



Grafting; where the past and future of a variety converge in the present

Early May 2023; Here at Irish Seed Savers the orchards are in full bloom and the scent of apple blossom is in the breeze walking down the hill at Lamb's Orchard. The grafted trees have sent forth new growth, guided by the lifeforce transported through the apple scions. It is hard to believe some small samples have started to bud, thinking of the precarious old trees that we grafted from. Over the past few months, I've been reflecting on the concept that grafting is a link between an apple tree's past and future, which is brought together in the present moment when scion is cut, tied and waxed. When the graft callus fuses, a union is made between the past and future. What you see in Irish Seed Savers collection are apple trees at a particular point in their life, whether a young potted tree or an established tree originally propagated and planted over 30 years ago when Irish Seed Savers was established. However, to really appreciate the collection of varieties, we have to investigate where the trees came from and their biographical story. At some

point many of the varieties were fortunate that they were saved and propagated.

While the process of grafting takes place in the present, however, it is only one point along the lifeline of a variety. Draw a long line in sand, make a number of intersecting lines similar to ogham, the marks can represent various points within generations of a variety where it may have been grafted, and in the process its lifeline survived.

Often the name or story of a tree is lost in time, but they survive as a living artefact, an unbroken lineage to our heritage. Families die out or emigrate, trees that are found around old houses are a living connection to the past. At one time in a past life those trees were tended by caring people in touch with the natural cycle, who acquired knowledge through observing and learning from nature and practicing traditional methods.

Through winter into spring, I have been fortunate to save and graft some veteran trees that were in



precarious circumstances at the end of their life. This has prompted me to reflect on grafting, through taking notes and writing a number of poems or "observations". I remember January when many people remarked on the destruction of hedgerows which was visible in many places driving through the countryside. This had an impact on me also.

An exciting project we are involved in is propagating an orchard in Cork belonging to the Barry family. Irish Seed Savers had originally collected a variety called Reardon's from their orchard some twenty years ago. The variety had been named after the current owner's mother Eileen Reardon. It was our task to propagate and save all of the trees, fifty or so that are at the end of their life. One of the most impressive trees was a sample of ancient pear. The tree was as large as an oak tree and the scion was a few inches and skinny. One out of the four grafted pear trees grew. Mike Feeney, Orchard Assistant and I grafted the very old trees. We only had two or three buds from some scion, but it was evident that trees persist in survival and most young grafts are taking.

Grafting shows trees can sometimes defy science. In late April we received scion from a tree that had fallen in a storm but was in leaf. It was well sprouted. I managed to snip the sprouted growth back to dormant bud and graft small scion.



Barry's Old Pear



Barry's old pear grafted in 2023

It sprouted and is growing well. Trees have an inherent survival instinct.

The following are three pieces of writing I put together since January, with various themes that I thought about and wrote down as a record at the time.

Poem

'A bright green field north of Inis Glas; are the fields far away greener?'

Late January: a calm day, looking north from Inis Glas an orange digger glistens as it catches the sun, the sound of the digger scraping and gnawing at the hillside breaks the stillness as it echoes across the valley. As weeks pass the steep slope of the distant fields is becoming a brighter smooth green interspersed with brown scars of tracks. Smoke and the smell of burning wood fill the air.

Early February, the hillside begins to show a few patches of yellow gorse, the birds are waking up and I hear a flock of crows in the distance.

A bright green field north of Inis Glas,

Are the fields far away greener?

Here is the same scene observed in February;

'A bright green field north of Inis Glas; How green is the green field?'

16th February, silence; the digger in respite, as if exhausted from its fight having asserted its presence and domination of the hillside.

A heavy grey mist drifts in and envelopes the field early in the morning, the limbs of the trees are split like splintered bones. The air is damp and heavy, but the Mrs Perry scion is beginning to sprout with the mild warmth.

I worry that it might dry out so I snip the top shoots, and with a grafting knife I slice through the soft marrow of the scion and press my thumb into the side of the bark, juice exudes, the invisible blood and life force for which the future destiny of a variety depends on.

The lifeline of the past and future exists within the delicate scion which is capable of producing a tree with longevity, we're present in that moment where past and future fuse within a graft, feeling as if we're responsible for its destiny.

After we've grafted this tree, over the tree's life will someone graft it when it reaches the end of its life?

What will its demise be?

I was delighted to receive a few small scions delicately wrapped and posted here today, a tree at the end of its life? Or is its life just about to begin?

The digger on the hillside is in respite for now.

The following poem is an account of tree destruction which highlights the importance of grafting. I have slightly censored the name of the place out of sensibility to the landowners.

'The present; where a trees past and future intersect'

Roselxxan April 2021, a moment when conscience prompted the digger to pause.

I was introduced to three old apple trees within a walled garden next to the shell of an old demesne house, the remnants of our colonial past, a house burned down during the Troubles in July 1922.

I arrived mid-April when the tree was in full bloom, its trunk had split at the core, one half falling through the roof of the shed which supported its limbs, nevertheless in full health and content to enjoy many years of life ahead. The neutral tree survived the Troubles I was told, ironically a hundred years later it met its own troubles. Doubtful I'd get viable scion I gathered enough for cuttings and a few grafts. The warmth of the spring heat encouraged the grafted bud to open releasing fresh green leaves, the joy of observing a few inches of growth as the weeks passed, Hope.

The second tree was dismembered, having been previously burnt by troublesome youths, the graft wood sprouted but later shrivelled.

The third tree marginalised and safe (so it thought) next to the east wall watched as the two others meet their demise, surely it was the one that deserved to live, bearing strong scion nearly two foot in length. Feeling certain that the tree would be safe, I endeavoured to return in Autumn to collect scion.

November 2021, soft mud ground illuminated with bright amber winter sunshine, in a flat levelled field a rotten stump remains along with a few broken tiles and earthenware. The third tree decapitated sent out a few inches of growth, signs of a life fading but life rises from the depths of the ground, some hope of graft wood for the following spring. Its personal story lives on in young grafted tree, transported through time to the present.

What can we learn from old trees? Many old trees found around abandoned houses remain neglected for years, they are free of disease and provide sufficient fruit for people, animals, and a mosaic of insects? How is it that these trees survive and thrive undisturbed. We can surmise that orchards have a natural ecosystem and find an equilibrium between the flowers, soil and habitat that surround a tree. Often old trees have a healthy mycorrhizal fungi balance with the soil, and in a natural healthy ecosystem everything is interconnected and balanced. Through gardening with nature and learning from veteran orchards we can help trees find their own balance.



Charcoal life drawing of apple tree at 45 degree angle

When you take a piece of scion from those trees and graft it, the past and future of a variety unite when the grafted scion calluses. Old trees are mystic, they have character and embody the spirit and stories of the people who grew them. Their story is invisible to the eye but is stored within the scion, and when you taste the apple, you share the

same experience across time with those families that once savoured that fruit. With an open mind you can sense the spiritual otherworld and learn from the trees and in the process enrich our curiosity of unknown forces.



Cillian Boyd
Cillian Boyd

Orchard Assistant, Irish Seed Savers