

# In the Shadow of the Tree

## A study of the motif of the White Tree in the context of JRR Tolkien's Middle-earth

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In the pages of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* one finds the White Tree of Gondor standing withered and barren within the court of the fountain. The White Tree's renewal was to be preceded by the great flowering of its image at Harlond which rekindled the same flame of hope that grew dim both in Eómer's breast and that of the men of the West during their monumental struggle upon Pelennor. In the following I will argue that the White Tree was an enduring symbol of divine kingship and, as such, was possessed of an undeniable connection with the lineage of Númenórean Kings, their sacral-power, their peoples and the lands subject to them. This paper will outline these aspects within Tolkien's Middle-earth and reflect upon cultural resonance in European lore.

### Literary origins

The origins of the White Tree can be found to stem from Yavanna, Giver of Fruits, whose voice first gave succour to the saplings that would soon rise as Telperion and Laurelin upon a hallowed mound: Ezellohar at the Western Gate of Valmar<sup>1</sup>. Later Yavanna fashioned a tree in the image of Telperion for the Elves of Tirion upon Túna and it was given the name Galathilion and planted in the courts of the city where it produced many seedlings, one of which, named Celeborn, was planted in Tol Eresseä, The Lonely Isle.<sup>2</sup> It was from this offspring of Galathilion that a further seedling was produced and brought to Númenor by the Elves wherein it grew in the king's courts in Armenelos and was given the name Nimloth, White Blossom,<sup>3</sup> and it was here, I propose, that an essence of Telperion, elder of the Two Trees of Valinor became intertwined with the fate of Men<sup>4</sup>. Such was borne out by Tar-Palantir, twenty-fourth king of Númenor, who foresaw that when "[Nimloth, the White Tree] perished, then also would the line of the kings come to its end".<sup>5</sup> This prophecy followed Tar-Palantir's rekindling of the 'Hallow of Eru' upon the Meneltarma. The White Tree had suffered at the whim of Tar-Palantir's predecessor, Ar-Gimilzôr under whose rule the White Tree "...was untended and began to decline..."<sup>6</sup>

Turning to European lore one may find explicit links with the concept of trees and kinship in the records of ancient Celtic lore. In the *Dindshenchas* of Loch Garnum there is an account of a young man of royal blood, Catháir, who dreams of a beautiful woman garbed in multi-coloured clothes and who is the daughter of a landowner, a 'hundreded-hospitaller' whose duty it was to supply food and lodging to travellers and members of the king's household. In the dream the woman is pregnant and subsequently gives birth to a baby boy who is

stronger than she is and soon overcomes her. In the background of this dream is a tall hill upon which is a shining tree, the leaves of which are melodious and the ground below the tree is covered with fruit. Catháir summons his druid who interprets the dream in the following manner:

*This is the young woman, the river is called Slaney. These Are the colours of her raiment, artistry of every kind...This is the*

*Hundreded-hospitaller who was her father, the Earth, through which*

*Come a hundred of every kind. This is the son...the lake which will*

*Be born of the river Slaney, and in your time it will come forth...*

*This is the great hill above their heads, your power over all. This is the tree with colour of gold and with its fruits, you [king] over Banba with its sovereignty. This is the music that was in the tops of the tree, you eloquence in guarding and correcting the judgements of the Gaels. This is the wind that would tumble the fruit, you liberality in dispensing jewels and treasures.<sup>7</sup>*

Banba is one of the names of Ireland and also a form of the 'sovereignty goddess'. Catháir may be seen as the very tree itself, that is to say this dream may be evocative of the sacred marriage of a human king to a goddess thereby crystallising the aspect of sacral-kingship whereby the king's rule and success may be determined by the fruition and prosperity of the fruits of his lands and, by extension, that of his subjects. So it may be seen that the health and longevity of a sacral-king's rule was directly proportional to that of the abundance of flora and fauna of his lands together with the peace and riches enjoyed by his subjects. Such may serve to illustrate somewhat the prophecy of Tar-Palantir in relation to the Númenórean kingship which found its fate bound with that of the White Tree. Sacral-kings were seen to have supplanted in themselves a function of 'magic sovereignty', that is to say one of their roles was sacerdotal - that of priest-king. Theocratic rule persisted for over a millennia in ancient Ireland and saw the Celts submit themselves to 'sacred monarchies' who acted as intermediaries between the gods and the people. Yet such sacral-kingships began to decline with the deterioration of druidic political powers. It was, after all, the druids who would examine the signs foretelling who would be chosen as sacral-king and their input into the inau-

1 *The Silmarillion*, 42-44. See also *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, p.81, 'In Valinor Yavanna hallowed the mould with mighty song, and Nienna watered it with tears.'

