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The Wishing-Tree of Isle Maree:

The Evolution of a Scottish Folkloric Practice

Context, context, context! As archaeologists, this is the central lesson drilled into us from the beginning of our educations, and it remains with us, a mantra recited religiously throughout our careers. When presented with a material object or monument, a consideration of its context is usually the first port of call. Where, and with what, was it found? When, why, and how was it made? How, where, and by whom was it used? When an archaeologist examines an artefact, they do not consider it in isolation.

However, as elementary and cardinal as context is, when presented with a material object it is sometimes tempting to neglect *chronological* context; to view an artefact in *temporal* isolation. We can all-too-easily misinterpret materiality for immutability. An object's physical properties are perceived as static; as a fixed frame preventing changing context. This, however, is obviously not the case. The physicality of objects and monuments shift, as do their social relations; it is vital, therefore, to consider them as aspects of much longer narratives. An object or monument viewed today is its most recent incarnation, preceded by a number of previous incarnations, all of which must be considered in order to adequately contextualise the artefact itself, and the customs and beliefs surrounding it.

This chapter specifically considers the contextualisation of folkloric structures, and it is my aim to contribute to the fostering of a dialogue between archaeology and folklore. 'Folklore' is here presented as the study of the traditional customs, beliefs, and legends of a given society/group, and it is advocated here that such a study can contribute greatly to archaeological theory and interpretation, and vice versa. Whilst the material culture of a folkloric custom can illustrate how people participated, the folkloric evidence – ranging from ethnographic data to contemporaneous literary sources – can elucidate *why*. Both strands of evidence, however, can equally testify to the mutability and malleability of a custom, and it is another aim of this chapter to demonstrate the necessity of considering chronological adaptations and 'evolutions' in the contextualisation of a folkloric object – indeed, of any material object.

Wild about Gairloch

It was this lesson I had in mind when visiting the ‘wishing-tree’ near the shores of Loch Maree, Wester Ross, in the Northwest Highlands of Scotland, in April 2012. I had been invited by Kenny Nelson of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to present an evening lecture on the history and heritage of wishing-trees – the topic of my PhD thesis – at Gairloch Community Centre, as part of the annual *Wild about Gairloch* festival. The aim of this festival, organised by SNH, is to simultaneously foster people’s awareness of the natural environment while encouraging local art projects, and one aspect of this festival was the creation of a ‘wishing-tree’.

A young beech, standing beside a woodland trail behind the Beinn Eighe Visitor Centre, two miles from Loch Maree, was selected for this project. Local artist Lynn Bennett-Mackenzie spray-painted the tree’s trunk and branches gold, and erected a gazebo beside it, stocked with art supplies. On the day of the festival, 13 April 2012, families were invited to craft offerings to the tree using these art supplies: white cotton rags and small wooden discs were decorated with paint, glitter gel-pens, and pieces of tinsel, and hung from the tree’s branches. As the children deposited their ‘offerings’, they were told to make wishes (Figs. 1-2).

Having been established in 2012, there can be no denying that this wishing-tree is a contemporary monument. An attempt to view the tree as one part of a longer ritual narrative is stymied by its evident infancy; prior to its utilisation in the festival, it was perceived simply as one tree amongst many, with no ritual or folkloric associations. However, adopting a broader geographic scope reveals that the tree does belong to a larger narrative and that it was preceded by numerous ritual incarnations, which led to its current employment as a wishing-tree. This contextualising approach requires a shift in geographic focus from the shores of Loch Maree to Loch Maree itself.

Isle Maree

Stretching for 12 miles in a north-westerly direction, its width reaching distances of 2.5 miles, Loch Maree is the fourth largest fresh-water loch in Scotland, and accommodates more than sixty islands, which are managed and protected by Scottish Natural Heritage. One of these islands shares its name with the loch. Situated 250 metres from the northern shore, Isle

Maree is of triangular shape, measuring roughly 200m by 170m, rising to a summit of 30m (Map 1).

Visually, it has been described as one of the more attractive islands, with its neat shores of sand and shingle and its densely forested centre. Thomas Pennant, having visited the island in 1774, opines that it ‘is the most beautiful of the isles; the others have only a few trees sprinkled over their surface’ (1775: 330), whilst Isle Maree was richly adorned with oak, ash, willow, birch, hazel, and holly trees (1775: 330). Gertrude Godden, making her trip to the island over a century later, describes it with equal admiration: ‘so covered with luxuriant foliage that a fragment of green forest seems to have been carved out and placed in the loch, set in a border of golden sand’ (1893: 498).

