan twigs bound together with red thread. In Scandinavia Rowans growing out of a cleft in a rock or out of cracks in the trunks of other trees were considered to possess even more powerful magic. These were known as “Flying Rowans”. Wands made from such a Flying Rowan are used to this day for divining to locate metal or water.

On Beltane (the night before May Day, which in some places was called Rowan Tree Day), sprigs of Rowan were often tied with string (dyed red from Rowan berries) to cows’ tails and horses’ halters and sheep were made to jump through hoops made of Rowan. In some parts of the Highlands there was a strong taboo against using any parts of the tree except for ritual purposes and it was considered very unlucky to damage a Rowan Tree in any way.

MODERN MAGIC

Those who indulge in modern magical practices still regard the Rowan Tree as the preferred wood for making wands and amulets. Tolkien, in the “Lord of the Rings”, uses Rowan (Quickbeam) to carve one of his Ents. In WhiteDragon.Org Glennie Kindred writes: - “Whatever your connection to the Rowan, be sure to look out for the changes that will occur as a result of any communication with this tree. It should not be underestimated and its influence will bring about a quickening of your energy on many subtle levels. For this reason it has always been used by the wise ones and revered as a powerful influence and should be treated with the greatest respect.”

Whether or not you are a superstitious Celt and believe or do not believe in the ancient wisdoms, this should at the very least give you some food for thought!

SOURCES

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