2 *Ibid*, 69

3 *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, 42-43 '...the Trees rose from the ground under the chanted spells of Yavanna. The silver undersides of the leaves of the White Tree now appear, and its flowers are likened to those of a cherry: Silpion (One of the names of Telperion) is translated 'Cherry-moon' in the name list to *The Fall of Gondolin*. Also page 81, '...and he bore white blossoms like the cherry...' It may be submitted that such characteristics would also be prevalent in Galathilion, which was the image of Telperion, and therefore also of its offspring. See also *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, 637 for further discussion.

4 *The Silmarillion*, 315-316

5 *Ibid*, 323

6 *Ibid*, 322

7 Stokes, W., *The Rennes Dindshenchas*, RC 15, 1894, 272-336.

guration rituals was paramount. A later instance may be found in the Old Norse Lay of Rígr<sup>8</sup> wherein the young king, Rígr, is the zenith of a hierarchical structure, the ascension of which was through knowledge and use of the runes and being wholly conversant with a secret wisdom which is bestowed on him by a god and which allows access to supernatural gifts such as understanding animals, power over fire and the knowledge of healing. Professor Tolkien notes that, '...when the 'Kings' came to an end there was no equivalent to a 'Priesthood': the two being identical in Númenórean ideas.'<sup>9</sup> On Númenor the White Tree resided in the 'Hallow of Eru' and Tolkien further elicits that, 'It is to be presumed that with the remembrance of the lineal priest kings [...] the worship of God would be renewed...'<sup>10</sup> In antiquity Maximus of Tyre states that somewhere in Galatia the Celts worshipped a large oak as a symbol of Zeus although the Greeks and Romans also observed this tradition so it may be postulated that the interpretation may be tainted by Maximus' own indigenous practices. However the reference to the Celts' reverence of this particular oak is not disputed but whichever god they were venerating is not wholly established.

One does not imagine that Nimloth itself contained within it the suggestion of a divine presence rather, it may have been purely symbolic of a sacral conduit between such priest-kings and Eru as the very precinct containing the White Tree was hallowed to Eru. If one examines Hebrew Biblical accounts such as Abraham's association with the oak, for example, that of Moreh which grew in the ancient holy place at Shechem, one finds that it was under this oak that Abraham is said to have built an altar after the Lord appeared to him there.<sup>11</sup> Other Biblical examples are that of Gideon who meets an angel, makes offerings of food and builds an altar beneath the oak of Ophrah; Elijah who encounters an angel under a broom tree and Zechariah who encounters an angel among the myrtles. Of course, a well known example would be that Moses who witnesses a burning bush on the side of Mount Horeb. An occurrence involving a sacred fire and located on the side of 'the mountain of God' – a sacred site where Yahweh councils Moses through the form of an angel amongst the flames. Muirchú, in his seventh-century *Life of Patrick*, would have been familiar with this tale of Moses, among others, and he describes a similar happening by which an angel communicates with Patrick through a burning bush although in this version of the story the bush is not razed.<sup>12</sup> Here the priest-figure is without the context of sacral-king as his king is that of Heaven but the tree remains as an intercessory allowing a divine encounter through the medium of its form and presence. Such may be more representative of the White Tree, although any sacredness may be discerned not purely by association with the line of temporal kingship but by the White Tree's lineage to that of Galathilion, the image of Telperion. Both trees having been brought into existence by Yavanna.

The White Tree would, I submit, be understood to be a divine, physical link with Valinor and its attendant Valar and subsequently, Eru. It is a focal station encountered in the realm of men that provides a consecrated portal, the dynamism and activity of which is in proportion to the extent of veneration provided by the sacral-king.

