A Glance at the Elder and Sundry Other Trees in Language and Tradition

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Humphrey Phelps’s *Forest Voices* of 2008 is a “people’s history” of the Forest of Dean, consisting almost entirely of reminiscences transcribed from what was probably the last generation able to tap in directly to an otherwise largely forgotten way of life with all its hardships, dangers, and unsophisticated pleasures. There is much to provoke discussion here, but for present purposes we focus on the often startling accounts of now surely obsolete folk remedies, such as the skin of a grass snake fastened, until such time as it rotted away, round the neck of a child suffering from a weak chest, feet placed into a pot of one’s own urine as a cure for chilblains, or a treatment of croup and whooping cough that involved the patient being taken to Cinderford so as to inhale the fumes emanating from the gasworks at the bottom of the town.

Herbal remedies were no less fascinating. Gorse tea was administered for dropsy, steam from an infusion of the plant’s young flowers was inhaled for asthma, lily leaves cleared out the pus from an ulcerated leg, while a mixture of celandine and the fat from around a pig’s kidneys was, with the addition of a little salt, rendered in the oven and then stored in jars, to be used as a treatment for skin troubles. There is a moving account of how a delicate boy suffering from an unspecified illness was given up by the doctor and not expected to live the night out. The boy’s father dosed him with nettle tea “as fast as he could take it”, and towards dawn he fell into a deep sleep that led to recovery.

One remedy is mentioned several times, as when an informant tells us that, with an admixture of black mint, *ellum* was used in cases of fever, to keep a patient’s temperature down. Now one might be forgiven for assuming that some part of the elm is meant, because, in many varieties of English, *elm* is *ellum*, with a murmur vowel between the *ll* and the *m*. The assumption would, however, be wrong. At the very beginning of Phelps’s section on remedies he quotes his informant Kate Meredith: “As children we drank quarts of elder and mint tea when we had colds”, and later in the section there is a reference by another informant, Elsie Olivey, to *ellum blow*, “the universal panacea”, and to *ellum blow tea*, “the queen of all Forest remedies” (Phelps, pp. 58-61). There is of course no doubt that *blow* means “flower, blossom”. Moreover, the context makes it entirely clear that *ellum* here means
“elder”. If any doubts remain, we can for instance compare the identical Herefordshire form ellum for the elder, recorded by Leather in her study of the county’s folklore (Leather, p. 80). How are we to explain a name for the elder that calls to mind a completely different tree, the elm?

First, we note that in our modern word elder the d has developed for euphonic reasons, and is not yet present in Old English ellærn. A reduced form of this was ellen (OED, 5, p. 112), with which we may compare modern Gloucestershire forms in the Survey of English Dialects, notably ellun recorded for Gretton (and also for Checkley in Herefordshire), and ellen (with the second e here representing the murmur vowel schwa) for Brean in the Forest of Dean as well as for Skenfrith in neighbouring Monmouthshire. The final n of Gretton ellun is replaced in Deerhurst, Gloucestershire, by m, so that we have here ellum (SED, IV.10.6), corresponding exactly to the ellum in the ellum blow and ellum blow tea of Phelps’s informant Elsie Olivey. Perhaps this was originally ellen blow, with n then becoming the bilabial m under the influence of the bilabial b of blow.

Turning now to the SED responses for elm in Gloucestershire, we find no examples of homophony: elm is elm, without a murmur vowel, throughout the county, and is thus phonetically distinct from the ellum of ellum blow (SED, IV.10.4).

Having touched on elder blossom as “the queen of all remedies” in the Forest of Dean, close to the eastern edge of Wales, we move westward to Carmarthenshire, where, as D. Parry-Jones recalls in his Welsh Children’s Games and Pastimes, the elder found a completely different use, for it provided small boys with popguns, fashioned from straight young shoots of the plant from which the pith had been removed with a strong piece of wire pushed through. The “bullets” were bits of paper chewed and softened in the mouth. So accustomed were Parry-Jones and his friends to regard the elder as existing only to provide them with popguns, that they always called it pren bwlet, the “bullet-tree”, and it was not until he had reached manhood that he found out its “correct” appellation, namely pren yscawen (Parry-Jones, pp. 39-41), a name that reminds us, incidentally, of Old Cornish scawen, plural scaw. This survives in Cornish-English scaw, but also in scawsy-buds for the elderflowers with which the insides of beehives were rubbed to prepare them for new swarms (EDD, 5, p. 249).