Reeves describes this isle as ‘the principal island in the lake’ (1857-60: 286). This is misleading, for in size Isle Maree covers only 6 acres and is in fact one of the loch’s smaller islands. *Culturally*, however, it can indeed be referred to as the ‘principal island’; as John Dixon wrote in the 1880s, ‘[t]hough one of the smallest of the islands, it is without a doubt the most interesting’ (1886: 150), whilst Brenda Macrow, having visited the island in the 1950s, describes it as the ‘most charming and most historic’ of the loch’s islands (1953: 85).

The local traditions surrounding Isle Maree are many and varied (Mitchell 1863: 253), centred primarily on the island’s reputed connection to the cure of insanity. Romeo-and-Juliet style tales are told of a Viking prince and his bride who, driven by jealousy and madness, took their own lives on Loch Maree and are now buried on the island. Other sources – with varying degrees of reliability; certainly the Presbytery records, for example, should be taken with a pinch of salt – describe ceremonies supposedly conducted on the loch and island regarding insanity. Seton Gordon notes how Isle Maree was a ‘Mecca of innumerable pilgrims’ (1935: 42) who resorted to the island for a cure to mental illness, sacrificing bulls on the loch’s shore, drinking water from the holy well of St. Maelrubha, whom the island (and loch) was named after, and being dipped into the purported healing waters of Loch Maree.

Undoubtedly, Isle Maree is rife with legends, superstitions, and local folkloric customs – far too many to detail here. Indeed, in the work of Ratcliffe Barnett, penned in 1930, we find a poetic and rather whimsical description of the island, more akin to the works of Tolkien or C. S. Lewis than to that of an antiquarian: ‘There, in a little clearing of the wood, we found what we had come to see – the stones of the Dead Lovers, the site of the Hermit’s Cell, the Well of

Magic Waters, and the Dead Tree' (1930: 112). It is this 'Dead Tree' which constitutes the central focus of this paper.

Saint Maelrubha

In order to contextualise Barnett's 'Dead Tree', attention must first be given to the holy well situated on Isle Maree. This well was under the sacred custodianship of Saint Maelrubha, also known as Maree. Born in County Down, Ireland, in 642, St. Maelrubha came to Scotland and founded the monastic community of Applecross, Ross, in 673 (Reeves 1857-60: 259; Mitchell 1863: 254-255). Dixon attributes to him the successful introduction of Christianity into this region of Scotland and, following his death in 722, he became the patron saint of the district (Mitchell 1863: 254-255).

St. Maelrubha's methods of Christianisation are particularly noteworthy for the purpose of this paper. Dixon observes how he permitted certain pagan customs to continue – such as the bull sacrifices, believed to have been performed on the shores of Loch Maree even after the Reformation, as part of the ceremonies for curing insanity (Barnett 1930: 113; Gordon 1935: 44) – but endeavoured to give these customs a Christian aspect (Dixon 1886: 150-151). Indeed, St. Maelrubha's flexibility in amalgamating the customs of paganism with the doctrines of Christianity is most apparent in his local title, '*god* Maree', rather than 'St. Maree'; evidence, perhaps, that Maelrubha had supplanted a pagan deity in the eyes of the local populace (Mitchell 1863: 255; Hull 1928: 157).

This deliberate fusion of pagan and Christian customs may be evident in St. Maelrubha's purported use of Isle Maree itself. Pennant writes that Isle Maree was his 'favoured isle' (1775: 330), chosen by him to accommodate his newly built chapel (Reeves 1857-60: 262; Mitchell 1863: 251). Whether the saint first consecrated the island himself, or whether he supplanted an earlier, pagan centre is unknown, and at this time impossible to determine – indeed, as is whether or not St. Maelrubha ever visited the island at all, or whether this tale is simply hearsay.

However, Pennant describes the remains of a structure in the centre of the island, consisting of a circular dike of stones with a narrow entrance, no longer visible, which Pennant believes 'to have been originally *Druidical*, and that the ancient superstition of *Paganism* had been taken up by the saint, as the readiest method of making a conquest over the minds of the

inhabitants' (1775: 330) (*italics in original*). Although this circular structure was not necessarily religious in nature, it does contribute to the possibility that the island had originally been a pagan cultic centre prior to St. Maelrubha's arrival and reutilisation.