### Sacred Trees and their otherworldly counterparts

Yavanna created in Galathilion a sacred image of Telperion and in the Irish tale *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra* (On the Settling of the Manor of Tara) one finds an account of the five *bileda*<sup>13</sup> of Ireland all of which grew from the berries of the same Otherworld tree.<sup>14</sup> A giant distributes the five berries and uses them to divide Ireland into five provinces with Tara being central. This division is more suggestive of the endorsement from a presumed divine authority in the delineation of five political zones pertinent to the time in which the tale was recorded which is believed to have been in the tenth or eleventh century. In fact those trees known as the five *bileda* all resided within the borders of Meath and Leinster.

One of the trees, the *Eó Mugna*,<sup>15</sup> was a large oak which put forth an inexhaustible supply of hazelnuts, apples and acorns. It was said to cover an entire plain and would never shed its leaves. The *Eó Mugna* was believed to be 'Son of the tree from Paradise'.<sup>16</sup> The presence of Otherworld trees is a common motif in the Irish journey tales such as *Immran Brain* (The Voyage of Bran) and *Navigatio Santi Brendani* (The Voyage of St. Brendan) wherein monks embark upon nautical journeys to fantastical islands of paradise that lie over the waves in the Otherworld. Here they bear witness to marvellous trees in ample foliage of silver and gold.<sup>17</sup>

Such trees may also be viewed in the context of Celtic scriptural texts that served to evoke the Biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil or the Tree of Life as the scribes would have naturally been conversant with Semitic tradition and the importance of tree symbolism as a focal indicator of divine presence and counsel. The roots of *Eó Mugna* were said to reach to Connia's Well that was in the Otherworld. One may also find this trait mirrored in *Yggdrasil*, the Norse World Tree, which had three roots; one of which was among the *Æsir* (the Norse gods commonly associated with strife, power and conflict), a second was among the frost giants and the third lay in *Hvergelmir* (the source of all rivers). Certainly it may be posited that many Christians of medieval Ireland would have been captivated by images of paradisiacal vistas populated with a richness of golden woods filled with trees that were forever fruitful, fragrant and filled with '...flock(s) of glorious birds singing perfect lively music under the sacred trees of paradise.'<sup>18</sup>

### Mounds and inauguration sites

Telperion and Laurelin both came to fruition upon a hallowed

8 *Ríg* is a borrowing of the Irish *rí(g)*: 'king'. The Lay is recognised as a genealogical poem extrapolating the origins of the three contemporary castes of the time: the serf, the farmer and the noble. Rígr is of the latter and is instructed by the god Heimdallr in wisdom, lore and the sacral facets of kingship. For further discussion see Dronke, 2000, 174 – 238. Also, Dumézil, 1973, 118 – 125. Also consider Bard the Bowman: a thrush counselled him as to how best to direct his arrow against Smaug, amongst other things. Under Bard Laketown was renewed and greatly prospered, *The Annotated Hobbit*, 261, 316 - 317

9 *Letters of JRR Tolkien*, 206                      10 *Ibid*                      11 Genesis 12, 6-7

12 Bieler, L. *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin, 1979

13 *Bile* is the principal term for a sacred tree in Irish texts with the plural being *Bileda*.

14 Hull, E. 'Fintan and the Hawk of Achill', *Folklore*, 1932, 386 - 409

15 *Eó* is most often used to indicate the yew but it may also be used in the context of other large tree species.

16 Vendryes, J., *Airne Fíngéin*, Dublin, 1953

17 cf *The Two Towers*, 443, 'Gondor! Gondor, between the Mountains and the Sea! / West Wind blew there; the light upon the Silver Tree'.

18 Greene, D. and O'Connor, F. and Murdoch, B., *The Irish Adam and Eve Story from Saltair na Rann*, 2 vols, Dublin, 1976.

19 *The Silmarillion*, 42                      20 *Unfinished Tales*, 223

21 A defended settlement defined by a raised earthwork.

22 *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 368-369. Compare also with *The Dream of Cathair* cited in footnote 6.



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mound.<sup>19</sup> Nimloth grew in a hallowed space upon Meneltarma.<sup>20</sup> The offspring of Nimloth, the White Trees grew in the courts surrounded, I would venture, with great reverence and ceremony. Sacred trees in Ireland were usually found growing upon *raths*<sup>21</sup> and forts, possibly within a ritual landscape. These trees played an important part in the inauguration of the sacral-king for under such trees the sacral-king would be ritually married to his respective goddess. This was symbolic of a marriage to the land made with a hope, rather than a promise, of abundant harvests, peace and good fortune for the subjects of the sacral-king; the ritual would also serve to underscore the ancestral connections of the tribe to that of their lands.