In northern England and in Scotland, the elder was the bour-tree, and guns fashioned from its branches were bour-tree guns (EDD, 1, p. 360). Further afield, in Germany, we find many analogues, such as the Mecklenburg Ballerbüss, quite literally “popsn”, made from a hollowed elder stick sealed at each end with elastic material provided for instance by the root of the horseradish. You fired the gun by vigorously pushing a ramrod into one end so that the compressed air within caused the “bullet” at the other end to be ejected. Elsewhere the guns were blown into, and different missiles were used. In the Eifel these were sloes, as is indicated by the regional name Schlenebüss, meaning “sloe gun” (WdP, 4, pp. 74-75).

There can be little doubt that, along with similarly fabricated water squirts and peashooters, weapons of the type described have been used in the mock battles of juveniles since time immemorial. Certainly we can go back a century or two. A description of rural life in
Upper Brittany dating back to the sixteenth century has an account of how popguns called *sarbataines* were made from hollowed elder branches, with wetted pellets of hemp as ammunition, fired by means of a kind of ramrod (Sébillot, p. 63). The French word *sarbataine* or *sarbatane*, traceable to 1519 and now *sarbacane*, goes back via Spanish, Arabic, and Persian to Malay *sumpitan* etc., for a serious weapon, a long blowpipe used by hunters on Borneo, with darts as ammunition, to bring down birds and other game (Bloch and von Wartburg, p. 573). The earliest German reference to the children’s weapon, a rather general one admittedly, is by the botanist and physician Hieronymus Bock (1498-1554), who, without going into detail, says of the elder, in chapter 23 of his *Herbal* of 1551, that “children have much sport with its wood and pith” (*WdP*, 4, pp. 74-75) while, a few decades later, in 1599, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* gives us “a perilous shot out of an elder-gun” (iv.i.203) as a metaphor for something as unlikely to cause damage or danger as a shot from such a harmless weapon would be. Apart from those already quoted, further accounts of how such weapons were, and perhaps still are, manufactured and put into action, may easily be found (Vickery, 1995, p. 125; Mabey, p. 344).

The elder of course lends itself to many serious uses, not a few now obsolete. It has for instance furnished a form of primitive bellows, which, as Mactaggart explains in his article on the *bowertree-puff*, was “an hollow tube made of Boretree, used by *killmen* to blow through, and rouse their seed-fires, or fires fed by the husks of corn”. *Killmen*, he tells us, are the men who attend to the kiln in a mill, presumably working at drying the grain. “These”, he continues, “are commonly very honest men, well liked by the lasses” (pp. 87 and 297). We may compare a rather similar activity attributed by Cromek to the Brownie in Dumfriesshire. Having come to the end of his nocturnal labours, he, or “it”, as Cromek prefers to call the fairy, would “come into the farm-hall [*‘kitchen’*], and stretch itself out by the chimney, sweaty, dusty, and exhausted. It would then take up the *pluff* (a piece of bored bour-tree for blowing up the fire) and, stirring out the red embers, turn itself till it was rested and dried” (Cromek, p. 264). No doubt such elder-wood bellows were in general use at the time, by common mortals as well as by our fairy.

