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"Think of It No Longer as a Broken Yew-Tree. . .but as a Living Witness": The Cultural and Ecological Meaning of Iconic Trees

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Abstract: Across the centuries, trees have been recognised as one of the oldest lifeforms on earth, witnessing and subject to the passage of time on a scale that far exceeds human life, telling us who we are in the world. This paper explores the intricate nature of human interactions with trees across a broad chronological and conceptual range, and the cultural, symbolic, and ecological meaning of "iconic" trees, drawing upon a selection of case studies to explore and analyse the relationship between the tree as a living organism and its cultural, textual, and mnemonic meaning. In conducting this, it reflects upon the cultural geographies of presence and absence, and the role of emblematic trees as places of memory and structures of belief. The relationship between human life and the life of trees is shown to be symbiotic; multiple cultural values and symbolic forms are ascribed to trees, and those same trees shape the physical, ecological, and human environment. The social and cultural construction of the landscape and sites of memory is presented as a key component in the formation of narratives and mentalities that define the relationship between humans and iconic trees, material and imagined. Physical, ecological, and cultural erosion, it is suggested, have the capacity of memorialising forgetfulness and creating a space in which the absence of presence and the presence of absence co-exist. The iconic image of the fallen tree, in its presence and absence, exposes the extent to which trees are also human objects, constructed and understood in human terms, and subject to a range of personal, political, and pragmatic impulses. A tree can be iconic not simply because of what it was but because of what it was believed to be, integrating a physical, historical, memory, and ecological or cultural space into our relationship with the natural world.

Keywords: trees; memory; landscape; loss; history; ecology

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1. Introduction

Landscapes, as Jo-ann Morgan has argued, are social constructions, composed of layers of cultural symbols which grow out of—and shape—a collective memory (Morgan 2001). To continue to live in the collective mind, those memories have to be maintained, often through invented traditions, sometimes involving rituals and pageantry, a coming together, or a literary, poetic, or artistic presentation that actively prevents forgetting. We can think about this as the construction of what are often called "places" or "sites" of memory, a term coined by Pierre Nora to describe the crystallisation of collective memory that still clings to remnants of memories that are passed down from generation to generation. Such sites are often created in the moment at which an event creates a rupture or break with the past, a new beginning, or an overwhelming sense of loss. The intention is to prevent forgetfulness by marking an initial desire to remember that is tied to a place in which the material, the symbolic, and the functional exist together (Nora 1989, 1996; Schama 1995).

Even the micro-history of a single building, statue, or tree can serve as an archive of place, narrating the local landscape and the memories associated with it.

Places of memory expose the means by which history is constructed from the reformations and interactions of past and present, a layering of the natural world and human perceptions of it. This stratiform landscape extends beyond the human past and present to include geological constructions and the markers of natural history. Our sense of chronological time is only a small part of a natural history that extends across a much more wide-ranging temporality. Moreover, within that vast chronological space, the living archives of human history and natural history each record the presence of the other but also their absence. Physical, ecological, and cultural erosion has the capacity to memorialise forgetfulness and to create a space in which the absence of presence and the presence of absence co-exist. The physical presence of the tree has been lost, but in its absence, the empty space becomes a visual mnemonic.

Forgetfulness may not be quite the right word here; the relationship between remembering and forgetting is more complex (Ricœur 2004) Memory is not immutable but collective amnesia is hard to achieve when social and cultural memory remains cluttered with the relics of the past. Those remnants possess a narrative historicity, building bridges with the past and re-forming a sense of belonging and identity with the landscape of memory (Hoskins 1955; Assmann 2008; Scannell and Gifford 2010; Kirwin 2000; Lahiri 2003; McDowell 2008). As Sundar has suggested, it is possible for such objects to become positioned as an integral part of invented traditions, with a "lineage and value" that shapes rituals and ceremonies that "help in creating our identities" as individuals or communities (le Goff 1998; Pollmann 2017; Sundar 2022). Visible markers of permanence and change serve as a cartographic signpost to the remodelling of social memory and history (Tabaszewska 2024; Walsham 2017; Walsham et al. 2020; Connerton 2010). The landscape and its empty spaces can be read as a discursive text in which memories are debated and refined, memorialised, and mediated through the lens of human experience and narrated in an individual and collective imaginarium. Landscapes have been described as "multi-temporal" and experienced in ways in which there is no conflict between time and space (Ingold 2000; Bender 2001, 2002). As Martha Norkunas observes, it is possible for distinct and separate periods of time to occupy the same physical and mental space as "the memory of the persons in the past are created in the space of the present, with past and present conjoined" (Norkunas 2002).