At Magh Adhair near Tulla in County Clare the Dál gCais tribe had their inauguration tree. Near Glenavy in County Antrim one finds *Craebh Tulcha* (Tree of the mound) and in Killeely, County Galway, is *Ruadh-bheitheach* (red birch). The surviving place-name of Lisnaskeagh (whitethorn fort) denotes a hill upon which once stood the sacred inauguration tree of the Maguire kings. The mound, hill or sacred enclosure reinforced the sanctity and importance of the particular tree in that it was set apart from temporal space being, to an extent removed, from the mundane world through a physical expression of sacral boundaries (possibly within a construct which hid internal ceremony from an external audience thereby reinforcing any mystery and awe held in association with the respective site). This was important to the sacral-king as it would convey to his subjects, during ceremony, that only he would have direct access to the precinct of the tree when it was 'ritually charged'. It was also a factor that the placement of the sacred tree, most commonly upon a raised feature, within the appropriate ritual landscape would create a primary

focal station for those within and without the respective tribe. Tolkien, I would hazard, was cognizant of this aspect of the locus and environment of a sacral tree. Another example from his literary output may be cited to illustrate this: when the company of the Ring find themselves guided, blindfold, into the heart of Lórien and when their eyes were eventually uncovered:

*'They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Spring-time in the Elder Days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and were leafless but beautiful in their shapely nakedness; the inner were Mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the centre of all gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green...'*<sup>22</sup>

A description of an Otherworldly paradise? Certainly the sanctity and 'separateness' of Lórien is well attested to. The early Irish voyage tale *Immram Brain* (The Voyage of Bran) recounts that the mythical king Bran was once visited by a mysterious woman during an assembly at his courts where she describes to him her Otherworldly home, Emne, where there is a great sacred tree:

*'An ancient tree there is in bloom  
On which birds call to the hours:  
In harmony of song they all are wont*

**Bag End**

**Jef Murray**





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*To chant together every hour...*

*Unknown is wailing or treachery  
In the homely well-tilled land:  
There is nothing rough or harsh  
But sweet music striking the ear.*

*Without grief, without gloom, without death  
Without any sickness of debility –  
That is the sign of Evin  
Uncommon is the like of such a marvel.<sup>23</sup>*

There are further fragments of the Irish journey/voyage tradition that serve to convey the actual sacredness of the tree itself by which it becomes the very beacon of paradise, usually indicated by its girth and foliage that holds promise of riches beyond that of the temporal world. By contrast the *Eó Rossa* (The Yew of Ross), which was not an Otherworld tree, had a litany composed to honour it. Taking the form of *kennings*<sup>24</sup> the litany is mostly obscure in several of its references but its main theme may be succinctly recounted:

- |                                |                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>Tree of Ross</i>          | 11 <i>The Trinity's mighty one...</i> |
| <i>a king's wheel</i>          | <i>Mary's son</i>                     |
| <i>a prince's right...</i>     | <i>a fruitful sea...</i>              |
| <i>best of creatures</i>       | <i>diadem of angels...</i>            |
| 5 <i>a firm strong god</i>     | 15 <i>might of victory</i>            |
| <i>door of heaven</i>          | <i>judicial doom...</i>               |
| <i>strength of a building</i>  | <i>glory of Leinster</i>              |
| <i>good of a crew</i>          | <i>vigour of life</i>                 |
| <i>a wood-pure man</i>         | <i>spell of knowledge</i>             |
| 10 <i>full of great bounty</i> | 20 <i>Tree of Ross</i> <sup>25</sup>  |