An ingenious use for the pith of the elder is found in Patrick Kennedy’s fairy-tale “Hairy Rouchy”, in which the heroine of that name is to capture a giant’s *puckawn*, a goat-sprite with golden bells about its neck. In order to silence the bells, Hairy Rouchy stuffs them “with the marrow of the elder”. For good measure she puts her hand on the puckawn’s mouth, but the creature starts to rear and kick. “Out came the elder marrow from three of the bells, and the sound that came from them was enough to waken the dead” (O’Griofa, p. 52; cf. Uther, 1, pp. 216-217, Type 328, and Halpert and Widdowson, 1, pp. 215-225). What happens next cannot be recounted here. Rather, we note a pastime of the Manx Fenoderee, alias Phynnodderee, a being in some ways resembling the Brownie, who had great sport swinging in an elder-tree or *trammon* outside the door of an old cottage. Such trees were planted about homesteads “for the fairies”, who no doubt in return provided protection against malevolent influences (Vickery, 1995, pp. 122-123).

We now come to a different protective strategy, our point of departure being Angle in South Pembrokeshire, to the south-west of Milford Haven, where as recently as 1910
doorsteps were daily chalked with patterns that had to interlink, “otherwise evil spirits would enter the house” (Scourfield and Johnson, p. 115). This and other examples, from Scotland to Devon, are listed in Opie and Tatem under the heading “Doorstep patterns keep Devil out” (DS, pp. 124-125). There is a nice example also from Bretforton near Evesham in Worcestershire, where the ancient Fleece Inn is “well known for its witches’ marks – white circles chalked on the hearth to prevent witches and evil spirits coming down the chimney (Meech, 15). Another variant comes from Cumbria. Here a soft red stone known as rud, used for marking sheep, also served for decorating doorsteps or passages, and even window sills, and the pavement in front of doorways, “not infrequently in fanciful patterns” (EDD, 5, p. 175).

It will be clear that the practice was characterised by considerable regional variation, different patterns and different materials being used in different places, some of them at no great distance from each other. Thus at Bow Street in Dyfed, according to Elsie Morgan writing in Welsh in 1984, her mother used to make a pattern on the floor-bricks, painting around them with red paint and “marking the cross” with elder leaves, this being an old custom going back to the time of Ms Morgan’s mother’s grandmother (Vickery, 1985, pp. 62-63; 1995, p. 121). What interests us in particular is the use of elder, and this was also recorded, in 1938, at the opposite side of Wales, where until the end of the nineteenth century “every Shropshire farm-house and cottage had its doorstep and hearth-stone decorated with queer patterns made from the pigment produced by squeezing a bunch of elder leaves (or more rarely of dock leaves)”. We are given an account, with illustrations, of the patterns used, followed by the author’s reminiscence of how, when he was a child, one of the maids belonging to the household used to decorate the back doorstep with a border of loops, which had to be done straight round in an unbroken chain, otherwise it would have been “unlucky”. He goes on to say that the flags of kitchen and dairy were also outlined in green and decorated, and that quite recently he had seen the stone steps leading to the bedrooms likewise decorated with crosses. Unfortunately there is no further mention of elder or dock, though one assumes that one or other of these will have provided the green colour for kitchen and dairy (Hayward, pp. 236-237). And one wonders how the work was done in the depth of winter, when leaves were hard or impossible to come by.

Casting our net a little wider now, we consider the German word for the elder, namely Holunder, and a no longer current shorter variant, Holder, which is easily associated with the adjective hold, meaning “lovely, beloved, sweet”, and with a substantival form of that adjective meaning “sweetheart”. With this in mind, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm refer to a tapestry in a Basel medieval collection showing a maiden standing opposite a young man and grafting on to a blossoming elder tree a branch from which hang three pairs of clasped hands. The clasped hands are a symbol of fidelity, and as a result of imagery and wordplay the elder comes to be associated with love. A punning inscription reads: ich inpfe hie in holder triève (Grimm and Grimm, pp. 1737-1738), the sense being either “I graft fidelity on to this elder here” or “I graft here in sweet fidelity”. Malcolm Jones provides an excellent commentary, along with a colour plate showing the relevant part of the tapestry, which originated in Strasbourg and dates back to c1430. Compare also a tapestry woven in Basel in the 1470s, with a similar theme (Jones, pp. 205, 218, and colour plate 18).
Finally, a superstition and a proverb deserve our attention. The superstition, from the west of County West Limerick, is to the effect that, if anyone deliberately strikes an animal or a child with an elder twig, the animal will die, and the child will grow no more (Danaher, p. 70). An informant from County Kildare, writing in 1984, states that to strike a child, or even an animal, with an elder stick would be “an unforgivable act” (Vickery, 1985, pp. 63-64), presumably for similar reasons. Much the same belief obtained in England, and extended to willow sticks, but also to switches of broom (DS, pp. 137, 446, and 46).