The Holy Well

In the south-west corner of the island, there once stood a well said to have been consecrated by St. Maelrubha (Map 2). It was widely believed in the surrounding districts that the water from this holy well could cure lunacy, and a pilgrimage to Isle Maree became the central aspect of a much larger ceremony, designed to cure the mentally ill. Bulls were supposedly sacrificed on the loch's shore and libations of milk poured onto the beach, before the sufferer was taken to Isle Maree, given water from the well to drink, and then dipped into the water of Loch Maree three times.

These rituals are well documented (Pennant 1775: 330; Reeves 1857-60: 288-289; Mitchell 1863: 251-262; Queen Victoria (Duff 1968: 332); Dixon 1886: 151; Godden 1893: 500-501; Muddock 1898: 437-438; Barnett 1930: 113), and are described (although probably exaggerated) in local Presbytery records and the *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (14.2.92, cited by Dixon 1886). The earliest of such records is from 1656 (Mitchell 1863: 251; Godden 1893: 500), although certain elements, such as the sacrificing of bulls, fell away over time.

The holy well on Isle Maree, it seems, was one of the final elements of this ceremony to remain. Holy wells are a relatively common feature of the British landscape; Jones lists 1179 holy wells in Wales (1954; Dowden 2000: 42), whilst Lucas estimates more than 3000 in Ireland (1963: 40). These wells were often employed for their curative properties, originally as part of pagan hydrolatry but later adopted by Christianity, the wells transferring to the custodianship of Christian saints (Daly 1961; Rattue 1995).

It appears that the holy well on Isle Maree was last resorted to for the cure of insanity in the 1850s; Godden believes that the last appeal was made to the holy well in 1857 (1893: 500), whilst Dixon cites a particular example of a woman from Easter Ross having been taken to the island for such a cure in 1858 (1886: 151). By the time Mitchell visited Isle Maree in 1863, however, the well was dry 'and full of last year's leaves, and the flat stone which serves for a cover we found lying on the bank' (1863: 262).

According to the *Inverness Courier* of November 4th, 1852, cited by Reeves (1857-60: 288-289), the well was believed to have lost its curative powers when a farmer from Letterewe brought his dog to the island and lowered it into the well, hoping to cure it of madness, ‘to the sore vexation of the presiding genie, who forthwith revoked his blessing’. It is notable that St. Maelrubha is here referred to as a ‘genie’, whilst Dixon simply writes that this ‘desecrating act is said to have driven virtue for a time from the well’, dating the act to 1830 (1886: 157). Whether it was a genie or virtue bestowed upon the well by St. Maelrubha, however, the curative powers of the well were believed to have been compromised, and by the 1860s, it was no longer resorted to for the cure of insanity.

By the 1950s, when the island was visited by travel writer Brenda Macrow, she remarked on how difficult it was to determine the site of this well (1953: 88), It has not been determined whether the well was filled up deliberately, having purportedly lost its efficacy, or whether this was simply the result of many years of disuse. Either way, today no visible trace remains of either the well or its stone slab covering.

However, it is possible to determine where the well once stood, judging by the location of a certain tree, as Godden did in the 1890s: ‘In the damp ground at the tree’s foot is a small dark hole...it is filled up with dead leaves. This is the healing-well’ (1893: 499). This tree, marking the location of the well, is the ‘Dead Tree’ referred to by Barnett.

The Well and the Tree

The earliest reference to a votive tree on Isle Maree was given by Pennant in 1775; in his description of the island, he writes of how a ‘stump of a tree is shewn as an altar, probably the memorial of one of stone’ (1775: 330). He does not, however, specify what form of objects were deposited on this altar nor what the altar was in honour of, but it appears that this votive tree was held in veneration through its connection with the island’s holy well. In fact, it originally appears to have simply been utilised as a convenient – if not incidental – altar on which pilgrims attached their offerings to St. Maelrubha after their visits to the saint’s healing well.