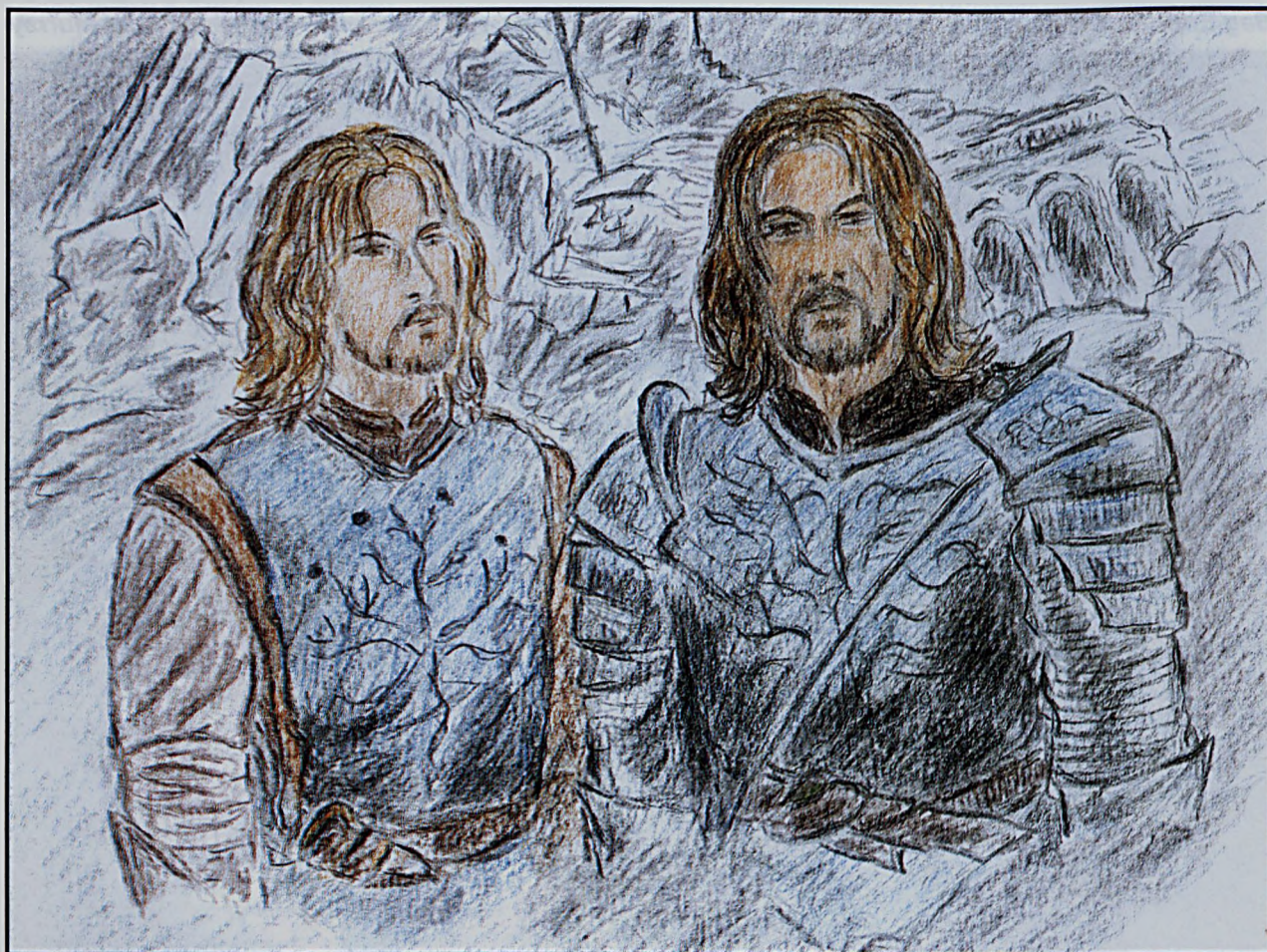
Contained within the litany of *Eó Rossa* are its numerous titles that reflect the mundane use of wood, reflected through the construction of conveyances such as chariots and ships. Other titles suggest a connection with fertility, territory and kingship as well as wisdom and judgement. Though, in general, the litany extrapolates the value ascribed to the tree during its lifetime, both temporal and sacred, I would submit that such a litany could also, with the appropriate contextual references transposed, describe the White Tree. Tolkien further links the White Tree to the renewal of a royal house through Faramir who voices his wish to see, '...the White Tree in flower again in the courts of the kings, and the Silver Crown return, and Minas Tirith in peace...'<sup>26</sup> Thus the sign of a new age is defined by circumstances whereby the return of an integral trinity of tree, crown and city is permitted. Without the presence of one the remaining two are redundant in the context of sacral rule.

