



The Dragon's Tears

Scotland

Once, the ancient land of Alba had just three aspects. There was the sky with its wheeling stars and galaxies, the ever-restless sea, and the dense evergreen forest that spread from coast to coast. And the people of Alba lived within the forest, except for the Watcher, who lived like a Lord in a high stone tower in the midst of the trees.

It was the duty of the Watcher to look out over the land and sea by day, and to observe the stars by night. But secretly in his heart, the Watcher was afraid of the forest and of what might lie beneath its green canopy. So he recruited soldiers from the people, and armed them with bows and spears to guard the coasts and protect his tower.

But the forest folk were kind, not hostile. They tended and harvested all the goodness that grew there – the nuts, edible fungi, herbs and honey. They shared the fruits and berries, and celebrated the seasons each in turn. Yet the fear and suspicion of the Watcher grew, and he diverted more and more of the forest's resources and people into his army. The wandering folk began to decline and their spirits were depressed and uneasy.

When this discontent rose through the trees, and reached the ears of the Watcher, he cried:

'I knew it. All along I knew the forest was full of darkness and evil. We must cut down the trees and build walls and ships to guard our coast from wandering strangers. We must level the land for all to see and be seen.'

So began a hacking and sawing and groaning and splintering, as the air filled with dust and the screams of falling trees. Day after day it continued until all that was left upright was the mighty oak in the heart of the forest, surrounded by a wasteland of bleeding stumps.

‘Take it down,’ shouted the Watcher.

‘We can’t, my Lord. It’s solid as a rock.’

And indeed, as all the other trees had been felled, they had sent their energy through underground roots to feed the great oak.

‘Undermine it,’ yelled the Watcher, in a frenzy of frustration and unidentifiable fear.

‘We can’t, the roots go down and down for ever.’

‘Bring me the wise women of the forest, now!’ screamed the Watcher.

‘No, no,’ cried the women when the soldiers came, ‘our knowledge is for healing not killing.’

But they were brought at spear point, and forced to pour the hidden poisons of the lichens and fungi into the roots of the mighty oak. A great sigh like breathing out came up from the earth, followed by creaking and cracking, rumbling and crumbling; and the oak came crashing down over the remnants of the forest.

All the people gathered round and peered down into the huge bole, but they were met by an overpowering smell of dank rot.

Mouldering there, in a slimy fungoid soup, was a huge coiled serpent, a tree dragon of the earth. It was dying, hide and flesh fast decaying. Yet its coils were studded with gleaming jewels, and from its cloudy eyes trickled clear tear drops.

The Watcher was astonished but exultant.

‘I knew there would be treasure,’ he cried, ‘tear off those gems, men, for now my kingdom will be rich and strong!’

But as the men cut, rippled and tore the dragon hide, wise women gathered the tear drops, for they knew that in that pure gentle liquid lay

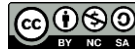
the cure and antidote for all venoms. Then the men marched away, and the dragon was left to die.

As the darkness gathered, the wandering folk crept back to the bole, for they say that all life began in the roots of a tree. And within that mulch of dragon flesh was an egg, and within that egg was a spark of cosmic fire, the life of wheeling stars and galaxies, waiting to birth a new earth cycle, a new consciousness, a new forest.

And the old peoples pass on that egg of healing and hope – their gift to us – and so this story begins once more, ours to remake. □

Adapted by Donald Smith (2022).

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Comments

Donal Smith tells how he heard this story during the Scottish International Storytelling Festival 2021 (SISF) from a group of young Scottish storytellers coordinated by his mentor, the storyteller Shona Cowie. The group drew on the story in their reflection on the regeneration of forests in Scotland, which in the past, when it was called Alba, was almost entirely covered in dense forest cover.

Donald would borrow the story to tell it a couple of days later at the Global Storytelling Lab at the same SISF, where we the Keepers of the Earth Stories were present. He told it in front of a group of European students from the Erasmus programme. And a Dutch educator listening to him there asked him to come and tell it again in the Netherlands in 2022, during a civic festival to bring trees to the city.

There is a surprisingly close link between this story and the findings of forest ecologist Suzanne Simard of the University of British Columbia. According to Simard (2023), all trees and shrubs in a forest are closely interconnected at the root level through fungal mycorrhizae, exchanging information, water and nutrients with each other, even between different species. In addition, Simard also speaks of the 'Mother Trees,' usually the oldest trees in the forest, which play a crucial role in

the conservation of the forest as a whole, hence their felling is disastrous for the forest ecosystem.

It seems at times that trees – and forests as millennia-old collective beings, such as coral – are the most indispensable beings for life on Earth, and the most generous of all the kingdoms of life’s manifestations. Not only do they take our poisonous carbon dioxide and transform it into oxygen, vital for most species on the planet, but they also play a decisive role in cloud formation, as well as attracting rain from the oceans, thus giving life to all other species, including our own. In this regard, see the Biotic Pump Theory by Anastassia Makarieva y Victor Gorshkov (2007).

But beyond the consonance with the findings of forest ecology which this story offers, the hymn to hope in its last lines takes us back to the Earth Charter. For, as *‘the darkness gathers’* in these times of revival of the ideologies that led to the mass destruction of World War II and of the early catastrophes of climate change, it is heartening to know that we have a life-giving ‘egg’ in the form of the Earth Charter, born within the *‘mulch of dragon flesh’* of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, and within which nestles the *‘spark of cosmic fire’* of the systemic, ecocentric, organicist, consciousness-based worldview. That worldview which can connect us, once and for all, to the Earth, its Community of Life and the universe of which we are but a thread in the fabric.

Sources

Smith, D. (2024). The dragon’s tears. In Cutanda, G. A., *Overturning the Narrative: Storytelling and Activism* (pp. 162-165). Barcelona: TESC Press.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 6e: Avoid military activities damaging to the environment.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

Principle 4: Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

Principle 16c: Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.

Principle 16f: Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which all are a part.

The Way Forward: As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. Such renewal is the promise of these Earth Charter principles.

The Way Forward: This requires a change of mind and heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.

The Way Forward: Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace ...