John Campbell writes of a similar arrangement in the Hebrides, on the island of Islay, where votive objects, such as copper caps, pins, and buttons, were ‘placed in chinks in rocks and trees at the edge of the “Witches’ Well”’ (1860: 134). Campbell compares this to the location

of votive objects left for the well on Isle Maree, so apparently the offerings for St. Maelrubha's well were likewise deposited in chinks in nearby trees and rocks; a matter of convenience rather than deliberate placement. Likewise, Dixon describes how the final ceremonial act on Isle Maree was to drink water from the well and then to attach an offering to the nearby tree (1886: 151), whilst McPherson describes how the offerings could either be laid at the side of the well or hung on a nearby shrub (1929: 156).

However, as Ross writes, 'a particular tree is often an integral part of the rites associated with a sacred well' (1967: 35-36); in many cases, a tree connected with a holy well is not incidental, but central to the ritual itself. In some cases, trees are viewed as sacred because of osmotic transference; their association with the holy wells bestows sanctity upon them also (McPherson 1929: 74; Lucas 1963: 40), and this bestowal may be literal as well as symbolic, with the holy water transferring from the well into the tree.

However, in other cases, the trees are integral to this custom because of qualities they themselves possess independently of the holy wells. In some cases, the trees have actually proven integral to the efficacy of the wells; at Easter Rarichie, Ross and Cromarty, the Well of the Yew was believed to cure the 'white swelling', tuberculosis of bones and joints, so long as a specific tree stood beside it. When this tree was felled, the well purportedly lost its power (Bord and Bord 1985: 59). Trees were also often utilised as apotropaic devices, and Shephard asserts that these trees, believed to possess protective properties, were planted beside wells as guardians, possibly to ward off fairies and witches (1994: 63).

The tree on Isle Maree may have been viewed as a particularly appropriate counterpart to the holy well because of its species, oak (*Quercus*), which boasts a wealth of folkloric associations (Vickery 1995: 260-264). In the British Isles, oak was widely attributed curative properties, with certain oak trees resorted to for cures for toothache (Walhouse 1880: 99n), ague (Thiselton-Dyer 1889: 288), diarrhoea, and ringworm (Vickery 1995: 264), while it was also held that passing injured or infected body parts through clefts or branches of certain oak trees would heal them (Walsham 2011: 460). Oak was also considered protective, with wood taken from these trees employed as apotropaic devices designed to deter witches (Wilks 1972: 199). It is unsurprising, therefore, that this particular tree – on an island of numerous species, such as ash, willow, birch, hazel, and holly – was viewed in connection with the holy well.

Holy wells and votive trees are so intrinsically connected that, in the British Isles, where there is a sacred tree, a sacred well will invariably be nearby (McPherson 1929: 74). As a result of the passing of time, there are, as McPherson notes, many holy wells without their counterpart holy trees, but it is rarely the reverse. McPherson does, however, point out one exception to the rule: Isle Maree. ‘Through the changes of time,’ he writes, ‘the tree, though but a withered trunk, is still there, while the well has been filled up’ (1929: 74). Colonel Edington, in fact, wrote in 1927 that the tree had ‘been fixed into the filled-up holy well’ (cited in McPherson 1929: 75), revealing that the tree had replaced the well physically, as well as ritually.

This tree on Isle Maree, therefore, may have originally been utilised for ritual purposes simply because of its association with the holy well, but it went on to outlive that well; indeed, to supplant it. While the healing well of St. Maelrubha has fallen out of use, leaving no visible trace of it behind, the ritual life of the tree has continued.

The Rag-Tree of Isle Maree

In 1775, when Pennant describes the tree, he does not specify what form of objects the pilgrims deposited. Later sources, however, refer to its use as a rag-tree. Hartland describes how pilgrims, seeking a cure from the holy well of St. Maelrubha, attached pieces of clothing to the nearby tree (1893: 453), and Barnett reports that the patients brought to the island would tie rags or ribbons to the tree (1930: 114). On Mitchell’s visit to Isle Maree in 1863, the tree was apparently studded with nails: ‘To each of these was originally attached a piece of the clothing of some patient who had visited the spot’ (1863: 253). Queen Victoria similarly observed ‘rags and ribbons’ tied to the branches of the tree in 1877 (Duff 1968: 333).

This use of rags corresponds with the connection of Isle Maree to the cure of insanity. In the British Isles, rag-trees were most commonly employed for their purported curative properties, and some were utilised for highly specific ailments. It was commonly believed that rags contained whatever ailment the depositor wished to be cured of (Hartland 1893: 460; Foley 2010, 2011), and, by affixing them to a tree, the ailment is transferred to that tree.