### **Destruction of a Sacred Tree.**

On Númenor the most hallowed site was Meneltarma where grew Nimloth. Sauron had subsequently ventured to Númenor and misled Ar-Pharazôn into believing that Eru was a deceit thrust upon men by the Valar. Now Nimloth was located in the Hallow of Eru and I would submit that it represented a powerful icon, not only of the Undying Lands but also of Eru. Sauron would naturally seek to destroy the tree and as he could not enter such a holy precinct he persuaded the king to act as his agent of destruction in felling Nimloth after which Sauron ritually cremated the Tree upon the altar of Armenelos the Golden; literally embodying a foundation-sacrifice pre-empting the temple's black function.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Nimloth may have also represented a potent sacral memory, the subjugation

### **Faramir and Boromir**

**Jill Thwaites**





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and passing of which allowed Sauron great sway with men and thus their devotion. In ancient Ireland there were few greater insults than the desecration of a sacred inauguration tree by an enemy. The destruction of the Eó Mugna is ascribed to Ninine the poet following the refusal of one of his demands by the king. At times it may have just been as likely to be a disenchanted member of the king's household venting his rage upon the sacred tree as that of the tribe's hostile neighbours. In the tenth to twelfth century *Annals* one finds several accounts of sacred inauguration trees being felled, uprooted or burned by rival tribes.<sup>28</sup>

## Association with people

When Isildur learned of the fate of Nimloth he used guise and stealth to secure a fruit from the Tree that contained a seed, but though he accomplished his mission he suffered grievous wounds by the weapons of the court's guards. The fruit was subsequently blessed and planted but it was not until the young shoot rose and opened its first leaves that Isildur was seen to make a full recovery.<sup>29</sup> Here Professor Tolkien is confirming and to an extent reinforcing the affinity between the royal lineage and the Tree. Again this finds resonance with European lore, for amongst the tales of ancient Ireland one finds that on the night Conn Cèthachach was born a marvellous tree was 'born' at the same time.<sup>30</sup> To give a more recent literary perspective – one reads in Shakespeare:

*'Tis thought the king is dead; we will not stay –  
The bay trees in our country are all wither'd.'*<sup>31</sup>

A possible influence for Shakespeare may have been Camden who wrote the following ominous piece concerning the heirs of Brereton Hall, Cheshire:

*'A wonder it is that I shall tell you, and yet no other than I have heard verified upon the credit of many credible persons, and commonlie believed: That before any heire of this house of the Breretons dieth, there bee seene in a poole adjoining, bodies of trees swimming for certaine daies together.'*<sup>32</sup>

Lupton writing somewhat earlier informs that 'If a fyre tree be touched, withered, or burned with lightning: it synifies, that the maister or mistresse therof shall shortly dye.'<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the belief that if one dreamed of a tree being uprooted in one's garden, then it was a portent of one's impending death, sur-

vived in West Sussex to the latter end of the nineteenth century. Harrison Ainsworth in his novel *Rookwood* borrows from the legend of the lime tree of Cuckfield Park, West Sussex, which preserved the tradition that when one of the lime trees shed a branch it signalled a death in the family.<sup>34</sup>

A tree at Howth Castle in Ireland also shared the tradition for it was said to be bound with that of the St. Lawrences, Earls of Howth, and that when the tree falls the direct line of the family shall become extinct. In an effort to avert such a catastrophe, timber uprights were arranged to support the branches of the tree. Such instances may be survivals of the Guardian Tree, a tree that in ancient times may have been a living centre point around which a building was constructed<sup>35</sup> or would have been sited close to isolated dwellings for protection of the family. The rowan, for example, was planted close to such dwellings as it was believed that it held properties that would ward off witches. Other folk customs of northern Europe and Russia held that if a tree was planted at the birth of a child and nurtured it would grow in tandem with the child. In Aargau, Switzerland, an apple tree would have been planted at the birth of a boy and for a girl, a pear tree - it was believed that the state of the child's health would be reflected by that of the tree. Whereas in Mecklenburg the more direct method of throwing the afterbirth at the foot of a young tree was employed, and this may have instilled in the family concerned a more physically explicit link to the tree.<sup>36</sup>