2. Trees and the Formation of Memory

2.1. Research Questions and Methodology

This article interrogates the function of trees as a repository of meaning and belief. It takes as its primary focus ancient and "iconic" trees, the narrative story-telling associated with them, and the intersection between the human and natural world that is embodied in their branches and in their destruction. The illustrative examples that are used throughout are consciously broad in their chronological range, evidencing continuity and change in multiple forms of human–arboreal interaction, and engaging with the place of trees in the construction of memory and emotion.

The structure is thematic rather than narrative, shaped by questions that invite further discussion and exploration: (a) In what sense are trees "living archives", critical to the formation of memory in the past and present? (b) How do narratives of emblematic trees become entwined in human beliefs and story-telling? (c) What impact does the loss and destruction of iconic trees have upon the visual, social, and cultural mnemonic of the landscape? (d) What role can environmental histories and humanities play in shaping future discussions?

These questions are addressed via a multi-disciplinary approach to the relationship between trees, memory, and belief. At the most basic level, these questions appear to be firmly anchored in the discipline of history, in which the multiple forms of archival records, narratives of belief and memory, and human relationships with the landscape environment are well-established fields of study. Historical research invites reflection on continuity and change in the world that we inhabit, the reciprocal relationship between human society and the landscape, and between nature and the human imagination. But as Nassar and Barbour have argued, trees embody and express their environments, and their own temporal history (Nassar and Barbour 2023). To understand that history, and the place of trees in human culture and belief—past and present—we must look beyond the manmade obstacles that delineate the boundaries between history, philosophy, ethics, literature, and ecology. In its broadest sense, history is inherently interdisciplinary, adopting and adapting methodologies from other subjects, and providing the means by which research in English, sociology, and environmental studies might extend their critical reach. With that in mind, this analysis takes into account the significant developments in scholarship around the history of memory, memory studies, and memorialisation, the growth of archaeobotany as a field of research, and a growing awareness of the complexities of the relationship between humanity and the natural world (Roediger and Wertsch 2008); Gülüm et al. 2024). Admittedly, the focus sits primarily within the scope of the emerging discipline of environmental humanities, recognising that engagement with current concerns around environmental crises demands a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach.

2.2. The Literature Review: Trees and Their Meaning in the Past and Present

"All landscapes are 'historical', provided that they are now—or were once—altered, inhabited, visited, or interpreted by people" (Holtorf and Williams 2006). A growing interest in the relationship between memory and the landscape is certainly evident in the volume and scope of recent work in the archaeology of memorialisation (Lahiri 2003; McDowell 2008; Stewart and Strathern 2003). Within this framework, trees become living archives, playing a pivotal role in preserving the visible and imagined chronology of the past in the present. They blur the boundary between material and metaphor, standing as a projection of philosophical thought, a projection of creation, the divine, or as agents and victims of cultural and political processes. Here, human and natural histories are intertwined, occupying a physical, ecological, and cultural space and memory. This is part of the reason why the Woodland Trust (the largest woodland conservation charity in the United Kingdom) describe ancient woodlands as irreplaceable; they provide an unrepeatable narrative of complex histories, ecological processes, and climate, including the ways in which humanity and the natural environment have interacted over the centuries. That interaction is woven into the way that we live and work, our cultures, and our identities. As John Hines observes, the interweaving and interconnectedness of textual, material, and landscape narratives present evidence of a "deeper level of cultural structure and practice" (Hines 2011; Bintley and Shapland 2013).