This notion of magic is an example of ‘contagious transfer’, a subcategory of Frazer’s ‘sympathetic magic’ (Frazer 1900: 39), and it is described by Skorupski using the following

equation: ‘A certain property, *F*, is transferred from the initial object, *a*, to the goal object, *b*, by some method of transfer’ (1976: 134). In the case of the rag-tree, the ‘certain property’ is illness; the ‘initial object’ is the depositor; the ‘goal object’ is the tree; and the ‘method of transfer’ is the tying of a rag. The illness is thus transferred from the person, through the rag – the ‘vehicle of the disease’, as Hartland terms it (1893: 460) – and into the tree.

The Nail-Tree of Isle Maree

At some point during its ritual career, the tree of Isle Maree shed its rags and ribbons and became predominantly a nail-tree. Mitchell describes how the tree was ‘studded with nails’ (1863: 253), whilst Hartland observes how ‘[m]any of the nails are believed to be covered with the bark, which appears to be growing over them’ (1893: 453-454). This reincarnation as a nail-tree is a logical next evolutionary step from the rag-tree; pins and nails were particularly popular ‘vehicles of transfer’ in the British Isles. Knocking nails into an oak tree, for example, was a well-known remedy for toothache in Cornwall. The toothache was believed to transfer into the tree, from the sufferer, through the nail (Walhouse 1880: 99n; Porteous 1928: 188). Pins were also employed as cures for warts; inserted into each wart, then into the bark of an ash tree, this was believed to transfer the affliction to the tree (Wilks 1972: 121).

The transformation of the rag-tree into a nail-tree, however, was probably wholly incidental. As has been observed, the rags and ribbons were attached to the tree using nails (Mitchell 1863: 253; Hartland 1893: 453). The nails were therefore convenient tools utilised for securing offerings, rather than offerings themselves. However, cloth decomposes much faster than iron; the nails would therefore survive long after the rags and ribbons had decayed. This natural process, leaving the tree studded with nails rather than adorned with rags, likely led to the misconception that the tree on Isle Maree was intended as a nail-tree. Pilgrims to the island therefore began inserting nails as votive offerings or vehicles of transference in and of themselves.

‘Any Metal Article...’

The tree on Isle Maree did not remain exclusively a nail-tree for long – if at all. Numerous other metal objects were reported to have been affixed to the bark of this tree. Mitchell mentions two buckles (1863: 253), and Godden lists ‘nails, screws, and rusty iron fragments’ amongst the offerings attached to the tree (1893: 499). In fact, Dixon reports the belief that ‘any metal article’ should be attached to the tree (1886: 150), whilst Godden remarks that by the time she visited the island in the 1890s, ‘the driving in of a bit of metal is the only necessary act’ (1893: 499).

The tree on Isle Maree, however, is not unique in its loose stipulation of the type of objects offered. Certainly in the British Isles, pins and nails were not the only metal objects to be attached to or inserted into trees for curative purposes. Beside the well of St. Enoch or Thenew, Glasgow, stood a tree onto which pilgrims nailed small pieces of tin-iron, shaped to represent the parts of the body which had been cured by the water of the well (Walker 1883: 190). Other metal objects attached to trees or dropped into British holy wells included buckles (Jones 1954: 92), gilt buttons (Hartland 1893: 453), keys, and fish hooks (Bord and Bord 1985: 90-91).

The loose stipulation of ‘any metal article’, however, may not have been quite as nonchalant as it sounds; it was, perhaps, the material of the objects rather than the objects themselves that was considered integral to the ritual on Isle Maree. For in the British Isles, and particularly in Scotland, metals were imbued with much preternatural power, both curative and protective. In Scotland, it was believed that metals, especially iron, steel, and silver, repelled malevolent supernatural creatures, such as fairies and spirits (Lawrence 1898: 26; Evans Wentz 1911: 87; Firth 1922: 76). For this reason, needles were stuck into children’s caps (Hull 1928: 134); iron nails were hammered into the front board of beds; newborns sipped their first drinks from silver spoons or coins to prevent abduction from fairies (Firth 1922: 76); and other metal objects such as reaping-hooks were placed under beds or beneath windows (McPherson 2003: 101).

