
BOOK REVIEW

Stout, Adam. 2020. *Glastonbury Holy Thorn: Story of a Legend*. Glastonbury: Green & Pleasant Publishing. xiii + 154 pp. ISBN 978-1-9162686-0-9 (hbk). £12.99.

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Like most ethnobotanies, Stout's book is a social history; or, as he puts it, "the biography of a symbol" (p. 1). It shows how closely the myth of the Glastonbury Thorn is linked with the British monarchy and the attendant rise and fall of Catholic and Protestant; without the royals, one could suggest, the myth need not exist. A slender tome underpinned by a magnificent sense of humour, this in no way undermines the author's clearly genuine interest in, and, dare I say, affection for, his subject. As he points out to one pub-going local: "If I thought for one minute that I could debunk the legends for all time ... I'd burn my notes tomorrow ... I am not out to 'debunk'. Legends beget history; ideas beget facts ... I think my work shows up interesting and important new patterns which I would like to think might themselves feed into the mythos" (p. 4).

The Prologue ("The Tree That Moved") immediately challenged what I realized was my key assumption about the myth of the Glastonbury Thorn, and that was its age. This chapter notes how many thorns there have been, their shifts in location, and how recent the phenomenon: the earliest evidence presented is from 1652 (p. 7). After a gap of some two hundred years, a new holy thorn was planted in 1863, lasting around another twenty years, with its successor on the hill being planted in 1951. The Prologue traces the history of these trees, as well as making a start to unpack the various locations of the Thorn around Glastonbury, setting the scene for the very varied history that is to come.

Chapter 1, "World Inverted", explores some of the Thorn's origin stories, as well as how tensions between Protestants (represented by Joseph of Arimathea's part in the story) and Catholics (the Marian connection) played out. Stout traces the ways in which Glastonbury was positioned as England's spiritual heartland, particularly the role of Abbott Beer in the early 1800s, and his campaign to promote Joseph of Arimathea's connection, largely as an encouragement to prospective pilgrims. A brief botanical discussion confirms the tree's longevity is due to a succession of grafts.

"Game of Kings", the lengthier second chapter, introduces the role of King James and his "discreetly-Catholic Queen" (p. 28), Anne of Denmark, in transforming the Thorn into a "playful symbol of Anglican inclusiveness" (p. 30). This was not effective enough, however, to prevent the Thorn being chopped down in the 1630s. Stout tracks the various ways the

tree's chroniclers align it with the fate of kings and churches; could the regenerating tree represent a restoration? Chapter 2 also examines the Thorn's popular connections with Joseph's flowering staff, and the Crown of Thorns, consolidating the manner in which the Thorn rises and falls with England's kings and queens.

Chapter 3, "The Good Old Days", includes one of the most entertaining stories from a book replete with them: the highly controversial Calendar Act of 1751, bringing Britain into line with the European calendar in 1752. Would the Thorn flower on new Christmas Day, or old Christmas Day? The scuttlebutt that ensues is both delightful and politically revealing. The eighteenth century also brings more representation of the Thorn in literature, and sees its popularity as a garden tree increase. I found this tiny facet of its history illuminating: for an object we romanticize for its perceived uniqueness, at this point there appeared to be a "lucrative market" in grafted Thorns (p. 59).

We reach the nineteenth century in Chapter 4, "Wanting Belief", a century both more tolerant of Catholics and more nostalgic for both tradition and superstition. Stout points out that, "as a proxy for Christmas virtue, [the Thorn] began to acquire a past that it never had" (p. 81), adding "a wholesome quality to the frenzied nineteenth century" (p. 85). The new myth-making of the twentieth century also arrives in this chapter with the vicar Lionel Smith Lewis and author H. V. Morton, whose book *In Search of England* recast the Thorn "for a new generation, right at the heart of English national identity" (p. 93).

The final chapter, "A Fresh Shoot", continues into the 1900s, with its search for "pre-Christian 'truths'" (p. 94): enter the Celts, the Grail, the Druids, and the tensions between existing Glastonbury residents and those who sought to recast the town. Stout also updates us on the Thorn's connection to the current monarchy, and the relationship between the tree on the hill and the tree in the Abbey. Interesting observations flow from the hill tree's destruction in 2010, bridging the divide between some Pagans and Christians, as the Reverend David McGeogh, who mourned with members of both communities that morning, notes: "Since then, he claims, 'alternative' people have accepted him as they never had before: 'you were there when we needed you', they say" (p. 114). Stout also takes note of the tensions which still remain between Glastonians and Avalonians.

The Appendix provides a surprising and quite wonderful catalogue of different international locations where cuttings from the Glastonbury Thorn grow. After this, Stout's bibliography, titled "The Business End", gives a firm clue to the book's desired audience: "I've tried to make referencing as simple and practical as possible. See this section as a workshop manual, not a display of erudition" (p. 127). The bibliography is, nonetheless, comprehensive and extensive.

With characteristic honesty, Stout makes plain in his introduction that he has tried to tread the middle ground between being driven by theory, and driven only by meticulous recording of fact. He concerns himself with recording both intuitive and deductive approaches to history, honouring and questioning both (p. 4). While noting the vast period of time he has covered may result in "conceptual shallowness", Stout hopes nevertheless he has written a work of interest not just to academics, but to anyone concerned with the Thorn (p. 2). I can commend it on both fronts.