To explore that cultural structure and practice is to expose the symbiotic relationships between the human and natural world. The meticulous analysis of Michael D.J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland's *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World* presents compelling evidence of the extent to which trees and woodlands were deeply rooted in "every aspect" of early English material culture (Bintley and Shapland 2013; Ingold 2000). As we might assume, trees served as a source of wood and timber for construction but also a means by which heat, light, and food were provided. Wood, even if taken from a fallen tree, is not inert; it retains an ability to bend to the environment around it, bearing the mark of human activity that is not passive (Ingold 2000, 2007; Rival 1998). The landscape—and the trees

that punctuate its horizons and permeate customs—tells the stories and beliefs of those who live in their shadow, prompting an engagement with memory and with time.

It is worth reflecting here upon the evolution of new multi-disciplinary approaches to the long histories of human cultures, plants, and trees, most notably archaeobotany. Both in theory and in method, archaeobotany is informed by—and informs—studies in ethnography, archaeology, and history and the manner in which humanity has engaged physically and culturally with its environment. The work of Marston et al. (2023) integrates multi-disciplinary methodologies and perspectives into a discussion of history that is rooted in a series of well-chosen case studies; read alongside one another, these studies and the analytical framework adopted present a persuasive case for recognising the value of human–plant relationships in the past in the construction of a cogent reading of the present and the future. Historic England's guide to theory and practice in this field (Campbell et al. 2011) likewise presents a model for research and analysis in which ecological, economic, and climate change are inextricably linked with cultural understanding of the natural world. Mooney and Martín-Seijo (2021) present a similar argument for the value and potential of an approach to human–plant relationships and interactions that enable the imbrication of archaeobotanical, archaeological, and historical analyses. Perhaps most relevant to this article is the approach taken by Evans et al. (2021) in the interrogation of what is described as "cultural tree thinking." The adoption of a phylogenic methodology, it is argued, exploits the analysis of evolutionary trees to expose the extent to which the cultural ancestry and narrative histories of populations, material culture, and languages intersect.

The relationship between culture and environment, we are reminded, is inseparable, with trees and woods embedded in the spiritual and linguistic realm. Whyte's detailed analysis of trees in the early modern landscape reveals the rich tapestry of threads that imbue the natural world with meaning. Perceptions of trees, she argues, "as part of a rich and varied assemblage of natural and archaeological features, identified by contemporaries as surviving from the ancient past, that carried meaning in the present and for future generations" (Whyte 2013). Trees provide an anchor in the past, a connection to antiquity, and an affinity with the beliefs and cultures of previous generations; as Gilchrist observes, an experiential perspective "interacts with archaeologies of time and memory" (Gilchrist 2004). Their loss, whether by destruction for use as fuel or timber or from the social memory and story-telling of life narratives, could elicit an emotional response.

But we should not underestimate the centrality of trees—particularly those with an iconic and emblematic standing—in the formation and evolution of beliefs and legends, in the language of early Christianity, and in that sense that the dead were somehow still connected with the living, bound by shared beliefs. Iconic trees to which a spiritual and cultural significance is attached in their presence, and in their absence, signposts to the beliefs and social structures of the past and are a tangible reminder that the stories that we tell occupy a liminal space in which the boundary between the natural and the human is permeable and undefined. In medieval ecologies, trees appear as a form of connectedness—a physical presence in the landscape but capable of transformation into other objects that act as a conduit of meaning (Bintley 2015; Bintley and Salonius 2024).

Trees and woodlands are woven into the rich tapestry of human story-telling, written and spoken. Take the example of Yggdrasil, the mighty tree of life in Norse mythology, encompassing the nine worlds that formed the ancient Norse view of the cosmos. Two sources provide much of the surviving narrative of Yggdrasil. The earliest, the *Elder Edda* or *Poetic Edda* (author unknown) is a collection of poems that date from the ninth century and survive in a thirteenth-century copy in the *Codex Regius* written for the king of Norway. The second, the *Younger Edda* or *Prose Edda* attributed to Snorri Sturluson dates from the first quarter of the thirteenth century.