The horse-shoe was another metal object widely utilised as an apotropaic device, hung up in homes to repel witches (Lawrence 1898: 7), and the iron plates of shoes worn by farm labourers would be fastened onto doors for the same purpose (Lawrence 1898: 32). Certain metals were also considered highly curative. Broadwood advocates that it was the belief that iron gives water a tonic property, strengthening the drinker, which led to the tradition of depositing nails and pins into holy wells (1898: 368). Indeed, in the Hebrides, a popular cure

against enchantment was to place pieces of steel in the milk of cows believed to have been bewitched; the drinkers of such milk would be protected from sorcery (Lawrence 1898: 33), whilst in Dumfries and Galloway, a flat piece of silver known as the ‘Lockerby Penny’, was widely esteemed as a remedy for madness in cattle (Henderson 1879: 163).

It is likely, therefore, that the vague stipulation of ‘any metal article’ does not indicate indifference towards the form of offering given on the island. Instead, it indicates both a local and national belief in the protective and curative properties of metal evidently prevalent during the nineteenth century. However, by the late 1800s, this broad category of ritual deposits had narrowed once more, and one particular metal votive object came to the fore: the coin.

The Coin-Tree of Isle Maree

The sources indicate that, for as long as the tree and the holy well on Isle Maree have been ritually employed, coins have been amongst the offerings deposited there. When the tree was still predominantly a rag-tree, it appears that pilgrims would also leave coins as an offering on the well (Barnett 1930: 114). The coins eventually began to be inserted into clefts and cracks in the bark of the rag-tree itself, rather than left beside the well. Mitchell, writing in 1863, describes how ‘[c]ountless pennies and halfpennies are driven edge-ways into the wood’, as well as numerous other offerings, such as rags and nails (1863: 253).

However, by the time of Queen Victoria’s visit to the island in 1877, it had become the custom ‘for everyone who goes there to insert with a hammer a copper coin, as a sort of offering to the saint’ (Duff 1963: 332); the coin had thus become the prominent offering. Indeed, by the 1890s, it was being referred to as ‘the money tree’ (Muddock 1898: 437), and by Colonel Edington’s visit in 1927, no pins or nails were visible in the bark of the tree, only coins (McPherson 1929: 75) – so many coins, in fact, that Edington describes the tree as ‘covered with metallic scales...something like what is depicted on a dragon’ (cited in McPherson 1929: 75).

The hundreds of coins inserted into clefts and cracks have no doubt taken their toll on this tree, which is now dead. It was still alive in the 1860s, when Mitchell described how the bark continued to grow over the coins (1863: 253), but Queen Victoria described it as an ‘old tree’

in 1877 (Duff 1968: 332), and Dixon observed in 1886 that it was ‘nearly dead’ (1886: 150). By 1927, when Colonel Edington visited, it was a ‘bare trunk...evidently dead’, propped up against a neighbouring tree (cited by McPherson 1929: 75), and McPherson believed that this ‘holy tree shared the fate of the holy well – the devotion of pilgrims has proven its undoing. The coins, hammered in and destroying the bark, have killed the object of their veneration’ (1929: 75) and, indeed, copper poisoning is assumed to have caused the death of this tree (MacLeish 1968: 420).

The death of the tree, however, has not led to the death of the tradition. Indeed, it appears to have proliferated; as the original tree became too densely coined, the custom appears to have spread to surrounding trees. By the 1950s, people had begun inserting coins into the stake used to prop up the original tree as well as into the barks of surrounding trees (Macrow 1953: 88-89). In 2002, when the North of Scotland Archaeological Society conducted a survey of the site, they observed that the original coin-tree (referred to in their report as a votive tree, and catalogued as VT1) was leaning on six spars, also embedded with coins, and counted two subsidiary parts of VT1, scattered some distance away, VT2 and VT3 (North of Scotland Archaeology Society 2002: 22-23). In total, they catalogued nine boles and spars embedded with coins on Isle Maree. However, in the intervening decade between their 2002 survey and my own fieldwork, on 14th April 2012, this number had further increased, evidence that the tradition has far from fallen out of popularity.

The Coin-Tree Today

Roughly 10 metres beyond the entrance into Isle Maree’s wooded centre, walking north-east from the island’s southern beach, is a small clearing, just below the burial ground. The path, which has been created by numerous traversing feet, stops once it reaches a cluster of eight logs and spars, leaning against each other, surrounded by a further seven trees, stumps, and logs standing just over 20 metres north of the southern shore, all of which have coins embedded into their barks (Figs. 3-5). On the day of my fieldwork, there were approximately 2000 coins inserted into or placed on these trees, or on the ground surrounding them, dating from 1875 to 2010.

