Shadow over the Ash

John Billingsley's tribute to an endangered tree

The ash is the biggest and best of all trees; its branches extend over the whole world, and spread out over the sky...

[Snorri Sturlason]

The ash is one of Europe's most significant trees, whose lore ranges from the mythological to the magical, the superstitious to the practical. What follows is an assemblage of traditions in its honour, a tribute to a much-loved tree whose existence in our landscape is threatened by ash die-back. This article gives a taste of what we will lose if we lose the ash.

Yggdrasil, the world tree of Norse mythology, is an ash, a cosmic axis binding together the upper and lower worlds. The first man was made from a tree trunk - he was called Ask, ash. Odin hung on it, a sacrifice to himself, for 9 days and nights to acquire the knowledge of the runes. At its foot are two sacred wells, one of them the Well of Mimir, the fount of knowledge. Yggdrasil is destined to be consumed in fire at Ragnarok, the time of destruction - but within its trunk shelter two human beings, who will be the forebears of the new humanity.

The rune aesc is a powerful rune, ruling over consciousness and the intellect, while invoking divine power; it can be used in workings to maintain natural order. In the customary language of floral gifts, it signifies the message 'with me you will be safe'.

The Ash, Nion, is the third tree of Robert Graves' tree calendar / alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion, which Graves associated with the ogham alphabet; its month is Feb.18 - March 17. In Irish legend, the ash can be found as the Tree of Uisnech, the Tree of Tortu and the Bough of Dathi.

Among the Ancient Greeks, the ash was sacred to the sea-god, Poseidon, in his chthonic aspect, while Hesiod wrote that the ash is possessed by the Meliae - nymphs sprung from the blood spilt when Cronos castrated his father. From the ash would come warriors in the Third Age of Man, an age of belligerence - no surprise that the ash was associated with Mars in classical times.

Of all the trees that grow so fair,
Old England to adorn,
Greater are none beneath the Sun,
Than Oak, and Ash, and Thorn.

[Rudyard Kipling]

Ash has the power to ward off witchcraft - in Lincolnshire and elsewhere, a sprig or length of living ash deterred witches, while in the Isle of Man it deterred fairies. The Lincolnshire belief was a little more specific, even - if the spring was berried, it worked against male witches, while female witches were thwarted by berry-less male trees. Placed over the bedhead in Scotland, it kept the occupants safe. At the same time, a
witch’s staff was preferably of ash, as was the requisite besom.

A Cornish tradition makes ash a lucky tree, if you pick off a leaf – *Ash, I do thee pluck, hoping thus to meet good luck* – and a leaf with an even number of leaflets was a lucky talisman for travellers and lonely girls – *The even ash-leaf in my hand, the first I meet shall be my man*. Yorkshire girls could put it under their pillow for a dream of their future husband, and other divination methods are also recorded.

*Used in meditation, burning green ash can result in a contemplative or divinatory state, and can heighten awareness. The qualities of the tree, evident through its appearance, mythology and symbology, can be adopted – inner strength, knowledge, self-expression, resilience – and it can be used to restore one’s sense of will."

*Oak before ash, only a splash;*  
*ash before oak, we’re in for a soak*

Watch the ash in springtime, for it will forecast the seasons: the ash came out early in 2012... Also, look at its keys for seed, as a barren year for ash foretells some great public calamity. And in autumn, a heavy crop of keys presages a severe winter.

Ash had a potent healing and protective role for humans and beasts. For children with hernias or rickets, a ritualistic process was applied in the 19th century: at dawn, a young ash sapling was approached, with the child naked and held face-up, and a split made in its trunk. The child was passed through the resulting hole, which was then bound up; as the tree healed, so would the child. Variants on this rite were even more esoteric, involving a set number of attendants – 9 – on a set number – again, 9 – of mornings; and/or in silence; or at midnight. The tree should not be cut down while the child lived, or the disease would return, more virulently. A feature of other ash-related cures is their ritualism.

Ash also helped children with their whooping cough in the 19th century; typically, a lock of hair would be attached to the tree. Richmond Park’s Shrew Ash was known for this custom, as was a tree near Etton in Herefordshire, described as “covered with hairs, small locks of human hair placed in notches in the bark”.

*Another ritual use was in removing warts. One could rub the wart with a piece of liver or bacon, and bury the meat under the bark of the ash, before pricking a pin into the tree, then into the wart, then back into the tree, where it remained. A rhyme like ‘ashen tree, ashen tree, pray buy this wart from me’ might be added to the procedure. Shrew ashes are testimony to a practice of placing a live shrew into a hole bored into an ash tree when disease, particularly cramp, was affecting livestock; the hole was plugged up and by some arcane means the disease was passed to the tree – which had the power to deal with it."

