



Fig. 1 Rose Castle

Cultural anthropology reveals that plants and humans have been bound together through the ages by religion, tradition, myth and historic symbolism. Fragments of our most ancient and indigenous religions still survive today, but most of us rarely give them a second thought. Professional gardeners however, with their fingers

in the soil, are well placed to delve beneath the surface of this subject, and an orchard full of apple trees is a rich source of material (fig. 2).

The small orchard I am thinking of is set in a Cumbrian castle garden where bishops walked for 800 years, and I have gardened for the past 26 (figs 1 & 3). In previous centuries, life for the Bishop

Malus domestica
'Lord Lambourne'
Janet Queen

of Carlisle, living in a castle so close to the border between Scotland and England, did not always run smoothly. Peaceful periods of ostentatious living were interrupted by warfare, ransacking, plagues, hardship and political turmoil. In the orchard soil at Rose Castle, we have found mortar balls; silver coins; jetons; Nuremberg tokens; shoe buckles; thimbles; bones from oxen; and many oyster shells. Counting the exposed rings of the intact shells, the way you count the rings of a tree, tells us that some of these Solway oysters had lived for at least seventeen years before ending up on the Bishop's table. Other shells have crumbled away on rubbish heaps over time, melting back into the soil and taking secrets overheard in the Bishop's kitchen with them; returning everything to nature. Gardens are just like oyster shells, formed from layers of time. For some of us who have



Fig. 2 Rose Castle orchard in May



Fig. 3 Rose Castle annuals

gardened for decades in one property, there is no need for walls to talk. There are days when the touch, feel and scent of the soil tells all.

One sunny morning in September, about 20 years ago, the visiting Bishop of Zululand walked out into Rose Castle garden. His skin was a shining black, his ecclesiastical shirt a glowing purple. I looked up from the bed of dahlias where I was weeding. He smiled widely as he introduced himself and said, "I have never seen apples growing on an apple tree – could you please show me the apple trees?" We walked over to the edge of the orchard. He stood very still, silently

gazing at the red, green, yellow and russet fruits, and I left him there, seemingly lost in thought among the trees (fig. 4). I wondered if he was contemplating the religious Christian symbolism of the apple: temptation; seduction; surrender to earthly desires; knowledge; and perhaps redemption.

Truth, tradition and tales are ingredients that can be blended in different measures to ensure continuity in all the best stories. We know apples didn't actually grow in that part of the world, but the Garden of Eden, where Adam was tempted with a fruit that Eve picked from

the 'Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil', is deeply set in layers of literature, art, religious belief and mythology. Some traditions have it that the tree was actually a grapevine, or an olive, or a fig tree; others suggest it was a stalk of wheat that grew to the size of a tree. Then, after Latin writers made their first references to the biblical apple tree, medieval art and literature followed suit. In the story of Paradise, death came into the world when the forbidden fruit was eaten – a story that is often represented in paintings from the baroque period, showing Death holding an apple.



Fig. 4 *Malus domestica* 'Lord Lambourne'

In pre-Christian times, the Romans used the word 'apple' (*mālum*) as a collective noun for all large fruits growing and ripening above the ground. True apples, however, were given the name of *pomum*, but this was also the name given in general to tree fruits with pips or seeds, including pears, pomegranates and figs. Greek mythology overflows with references to apples and apple trees, although present-day scholars regularly point out that these Greek 'apples' were also a name for fruits in general, and not the apple as we know it today. Etymological confusion surrounds the apple and other fruits, and it's easy to tie oneself into metaphorical knots when

trying to unravel it. But if you try too hard, you only end up spoiling the stories.

The apple tree and its fruit are well represented throughout history, in mythology and early worship. Rameses III, an Egyptian pharaoh, encouraged people to make offerings of apples at a temple in Thebes, but he also allowed the more realistic back-up option of bone-marrow extracted from a camel, if you were short of apples. Teutonic, Norse and Germanic cultures among others believed the apple held magic powers related to youthfulness, including an ability to facilitate healing by absorbing illness. Their miraculous apple trees were guarded by wonderfully

imaginative versions of creatures such as a snake, dragon, worm or dog.

In Greek mythology, when Hera married Zeus, the god of sky and thunder, she was given a tree bearing golden apples that granted immortality and eternal youth. These apples grew in her garden, located near the edge of the world, closely guarded by a dragon with many heads, and four nymphs known as Hesperides. For his eleventh labour, Hercules was sent to steal three of the golden apples, which he managed to do, but the gods saw to it that the apples were eventually returned. The moral of this myth is that only the gods are immortal, and it is futile for earth dwellers to aspire to such a privilege.

British cultures also look back on old traditions and ceremonies relating to apple trees. Ancient Celts believed apples provided health and fertility, and they buried them with their dead as a source of food for the afterlife. In the Celtic legend of the Holy Grail, King Arthur is granted eternal life on Avalon, a place name which can be translated as 'the island of apples'. Versions of the well-known ceremony of wassailing, or blessing, apple trees to ensure a bounteous harvest still continue today in some English counties, albeit more with corporate marketing and modern



Fig. 7 *M. d.* 'Reverend W Wilks' fruit

so there are enough for the rest of us."

September never passes in the garden without me remembering the Bishop of Zululand and his admiration for the apples, and how he managed to upset our

chauffeur who, sadly, has now passed away. In memory of the chauffeur, I thought it was in the best tradition of garden continuity to plant another *Malus domestica* 'Lord Lambourne' tree in the



Fig. 8 *M. d.* 'Ashmead's Kernel' fruit

orchard at Rose Castle, to ensure a continuing supply of his favourite red apples, and to keep his story alive.

In north-west England, we enjoy the benefits of mild, humid air from the Gulf Stream, but fruit trees can struggle with the constant damp, especially in winter. Fungal and bacterial diseases that attack the trees are more prolific in years when we have a combination of prolonged winter wet and very hard frosts. All apple varieties growing here in the garden at Rose Castle have been affected to varying degrees by disease, but there are some, such as *Malus domestica* 'Lord Lambourne' (fig. 6); *M. d.* 'Egremont Russet'; *M. d.* 'Keswick Codlin'; *M. d.* 'Reverend W Wilks' (fig. 7); *M. d.* 'Ashmead's Kernel' (fig. 8) and *M. d.* 'Laxton's Epicure', which manage to live with their afflictions, show remarkable tolerance, and continue to yield good harvests year after year. As well as providing us with an abundance of fruit, the apple trees provide our resident colonies of honey bees (fig. 9) with nectar when they are blooming in May (fig. 10). The bees, in turn, ensure good pollination in spring for all of our fruit trees in the orchard.

They say if someone close to you moves away or dies, you should stand beside the beehives and tell



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Fig. 9 Rose Castle Beehives

the bees the story of their life. Similarly, just in case, I try to tell as many of the stories that I know about the life of the garden to our volunteers, contractors and younger staff. I do the same when I am planting trees, imagining these stories being carried in tree roots down into the soil to join the oyster shells and mortar balls of previous centuries, from where they can be revealed to future generations of gardeners, or indeed to anyone who can hear them. 🐝



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Fig. 10 *M. d.* 'Lord Lambourne' blossom

Janet Queen (Dip Hort, Edinburgh) is Head Gardener at Rose Castle, which is undergoing renovation and is due to open soon as a hospitality and events venue. Details of Rose Castle Foundation and Rose Castle hospitality can be found at www.rosecastle.com

Reference: *Compendium of Symbolic and Ritual Plants in Europe*, Marcel De Cleene and Marie Claire Lejeune, mens & cultuur uitgevers n.v. , 2003.