Yggdrasil is an ash tree in which all of the worlds, including the world of humans and the world of the gods, nestle among the branches and roots; simultaneously a tree and the entire universe. It stands as the axis of the world, the world tree, and the tree of life. The world above and below the tree are united by it, and the realms of the plants and animals exist in a state of mutual dependency in its trunk and branches. Yggdrasil is living and dynamic, a force upon which the inhabited worlds and the sky depend. Inhabited by deer that graze on its foliage, its branches reach to heaven; atop the tree, the wings of the eagle beat and their wind blows upon the world. High in the tree, Yggdrasil supports the worlds of Asgard, the great halls of the gods, and under its three principal roots lie the underground realm of Hel (goddess of death), Jötunheim (the land of the frost giants), and the Earth. Around its base lurks the dragon Nidhogg and several snakes, who gnaw at its roots and feed upon corpses, devouring the dead and their presence on earth. Yggdrasil is described as the meeting place of the gods, a sacred place in which the gods assemble, and where the waters from the "well of time" are splashed on the roots and trunk of the tree to ensure its survival and the survival of the world and human life upon it. Both a symbol and an agent of continuity and memory, the tree connects the generations of the past with the living, its branches providing protection at the end of the worlds of gods and men (Larrington 2014; Murphy 2013). The animals that nibble at the tree express the mortality of Yggdrasil, and along with it, the mortality of the cosmos that itself depends upon it.

In many respects, Yggdrasil is the archetypal emblematic tree, imbued with cosmological meaning and purpose and standing at the centre of the Norse spiritual and material worldview. For all its power and purpose, the texts in which Yggdrasil is described emphasise not just its sacred meaning but also its mortality, and the obligation is to provide the tree with protection and treat it with compassion (Davidson 1964). Often described as a "world tree", iconic trees such as Yggdrasil are imbued with spiritual and cosmological value and significance, associated with the genesis of life and narrated in myth and legend (Holmberg and Harva 1922; Tolley 2009). The mental space inhabited by the tree can be projected into the material world, imposing an unbounded cultural value upon a tangible object existing in a microcosm; alternatively, an existing tree can create a library of legends that invent a place for it in the cosmos of the human imagination (Eliade 1996).

3. Narratives of Belief

As Christianity spread across Europe, the interaction between the potent imagery of the "world tree" and the iconography of the tree in Christian texts created an interaction of belief systems that was simultaneously synergistic and antagonistic (Tolley 2009; Hooke 2013). Emblematic trees were intrinsic to the scriptural text; the tree of life and the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9) and the Tree of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1) provided the loci for interaction between the human and the divine. The "new heaven and a new earth" revealed to St John describes "the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2). In the pages of Judaeo-Christian sacred texts, the single tree emerged as the architect of the relationship between man and God, and the viewpoint from which the divine purpose is made visible. Superimposed upon it, the image of the one true cross revealed the adaptive capacity of the emblematic tree in the re-imagining of its origins and meaning. In his analysis of the enduring presence of Yggdrasil in the beliefs and spirituality of Northern Europe, Murphy argues that the tree of life and the image of the Cross share a visual lexicon, and one which facilitated a metaphorical merging and analogue of Christ and Woden born of a reading of the Gospel texts as a form of epic. Pope Gregory's instruction to Augustine that pagan temples be converted into churches retained the symbolism of a wooden structure and

positioned stave churches as a Christian expression of Yggdrasil as a "holy wooden place of protection at the doomsday" (Murphy 2013).

Nevertheless, it is clear that trees such as Yggdrasil, which were revered as the place where humanity encountered the divine, were not woven seamlessly into the Christian worldview. Iconic trees were not easily stripped of their meaning, and any desire to overlay the Gospel on a place of pre-Christian worship and veneration required the collective forgetting of its cosmological and cultural significance. Their healing power, and positioning as the central pillar of the human world, the heavens, and the underworld turned individual trees into a site of conflict and forced amnesia. St Martin of Tour, for example, demolished a pagan temple before cutting down a nearby pine that was a place of veneration. As the tree fell, with the bishop standing in its path, it changed direction, leaving the saint unharmed and demonstrating the power of the Christian God and saints over pagan devotional practices and sites (Skeat 1881). Similar efforts to suppress the veneration of sacred trees were embedded in the hagiographical narratives of other early medieval saints, and in the canons of the Council of Nantes (895 CE) (Flint 1991). The Christian missionary St Boniface felled the ancient Donar's oak in Hesse in an attempt to suppress the beliefs associated with it (Noble and Head 1995). Willibald's Life of St Boniface described the actions of the saint in detail. While many of the people of Hesse were willing to adopt the new religion, others refused to accept the foundations of the Christian faith and some "were wont secretly, some openly to sacrifice to trees and springs; some in secret, others openly practiced inspections of victims and divinations, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries and auspices and various sacrificial rites." To demonstrate the power of God over sacred trees and their sites, St Boniface felled an "oak of extraordinary size" at Gaesmere, the Oak of Jupiter. The tree crashed to the ground, "driven by a blast from above", and its timber was used by Boniface to build an oratory dedicated to St Peter (Levison 1905; Robinson 1916). Emblematic trees, whether consciously planted as sites of devotion, or identified as possessing a power and potency that marked them as worthy for veneration were still vulnerable to cultural appropriation and subject to physical and mental iconoclasm (Philpot 1897; Hooke 1985).