The central bole is most likely the original votive tree (Fig. 6). It is 4.8m in length, and is embedded with 613 coins, inserted longitudinally up the trunk, ranging in date from 1897 to

2009. The majority of these coins are pre-decimalisation (predominantly one pennies, but also half pennies and two shillings), but there are also many which are post-decimalisation, ranging from 1 pence pieces to a 50 pence piece. There is also some foreign coinage, including a Dutch 5 guilder coin from 1985, 10 Dutch cents, 1 Euro cent, and 1 US cent.

Today, coins undoubtedly dominate as the most popular offering deposited there, but they are certainly not the only objects to have been attached to these trees in recent years. Adorning an upper limb of the central (and possibly original) tree is a badge shaped as a golden eagle, a silver chain, a crystal love-heart earring, and one nail. A nail was also found inserted into another tree, and embedded into another was a screw. Placed atop a horizontal log was a red candle, and another tree contained no coins at all, but attached to one of its upper limbs was one metal badge clip, two black hair bobbles, one metal hairclip, one pink rag, one piece of string, and one leather bootlace (Figs. 7-9).

Represented by these various deposits are the numerous ritual incarnations the tree of Isle Maree has embodied. The candle is obviously an object with a multitude of ritual associations, from its symbolism in Christianity to its use in New Age paganism. The nails and screw no doubt hark back to a time when the main tree was employed as a nail-tree. The golden eagle badge, silver chain, and metal hairclip evoke the loose stipulation that ‘any metal article’ will do, while the pink rag, piece of string, bootlace, and, indeed, all of the other items which would have been worn close to the body – the hair bobbles and the love-heart earring – recall the tree’s utilisation as a rag-tree, and the belief that a disease can transfer from the sufferer to the tree via a vehicle of transference (i.e. an object once worn close to the body of the sufferer).

The tree of Isle Maree is evidently far from exclusive. It is able to accommodate all of these traditions simultaneously, which may go some way in explaining how this custom has survived, whilst others have not. As has been observed previously, monuments are not static. This, however, refers to more than their physical locations; culturally, these trees are malleable. They can embody numerous traditions at any one time, and they can shift from one incarnation to another, following the mutable tides of fashion.

With the rise of Christianity, Isle Maree’s pagan associations were purportedly easily supplanted by St. Maelrubha, who was believed to have sanctified the island and, by association, the tree itself. Unsurprisingly, some of the more perceptibly ‘pagan’ customs fell away; the sacrificing of the bulls and the pouring of libations, for example, but the remaining

traditions adapted well to Christianity. However, with the loosening grip of the Church and the declining faith in the power of saints and their holy wells, the traditions needed to adapt further still in order to retain their popularity.

By the time the tree had become predominantly a coin-tree in the late nineteenth century, for example, its purpose had changed. It had become a ‘wishing-tree’, a term employed by Dixon (1886: 150), Godden (1893: 499), McPherson (1929: 76), Barnett (1930: 114), and Macrow (1953: 88-89). It was now believed that, as described by McPherson, a ‘wish silently formed when any metal article was attached to the tree, or coin driven in, would certainly be realised’ (1929: 76). No longer associated with healing, the tree became imbued with the power to grant wishes or to ensure good luck (MacLeish 1968: 420), the only two traditions which participants seem to observe today. Local residents in Gairloch, for example, associate the tree with only two things: wish-making and good luck. The tree has therefore shed its (Christianised) curative properties and become a wishing-tree instead, a custom much more inclusive – albeit perhaps less earnestly observed.

The Current Incarnation

Certain practicalities often determine whether a tradition persists or wanes, and one such practicality is accessibility. Naturally, Isle Maree has never been particularly easy to access. However, if the need was strong enough, then the means had been found; when Isle Maree was faithfully resorted to for the cure of insanity, pilgrims would go to many lengths to reach the island. A boat would be hired, along with someone who could adeptly navigate the dangerous outcroppings of rock on Loch Maree. Even when the holy well had supposedly lost its powers, and the votive tree had evolved into a wishing-tree, the island would be visited often enough, mainly by tourists who had hired boats and gillies for fishing on the loch, and would make side-trips to Isle Maree out of curiosity, having heard of its reputation.