The superstition relating to willow, alias “sally”, was not restricted to Ireland and Britain. In Germany there was a “widespread” belief that small children and domestic animals must not be chastised with a sally rod, lest they cease to thrive, becoming emaciated and consumptive (HdA, 9, p. 245). As for the hazel, although it is widely regarded as beneficial, to it are also attributed negative characteristics that Marzell sees as possibly resulting from the demonisation in the Christian era of a tree previously much revered in pagan tradition. Various reports of its alleged harmfulness include one from Switzerland to the effect that children chastised with hazel rods cease to grow, while in Bavaria a pig similarly beaten thrives no more (HdA, 3, pp. 1537-1538). The elder can have similarly negative attributes. Thus in Grisons in eastern Switzerland, cattle struck with a rod of red-berried elder, Sambucus racemosa, will give bloody milk (Büchli, 1, p. 263), while in Tyrol and also, as we are about to see, in France, the same is believed of common elder, Sambucus nigra (HdA, 4, p. 268), in these notes henceforth referred to simply as “elder”, without a defining adjective.

Now to the French evidence, which seems to refer exclusively to animals. In Finistère these will die if touched, no matter how lightly, with a branch of maple (étable) or elder (sureau). In Ille-et-Vilaine, cows struck with a switch of alder-buckthorn (bourdaine) will pass blood in their urine. In Poitou, sheep struck with branches cut from the dogwood (cornouiller) will suffer from a coup de sang. In Cher, if cowmen, shepherds, or swineherds use a switch of dog-rose (églantier) to strike or threaten their animals, these will not thrive, because the Devil will torment them (Sébillot, pp. 40-41). In short, what looked at the outset like a relatively simple belief involving the elder alone turns out to be rather complex, embracing different kinds of wood, and clearly in need of further investigation.

For the moment we merely note that, if anything seems to be shared by such accounts, it is that properties considered undesirable in a tree can be transferred to a victim chastised with a rod cut from that tree or other plant such as the dog-rose. It is obvious that the briar of the dog-rose is prickly, a property easily associated with devilish torments. Because of its dark-red first-year stems the dogwood is Cornus sanguinea, and some of the its vernacular names, such as English bloody twig, French bois sanguine, and Luxembourg Rotholz, likewise reflect this idea of bloodiness (WdP, 1, pp. 1175-1176). As often happens in matters of folk belief, this leads to contradictions. On the one hand the dogwood was used, in Belgium for instance, to prevent domestic animals from passing blood in their urine; on the other hand, as we have seen, the same plant could have the opposite effect (HdA, 3, pp. 1493-1494). It would appear that some of the other trees we have mentioned were associated with redness and hence blood. The maple, for instance, has strikingly red foliage in autumn, which
may explain the taboo on its use in Finistère. However this may be, there can be little doubt that the redness of the red-berried elder is responsible for the reluctance to beat cattle with its branches in Grisons. It will not be entirely irrelevant at this point to cite another superstition from Grisons. It is that if someone takes a redstart’s eggs or tortures the bird, his cows will give red milk. An informant remarked that as boys he and his fellows, guilty of such ill-treatment, saw for themselves that as a result their cows’ milk was streaked with blood (Büchli, 2, p. 939). This superstition is well known and widespread (HdA, 7, pp. 837-838), and is matched by similar beliefs about the redbreast (HdA, 7, pp. 835-836; cf. DS, p. 329, item dated 1868 from Boroughbridge, Yorkshire).