4. Felled Trees and the Visual Mnemonic of Empty Spaces

4.1. The Holy Thorn

This is well-illustrated by the history of the Holy Thorn of Glastonbury, and the destruction and invention of the legends and beliefs associated with it. Rooted in "the holyest erth of Englande", the Glastonbury thorn (a common hawthorn, *Crataegus monogyna*) provides a physical record of the conflict between competing views of its past and its meaning. The legend associated with the thorn, which imbued it with meaning, describes the arrival of St Joseph of Arimathea in England in the first century CE. After reaching Glastonbury, the saint climbed Wearyall Hill, rested, and thrust his staff into the ground. By morning, a reputedly miraculous thorn had taken root. The Holy Thorn bloomed not once but twice a year, its flowering cementing the sacred history of the site. The historicity of Joseph's presence in Glastonbury remains a subject of dispute, although the narrative of his arrival and the planting of the thorn proved difficult to suppress. By the 1530s, three thorns were growing on the hill, each flowering to mark Christmas and Easter. However, in 1647, the thorn was cut down by a Civil War soldier who deemed it a monument to Roman Catholicism and superstition. Cuttings were taken from which the tree now growing in Glastonbury Abbey is believed to descend (Rahtz and Watts 2003; Stout 2007). The events of 1647 provoked a response from the Bishop of Gloucester, Goodman, in which the Thorn was depicted as a bridge that connected "a reverent past and an irreverent present" (Walsham 2004).

In 1951, a new thorn was planted on Wearyall Hill but this was reduced to a stump in December 2010. A sapling grafted from a descendant of the pre-1951 thorn was then consecrated and planted, although two weeks later it too was damaged beyond recovery. What little remained of the thorn was removed in 2019. However, despite its chequered history, the legends associated with the site continued to be told, fuelling rather than suppressing the stories associated with the ancient site (Walsham 2004).

The thorn itself, and the place where it once stood, act as a visual mnemonic in a place of memory. The destruction of a sacred tree, particularly a tree that was for centuries an emblematic object of devotion, did not guarantee the suppression of the beliefs that attended it. A physical tree could stand as a palpable reminder of the presence of the past in the present but the empty space left by its destruction was equally capable of memorialising the very beliefs and connectedness with the past that were subject to attempted suppression. The fallen tree was simultaneously vulnerable and invincible, symbolising the longevity of ancient belief and the transmutation of meaning and presence in a sacred site.

Mutilated and disfigured on more than one occasion, the Holy Thorn provoked simultaneously a sense of loss—a sacred site stripped of its connection with the miraculous—and of triumph in the destruction of a living monument to idolatry and superstition. The sense of time and space anchored to a single tree is imbued with the voices of the past and the rhetoric and preoccupations of the present. Those preoccupations may have changed with the passing of the generations, but the capacity of a single tree to evoke such visceral responses to its presence and its absence still endures.