For sacral-kings the tree was a direct link to the land; a hal- lowed barometer that gauged the health of the soil, its fertility and thus the prosperity of the king's subjects.<sup>37</sup> If the land failed then the marriage between the land-goddess and the sacral-king was discerned to be weakened and in some instances placating the land-goddess was carried out through the sacrifice of the sacral-king. In Tolkien's canon the connection between king and Tree could, on occasion, be more cohesive: a plague took King Telemnar and the White Tree, and a White Tree died with Belector II. The Tree of the king, in the context of Middle-earth is, I suggest, strongly evocative of the fertility and health, not only of the royal-line and subsequent ruler-ships, but also of the land itself and the royal subjects who toil over it. The king's 'luck'<sup>38</sup> may derive not only from his person but also from the divinity that bestows fecundity and halcyon days upon his reign and thus that of his subjects. Homer tells us that 'when a blameless king fears the gods and upholds right judgement, then the dark earth yields wheat and barley, and the trees are laden with fruit, all from

23 Meyer, K., *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, London, 1911, 3-4.

24 The simple definition of a kenning implies that, in the basic word, the person or thing to which the poet alludes must be called something which it is not, although it must in some way resemble it. The basic words in kennings for men and women are often words for trees or poles; tree of battle a kenning for warrior for example. See *Scaldic Poetry*: Turville-Petre, p.xlv-p.xlvii

25 Stokes, W., *The Rennes Dindshenchas*, RC 16, 1895, 31-38

26 *The Two Towers*, 698.

27 *The Silmarillion*, 329.

28 Lucas, A.T., "Sacred trees of Ireland", *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 68, 16-54

29 *The Silmarillion*, 328 30 Vendryes, J., *Airne Fíngéin*, Dublin, 1953 31 Richard III 32 Camden, *Britannia*

33 Lupton, T., *A Thousand Notable things, of sundries sortes*, London, 1579

34 Latham, C., *Some West Sussex superstitions lingering in 1868*, Folk-Lore Record I, London, 1878

35 See *The Saga of the Völsungs*, Branstock; 'And as in all other matters 'twas all earthly houses' crown / And the least of its wall-hung shields was a battle-world's renown / So therein withal was a marvel and a glorious thing to see / For amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang up a mighty tree / That reared its blessings roofward and wreathed the roof-tree dear / With the glory of the summer and the garland of the year', Guerber, H.A., *The Norsemen*, Senate, London, 253

36 *The Golden Bough*, 682

37 See also Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* Chapter 32, 'At the Kifhäuser in Thuringia sleeps Frederic Barbarossa: he sits at a round stone table, resting his head on his hand, nodding, with blinking eyes; his beard grows round the table, it has already made the circuit twice, and when it has grown round the third time, the king will awake. On coming out he will hang his shield on a withered tree, which will break into leaf, and a better time will dawn.'

38 A king's riches are a sign of his luck; in Anglo-Saxon the terms eadig and saelig are both used to mean 'lucky' and 'rich', and wealth is taken as a token of that quality on which the gods shower their blessings. Leisi, E., *Gold und Manneswert im 'Beowulf'*, Anglia, LXXI, 1953, 259 - 260

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his good leading.<sup>39</sup>

King Waldemar I of Denmark was said to possess a sacral hand whereby he 'touched the seed of the future harvest, as well as children and both sick and well among his folk.'<sup>40</sup> During the transition of the heathen religions to that of Christianity this virtue was, to an extent, retained as the priest-sacral-king became a saint-king 'He is a man of God,' sang Thorarain Praise-Tongue of King Olaf The Holy, 'and he can get good seasons and peace (*ar ok frid*) for every man of God himself, when though puttest forth thy prayers before the mighty pillar of the Scriptures.'<sup>41</sup> The king possessed *mana* which was a power or force totally distinct from mere physical power or strength, the possession of which assures success, good fortune, and the like to its possessor.<sup>42</sup> The king's ancestral lineage was steeped in this power and its origin was considered to originate with a deity setting apart the royal bloodline from that of common men as 'It was the virtue of their blood that lifted the sons of Woden, the Astings, the Amals, and so on, out of the ranks of the folk, though without bestowing upon any individual prince a right to the throne independent of the popular will'<sup>43</sup> To a certain degree the Tree encompasses the promise of regeneration and vigour – a reproduction of exact form and stasis – it symbolizes a sacred universal power which is recognized and revered not only by those who thrive off the land but also by those who would seek to rule over it.