Ash sap was a medicine for Scottish Highland children – a green ash stick was burnt at one end, and the sap that oozed out at the other was good, particularly if it were the first food given to a new-born
baby. Elsewhere in Europe the custom was sweeter, applying ash honey to the newborn’s lips.

Aubrey in 1696 testified that cutting a piece off a very young ash tree at the very moment that the Sun enters Taurus would cure nosebleed, and that it had worked on King James II in 1688 when his nose bled for two days. Other authorities reckoned Midsummer Day was the time to acquire an efficacious chip.

In Devon, it was said that Jesus’ first bath was by an ash-wood fire, and that was a good enough reason for local mothers to do likewise with theirs.

Ash kept in stables in summertime kept away flies, according to folk in E Yorkshire, and both timber and leaves were held abhorrent to snakes from at least the days of Rome and persisted until the last century in Britain and USA. This quality was sometimes even assumed for its shadow, which meant an ash tree was a safe place from which to suspend a cradle when working in the fields.

Ash logs, smooth and grey,
Burn them green or old;
Buy up all that come your way,
They’re worth their weight in gold.

As mentioned above, an ash fire will impart a contemplative mood. But there was plenty to do with ash before you went a-burning it. Ash is a tough wood, and you would use it for the handles of tools needing tensile strength – cart shafts, spears, scythes, axes, billet sticks, and witches’ staves and brooms – and clog soles. Coppiced, its wood goes into chairs and shorter handles for tools like axes. Avoid it in gardens, though, as it demands much of soil, and its spreading roots aren’t good for buildings, and there’s also a belief that it can attract lightning...

The ash, then, is a tree of many faces and roles in nature and human society, and is a beautiful figure in the countryside in both summer and winter. Its decline and loss would not only be tragic, but something of a cultural blow, as I hope this brief tribute shows.

I shall end this with a true story that has become something of a folk tale in NE’s hometown of Mytholmroyd. It conveys something of the affection that ash can engender, testifies to the cash value of its wood, has something of the ash’s traditional protection of children, carries the idea that a child can build a link with an ash tree that can have negative consequences if the ash is felled, and finally manifests the resilience which we can only hope will extend to the threatened ash population of the British Isles.

References
The notes for this ashen tribute were mainly compiled from the following. Mary’s Tree was adapted from John Billingsley, Hood, Head & Hag (Northern Earth 2011), p95.

Addison, Josephine. The Illustrated Plant Lore
Ferguson, Diana. Greek Myths & Legends
Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Myth and Legend
Graves, Robert. The White Goddess
Harlley, Dorothy. The Land of England
Jordan, Michael. Plants of Mystery and Magic
Murty, Steve. Summat o’Nout
Nicholson, John. Folklore of E Yorkshire
Opie, Iona & Tatem, Moira. A Dictionary of Superstitions
Orchard, Andy. Dictionary of Norse Myth & Legend
Pennick, Nigel. Wyrdstaves of the North
Radford, E & M A. Encyclopaedia of Superstitions
Roud, Steve. A Dictionary of English Folklore

www.verdasmedley.com/ash-fraxinus/
Ash clip-art from http://www.arthursclipart.org
Mary’s Tree

In a field in Mytholmroyd, an ash tree stands conspicuously solitary. It’s known today as Mary’s Tree, after Mary Whitaker, a child who was born and grew up at nearby Stubb Farm. It was once in a typical location for ash trees, part of a hedge to the farm fields. Mary’s father, William, worked those fields, and when Mary was a little girl, she would sit under one particular tree, hugging and talking to it like a friend.

One day in 1900, however, when Mary was 7 years old, she was dismayed to learn that her father had sold all the trees in the field to a nearby clog factory for soles. She begged him to save her favourite tree, and her father listened - he went out and bought it back from the cloggers. It cost him £1.10s (two weeks’ wages for a labourer at the time), but Mary’s Tree became a distinctive landmark.

In time, the field became a sports field, and the tree stood out even more proudly; and in 1970 Mary died, still seeing her beloved tree from her windows at Stubb.

Calderdale council officials who turned up in 2005 were unaware of any of this when they decided that a single solitary tree in the middle of a sports field posed a significant danger to the public - any heedless footballer might run into it - and healthy or not, it had to go. Steve Murty, who also lived at Stubb (which had been subdivided), was a friend of Mary’s and didn’t agree; he set about enlisting agreement among local residents, which wasn’t hard, and combating the council bureaucrats - for which his straight-talking Yorkshire bluffness was doubtless an asset.

Steve’s campaign to save Mary’s Tree won both hearts and a reprieve from the council, and this well-loved tree, originally planted around 1790, is still to be seen in its own little ‘park’, a landmark viewed from neighbouring houses and from the hillsides above the town. Long may it thrive...

John Billingsley