4.2. The Sycamore Gap

The fate of another single tree, the iconic focal point at the Sycamore Gap, is a visual and verbal reminder of the juxtaposition of an anthropocentric narrative and an ecological reading of a site of memory. Felled under cover of darkness in September 2023, the sycamore and the empty space left behind fuelled a global outpouring of public grief and anger, the scale of which invited the conclusion that a solitary tree has the ability to incite a more visceral reaction than the loss of entire rainforests. The sycamore had stood proud against the backdrop of an otherwise sparse landscape; a single tree destroyed and planted by human hands. Sycamores (*Acer pseudoplanatus* L.) were not native to Britain, but once introduced half a millennium ago became often unwelcome colonisers in an unfamiliar landscape. John Evelyn, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, bemoaned the "honey-dew leaves" of the sycamore, "which fall early (like those of the ash) turn to mucilage and noxious insects and putrefy with the first moisture of the season, so as they contaminate and mar our walks; and are therefore, by my consent, to be banished from all curious gardens and avenues" (Evelyn [1664] 1964). As the use of the land changed across the centuries, the sycamore stood as a visible observer and memorial to human relationships with the physical environment.

The deliberate cutting down of an ancient or emblematic tree can elicit a highly charged emotional response, not simply because its material destruction changes the physical environment that we inhabit but because a single tree is often so central to how we perceive ourselves within that environment. The records of our planet's past and our own personal histories are archived within the tree, and our instinctive search for stability attaches to trees a humanising individuality that is deeply rooted in our sense of self, culture, and language.

Human instinct was to attempt to replace or recreate that environment, filling the void left by the fallen tree with a sapling or with carefully grown seedlings from the original tree. Images of small seedlings and buds growing at the National Trust Plant Conservation Centre (Devon, UK) were shared widely. However, this anthropocentric response is an articulation of

human emotion that exemplifies a collective attachment to an individual tree. As a result, we can perceive something akin to the identifiable victim effect in the outpouring of emotions incited by the spectacle of the fallen tree. The term was conceptualised most clearly by Thomas Schelling in his assertion that harm caused to a particular and recognisable person invokes anxiety, guilt, awe, and responsibility in a way in which a statistical record of widespread suffering does not (Schelling 1968, 1991). In the same way, harm caused to a specific tree provides a visible focus for the human emotions attached to such loss, one that ascribes a tangible place to the associated memories. Set against this, the destruction of entire forests may be globally significant but still not evoke such visceral personal emotions informed by lived experience. "A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths are a statistic" the saying goes (Tirman 2011). At the same time, the Sycamore Gap was headline news, the State of Nature Report showed Britain to be one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world; when we ascribe value to the natural world, our focus is pinpointed rather than panoramic (The State of Nature Partnership 2023).

4.3. All Are Felled: Trees and Ecological Grief

That sense of loss is not unique to the modern world. Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "Binsey Poplars" (1879) described the human grief that attended the felling of trees, raising a dirge for the landscape that he had known most intimately as a student. A handful of strokes with the axe could "efface" the landscape so that it ceases to be its current self:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;
> Of a fresh and following folded rank
> Not spared, not one
> That dandled a sandalled
> Shadow that swam or sank
> On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank (Mackenzie 1990).

Modern terminology refers not to the effacement of the landscape but to the shared ontology of ecological grief created by the human internalisation of loss (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018). Ecological grief emerges from the mourning of lost landscapes, species, and emblematic objects, and the disruptive impact of the loss of personal identity and beliefs that were once rooted in the physical environment. The innate desire to take action in response to this effacement creates a mental space in which optimism and despair collide. At one level, there is reason to be optimistic—the promise in the Old Testament Book of Job is that "there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease." There is no return to life for man, who "dieth, and wasteth away" but the tree will bring forth boughs when nourished by water (Job 14:7–12, King James Version). The desire to replace or regenerate the Sycamore Gap tree is an attempt to rebuild the visible presence of a place of memory. However, as the remains of the Sycamore Gap tree start to show signs of recovery, it is easy to be blind to the inadequacy of a sapling that cannot immediately replace the unique ecosystem of a three-hundred-year-old tree any more than it recreates the cultural and historical ecosystem of an ancient tree and the story-telling and legends associated with it.

The shape-shifting meanings inherent in an ancient and solitary tree are well-captured in William Wordsworth's celebration of the magnificent Lorton Yew, in which past and present, imagination and reality are woven together in an intricate web. The yew, "Which to this day stands single, in the midst of its own darkness" is consciously described as a

> solitary tree, a living thing

Produced too slowly ever to decay;
Of form and aspect too magnificent
To be destroyed.