Galathilion and its offspring, which are recorded, were planted and nurtured in sacral-zones within urban enclosures, thereby maintaining a continuity and affinity with the surrounding floescence and fauna. As the Tree may reside in a sacral-zone, which was fundamentally exclusive, the king would have been permitted due access to a sacrosanct propitiation through the figure of the Tree. A decline in the health of the tree would have been interpreted as a sickness in the land and a reflection of the king's failing authority. Tolkien expresses this motif, as noted above (more as a termination of reign rather than any sacral shortcomings on the part of the king), through the deaths of Galathilion's offspring and the subsequent effect on the respective kings. In Rome the fig tree that was believed to have sheltered Romulus and Remus when they were infants was known as Ruminalis, or the Ruminal fig, and there is one instance when the tree appeared to fail. Perturbation spread throughout Rome but the tree soon put forth new growth, much to Roman relief. Also in Rome one finds that a cornel tree that grew on the slope of the Palatine Hill was held to be one of the most sacred and revered objects in the city. If the tree were observed to exhibit a droop in its gait then passers-by would send up a cry and rush to the tree with buckets of water to revive it.<sup>44</sup>

Pliny records that in front of the Temple of Quirinus in Rome grew two myrtle trees. One of these trees was called the Patrician Tree and the other was known as the Plebian Tree.

As the years passed and the Senate remained supreme in its authority the Patrician Tree thrived and grew while the Plebian Tree was meagre and shrivelled. When however the Senate's power began to fail the Patrician Tree began to deteriorate, losing its potency and falling into a state of decay. Upon this, the Plebian Tree increased in stature and girth, putting out new foliage until it had outgrown the Patrician Tree.<sup>45</sup> This is an allegorical narrative that no doubt served political rather than sacral ends. Yet even within such a tale the vitality of the tree is equated to that of human authority.

### Conclusion

In summation one final, late medieval poem may be examined: 'The Harrowing of Hell' from the *Book of Fermoy*<sup>46</sup>. The writing is based upon a Latin text, 'Christ's descent into Hell', and it is believed to have been known in Ireland as early as the eighth century. The poem incorporates a paradisiacal isle, 'Adam's Isle' and takes place on the morning of the resurrection with Jesus approaching the gates of Hell (Hell now resembles a fair plain). Adam, who is present, cries out that the following prophecy is being fulfilled and explains:

*'One day', said Adam the noble scion, 'I sent my son to paradise of the fair-topped bright-stemmed apple trees which no man finds. He saw at a distance the withered tree at which I and my great seed fell: there he saw a child, comely, graceful, soft-eyed'.*

Because of the child that bare tree had become covered with branches, leafy and bushy; his shapely fingers were shaking the apple tree, so that it became fresh.<sup>47</sup>

The tree mentioned is the tree of the cross, here one of the trees of paradise. It was withered by sin and was revived by the hand of the Christ-child. In the renewal of the White Tree, following the defeat of Sauron, Tolkien discounts any miraculous reawakening by having King Elessar's cry of '*Yé utúvienyes! I have found it*', herald the discovery of a seedling of the White Tree flourishing on hallowed ground amongst Mindolluin's snows,<sup>48</sup> and it is with reverence that the Withered Tree was removed and placed in Rath Dínen<sup>49</sup> (in contrast to Sauron's treatment of Nimloth).

Throughout our history, both recorded and oral, the symbol of the tree has figured in numerous contexts – myth, cosmology, ritual, theology and folklore. A potent symbol of fecundity and regeneration of form it has long been associated with a perception of divinity and the riches lavished upon the rulers of men. It may be further posited that Aragorn was the dormant seed of the sacral line of Númenor, a lineage of kings here represented by the White Tree. A symbolic relationship crystallised as the Withered Tree was laid to rest and a new sapling rose in conjunction with a new age of men, as their king took the hand of his sublime, Otherworldly, bride.

39 *Odyssey*, XIX, II. 109 - 114

40 Holder, A., *Saxonis Grammatici Gesta Danorum*, Strassburg, 1886, 537.

41 *Glaelogs-Kvida*, II 36 - 39

42 de Vries, J., *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Vol. XII:2, Berlin and Leipzig, 1937, 32 - 43

43 Kern, F., *Kingship and Law in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1939, 14

44 *The Golden Bough*, 111

45 Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, Book XV. C.35

46 Bergin, O.J., 'The Harrowing of Hell', *Ériu*, 4, 112 - 115

47 *Ibid*

48 *The Lord of the Rings*, 1008

49 *Ibid*, 858

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