In recent decades, tourists and locals alike have had the opportunity to visit Isle Maree on boat tours, organised by the Loch Maree Hotel – indeed, Queen Victoria (Duff 1968: 328), folklorist Muddock (1898: 437), and Colonel Edington (McPherson 1929: 75) reached the island using this hotel’s service, as did many of the local residents of Gairloch who had visited Isle Maree during the last few decades. Unless you owned your own boat – privately owned non-motorised boats are permitted on the loch (Kenny Nelson, Scottish Natural

Heritage, pers. comm. 14/04/2012) – the only way to reach Isle Maree was either through these boat tours, or to hire a rowing boat yourself from the Loch Maree Hotel (Fig. 10).

However, in 2010 this hotel closed, and extensive damage caused to the structure's interior due to a water-pipe burst has meant that any plans for re-opening will be greatly delayed. Subsequently, there is no longer any easy way to reach Isle Maree, and Scotland's National Nature Reserves website advises that the 'islands can only be reached by non-motorised craft and this can be difficult or even dangerous – so they are best appreciated from the shore' (Scotland's National Nature Reserves 2010).

Obviously Isle Maree still receives some visitors; five coins inserted into the trees were dated 2009 and one was dated 2010, indicating that at least one group has been to the island since the closure of the Loch Maree Hotel. The six Dutch coins inserted into these trees also suggests that the wealthy family from the Netherlands, who own the land north of Loch Maree, may have visited the island using a private boat. However, if the Loch Maree Hotel remains closed, and no company in the area begins to offer replacement boat tours, then fewer and fewer visitors will reach the island, and the custom of the wishing-tree will eventually cease to be observed. Perhaps it is the fear of the loss of this local tradition which led to the creation of the wishing-tree as part of the *Wild about Gairloch* festival, to which we have come full circle.

In this 2012 reproduction, many of the customs of the Isle Maree tree are – either consciously or unconsciously – observed. The wooden disks were deliberately chosen to represent coins, a direct link to the coin-tree, whilst the strips of cloth were no doubt intended to evoke the tradition of the rag-tree. The nailing of these offerings perhaps harks back to the tree's employment as a nail-tree, and the use of tinsel, glitter pens, and gold spray-paint may recall the loose stipulation of 'any metal article' representing a wish. Here, therefore, is another tree which successfully accommodates an amalgamation of traditions. However, despite its invocations of the earlier customs, it is very much a *modern* recontextualisation.

The tree of Isle Maree was once resorted to by patients diagnosed with insanity, as part of serious, earnestly conducted ceremonies. Today, however, the re-created wishing-tree is intended for the play of children, whose offerings are colourful simulacrums of the real things. The tree of Isle Maree was once imbued with powerful healing properties, inherently associated closely with the holy well of St. Maelrubha. This re-creation, however, is connected with no areas or monuments of ritual significance, and is employed for simple

wishes. This demonstrates the importance of applicability in adaptation; because few adults would earnestly observe such customs, a slightly less discerning audience is targeted: children. And because the participants can no longer easily reach the tree on Isle Maree, the tradition, aptly fluid, will come to them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the tree on Isle Maree is a prime example of folkloric evolution made manifest, and this paper has illustrated how a consideration of the materiality of a monument can testify to change and mutability. By focusing on the physical properties of the wishing-tree of Isle Maree, and its reproduction, a sense of fluidity emerges, reflecting the shifting customs they have been appropriated and re-appropriated for over the centuries. Evidently change is not an incidental factor of a custom, but an integral one. Longevity necessitates malleability, and both the custom and its material manifestation – in this case, the trees – must adapt in order to survive.

The mutability of the Isle Maree tree is clearly evident in the number of forms it has adopted, transforming from an altar of convenience to a rag-tree in its own right; from a rag-tree to a nail-tree; from a nail-tree to a coin-tree; from one coin-tree to a cluster of coin-trees; and finally, to a more accessible reproduction behind the Beinn Eighe Visitor Centre. Judging by this malleability, it is clear that considering a folkloric custom in material form should not mean studying an object or structure as a permanent fixture; neither should it involve the assumption that the beliefs and customs which surround it are equally static. Instead, we should be viewing the material object as one page in a much longer biography and as one part of a much larger whole.

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