The solitary yew is etched onto the wider English physical and linguistic landscape, occupying a physical and timeless place in medicine, mythology, and in the literary lexicon. Most yews are positioned to the south or south-west of the church, or perhaps more often, the church came to be built to the north or the north-east side of the tree. Some 500 churches in England are home to a yew that predates the construction of the church, their imposing presence acting as a bridge between the distant past, the present, and the future. Famed for its longevity, the yew occupies a special place in culture and memory, most frequently associated with death and mortality. Indeed, the concentration of poison within the tree could prove deadly. Turner, this time quoting Galen and Dioscorides, argued that even lying under the branches of the yew could lead to death, a rejection of the less disconcerting experience of John Gerard described in his 1597 Herball in which he claimed to have slept beneath the yew on multiple occasions and come to no harm (Gerard 1597).

Robert Turner in his 1664 Botanologia, suggested that because the yew is "hot and dry", "the very branches will attract poysonous vapours and imbibe them, hence it is conceived that the judicious in former times planted it in churchyards on the West side, because those places, being fuller of putrefaction and gross oleaginous vapours exhaled out of the graves by the setting sun and sometimes drawn by those meteors called "lgnes fatui", divers have been frightened, supposing some dead bodies to walk, not that it is able to drive away Devils as some superstitious monks have imagined" (Turner 1664). The association of the yew with the physicality and spirituality of the dead is longstanding. In Thomas Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard it is "beneath the yew-tree's shade" that "heaves the turf in a mouldering heap" casting a shadow over the dead, and the ground within which the living meet the dead. A yew that stood in a churchyard adjacent to a church meant that the dead and the ground in which they lay were interwoven in a common history and an ancient sacred landscape.

In the presence and in the loss of these solitary trees, we can see the co-creation of a history of the landscape and community at work. The value and meaning attached to a single tree are intrinsically bound to the social and cultural beliefs that shape the community's relationship with the natural environment around them (Stewart and Strathern 2003). Human–arboreal histories narrate social obligations, customary observances, and the meaning that a community ascribed to their physical and natural surrounds, internalised in their actions and beliefs.

5. Scope for Future Development

There is scope to develop this project further by expanding the chronological, geographical, and conceptual framework into a single substantial piece of comparative research, or through an investigative analysis micro-history of one particular community or iconic tree. For example, in what ways have trees shaped national or regional identities or been shaped by the culture and beliefs of specific communities, by what means have individual trees become individual or collective mnemonic devices, what role do "witness trees" play in narrating human history, and what impact has climate change had upon memory treescapes and landscapes? To some extent, these questions are driven by current fears of a growing environmental and climate crisis, though this does not mean that a multi-disciplinary approach could not be effective and thought-provoking. As the profile of environmental humanities expands, so do the possibilities to engage in a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding human connections with the landscape and with iconic trees. Environmental humanities presents a sharper lens through which to view and address the

ecological crises that face the modern world, and to engage in a nuanced reading of the ever-more complex relationship between humans and the environment. In conducting this, we will be better able to challenge embedded anthropocentric perspectives and reach a more granular understanding of the human dimension in environmental crises (Bristow and Ford 2016; Cohen and Foote 2021; Emmett and Nye 2017; Heise et al. 2017; Hughes 2016; Isenberg 2014; Merchant 2020).

6. Conclusions

The narrative presence of trees is part of the process by which they become established as sites of memory, possessing multiple meanings. Trees serve as a mnemonic for the complex interweaving of past and present, word and image, culture and belief across the centuries. The historicisation of the iconic tree demonstrates the human capacity to re-imagine and represent the form in which the material object or the ideas associated with it are interpreted and perceived over time. That process extends well beyond devotional texts, hagiographical narratives, and confessional conflict. Politics, prophecy, and the preternatural inhere in the wood of trees, which stand as living witnesses to human history and memory. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "This Lime-tree Bower My Prison", the solitary tree can evince an ability to conjure, connect, and to harness the associative power of human imagination and nature.