In Ille-et-Vilaine, as we have already seen, striking animals with a switch of alder-buckthorn could result in the appearance of blood in their urine. At the back of this there may well lurk a sense that the alder-buckthorn is an “evil” tree (HdA, 2, pp. 1268-1269), an impression no doubt fostered by the black colouration of its leaves, its inedible berries, black when ripe, and the smell of its bark that has led to vernacular names such as the French pou vèrn, “stinking alder”, the German Mausbaum, “because its wood stinks of mouse urine”, and the Cheshire stinking Roger (WdP, 2, pp. 471-486).

Before dealing with the elder, Sambucus nigra, similarly rejected in parts of France, we look at the broom, Cytisus scoparius, a plant that according to beliefs recorded in Shropshire and Surrey as well, apparently, as in Germany, will lead to stunted growth in a child whipped with it. It is perhaps worth pointing out that, in Britain and Ireland at least, there are powerful taboos associated with bringing broom into the house in May and sweeping the house with it in that month, but also with buying brooms, the implements, then (DS, pp. 45-46). At the back of these is the idea of sweeping life away. A plant or implement that can do that can perhaps also affect the way a child thrives and grows. However that may be, there are clearly negative, and indeed magical, aspects to broom that may in one way or another link with the taboo on whipping (Grigson, pp. 128-130). Marzell approaches the matter from a different angle, pointing to the desiccated, sapless, stunted nature of the plant’s twigs as used for brooms, negative qualities that could be seen as communicating themselves to children thus chastised (HdA, 3, pp. 852-853).

The British belief that neither children nor animals must be whipped with willow (DS, p. 446) was, as we have already seen, shared by German-speaking countries, where it was “widespread”. According to Marzell, it could have its origin in a belief going back to classical antiquity that the tree is sterile (HdA, 9, pp. 244-245). Ella Mary Leather, on the other hand, links it with the curse on the willow in the ballad “The Bitter Withy” (Leather, pp. 19 and 181ff).

As for the elder, we have tended to dwell on its positive attributes. In fact it has a mixed reputation in folk belief, where it is in many ways regarded as malevolent (DS, pp. 137-138). We have only to glance at some of its vernacular names to realise this, such as the English devil’s wood, God’s stinking tree (since it was used for the Cross), and Judas-tree (since Judas hanged himself on it) (Grigson, pp. 351-354). As for its malodorous properties, they are said to inform not only vernacular names such as God’s stinking tree and, say, the German Stinkholder and Faulbaum, but even elder itself and sambucus (WdP, 4, pp. 67-68).
Perhaps some of this is at the back of the reluctance in Britain, Ireland and France to chastise animals with it, as well as children in Britain and Ireland. Note in this respect the remark about elder, recorded from an Irishman in 1914: “It is a bad thing to give a man a scelp [‘blow’] of that. If you do, his hand will grow out of his grave” (Grigson, p. 352). Here our superstition has become fused with tale-type ATU 760**, “The Obstinate Child”, in which out of its grave there grows the hand of a disobedient child that has died after striking its mother (Hand, p. 63; Uther, 1, pp. 420-421; cf. Smith, pp. 118-120).

Finally, the proverb that attracts our attention is from Wiltshire. It runs: “An eldern stake and a blackthorn ether/Will make a hedge to last for ever”. *Ether* alias *edder* is an ancient word referring to light, flexible wood, in the present instance blackthorn, used for interlacing the stakes of a hedge or fence at the top, the result being a *stake and edder fence* (Dartnell and Goddard, pp. 52-53; *EDD*, 2, pp. 234-235; *OED*, 1, p. 66). Now widely regarded as little better than a weed, the elder was formerly much prized for its many properties (Mabey, p. 343). Not least among these will have been the great durability of its wood, that made it a valuable and no doubt easily obtainable source of hedge stakes. Perhaps this note will have done a little to bring to mind some other long-forgotten virtues of a remarkable plant that, even in the twenty first century, still has much to offer, as have the other trees we have mentioned.

**References**