Trees—and particularly emblematic trees—are key to how we perceive ourselves and our ancestors within an environment with a long and deep history. Trees tell us something important about ourselves and who we are in the world, and our ontological security—our sense of trust in stability and predictability. To follow the definition offered by Anthony Giddens, ontological security exists as a "sense of continuity and order in events" such that the familiarity of the physical and social world around us is vital to our sense of self and identity (Giddens 1984). This instinctive search for stability attaches a humanising individuality to trees, one that is deeply rooted in our sense of self, culture, and language; to borrow W.H. Auden's phrasing, "The trees encountered on a country stroll, Reveal a lot about a country's soul. . . a culture is no better than its woods" (Auden 2024).

If we look today at sites of destruction—like a felled tree—we see something in that space but we also see something that is not there. The intermingling of landscape and memory creates cartographic signposts with the potential to create and to conceal the past, to memorialise forgetfulness, to fashion a new social memory, or to sustain the afterlife of the suppressed or fallen in the space that they once occupied. Memories are reworked, meanings negotiated, and the narrative of the past that was etched upon the landscape polemicised and politicised. Once a living archive of human history, the fallen tree records a different type of memory in which absence, presence, and re-imagining co-inhere. The landscape not only stores and archives memory, Basso reminds us, but also prompts it in a way that enables the "reimagining and reconstruction of the past" (Basso 1996; Bridges and Osterhoudt 2021). In addition, where the environment acts as the means by which the past is re-imagined and archived, the narrative of the past extends across "incomprehensibly long" periods of time. Human interaction with the landscape and nature—and the recording of those interactions in ways which are both imperceptible and comprehensible—takes place not within the human measurement of time but across a much more expansive longe durée (Chakrabarty 2018). In the moment of destruction, the life, the meaning, and the ecology of lost woodland may seem irreplaceable; however, the palimpsest of history, culture, and layered ecology is never entirely wiped clean. Trees run as a thread throughout human history, assigned a religious and magical meaning, a medicinal purpose, and a functional value in agriculture and construction. Moreover, the lifespan of trees is measured on a timescale that differs from that of human history. Their branches and roots connect the

brief lived history of humanity and the deeper history of the planet, human actions, and cultural and environmental change (Peretó 2000; Serra and Bruguera i Barbany 2015).

Fallen trees and the empty spaces that they leave behind are simultaneously a visible reminder of the past and a newly erected signpost to the triumph of human intervention in the narrative of the natural world. In *Remembering*, Frederic Bartlett encourages his reader to understand that when individuals remember the past they do so "(re)constructively rather than reduplicatively" and in a way that is constructed by continuity and change in the immediate environment (Bartlett [1932] 1995). The reading of the fallen tree is not a simple process of forgetting what once stood in the space but a more complex and multivocal attempt to fashion or to fabricate memory. In a mutually reinforcing process of refashioning and reconstruction, the past is seen through the eyes of the present but the present is inseparable from the culture and context imbued within it by the past. Meaning is created in a specific cultural context; if the mnemonic object of the tree were to be removed, or artificially renewed by the desire to "do something", its significance and meaning would need to be reconstructed through a process of social negotiation in a different environment (Geary 1990). Without that cultural matrix, the tree remains socially and culturally inert (Hahn 1997, 2017). The fall of a tree at the hands of humans can be represented as an act of iconoclasm that shatters not just the shape and substance of the tree but also the context in which it was created and sustained. The meaning of the fallen tree had also migrated, preserved and re-defined in their physical and linguistic remains in which the tree came to embody a process of memory-building that both prized the material object and undermined its worth, filling the temporal if not spiritual space that remained. The fallen tree never quite disappears materially or metaphorically. Wrapped in legends that were intertwined in social memory, the persistence of that memory contributed to the survival of ideas about glimpses of human history and mentality that inhered in material objects (Gathercole and Lowenthal 2004; Lowenthal 1998; Fentress and Wickham 1992). Rooted in the realms of nature, trees are also human objects, constructed and understood in human terms, and subject to a range of personal, political, and pragmatic impulses. Trees were iconic not simply because of what they were but because of what they were believed to be. As physical objects and material remains, they were subject to human thought processes that imbued them with meaning, purpose, and value. Perhaps then, in their leaves, we can hear the whisper of a conversation that integrates a physical, historical, ecological, and cultural space and memory into our relationship with the natural world.

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