

THOUGHTS ON TREES

being introductory remarks at the planting ceremony, RPCG, 4 March 1971,

by G. I. WATSON, PRCGP

Your Excellency, Professor Gibson, Dr Graham Kerr, and Gentlemen, for most of us this ceremony must be unique since we have come together to honour, not a person nor an event, but a particular tree—the tree of Aesculapius in the island of Cos under which Hippocrates may have sat and taught. More about that later, perhaps, from others.

Will you spend a few moments with me thinking about other famous trees, starting of course with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the midst of the Garden of Eden, with which from the very beginning the Adam or Eve of all serpents, including our own, was closely entwined.

Throughout prehistory man associated trees, especially in groves or hilltop woods, with special powers or deities: Chanctonbury Ring of beech trees on the South Downs is a good example of this. Some of the Cedars of Lebanon or the olive groves in Jerusalem are also very old, comparable in age with our Tree. Professor Gibson may well have seen the tallest tree in the world, one of a group of giant redwoods in California—perhaps over 4,000 years old. Also in California, the Wowana tree—a giant sequoia—was well known for the hole in its trunk through which a coach and horses could be driven. About the oldest tree in Britain is the yew at Fortingall in Perthshire—over 2,000 years old with a girth of more than 56 feet.

What other particular trees can we recall? There was that branch which killed Absalom but we don't know what kind of tree it was. We cannot identify the tree in the New Forest off which an arrow glanced to kill King William Rufus nor the Royal Oak near Worcester which hid King Charles the Second from Cromwell's men. From which tree in which orchard did that apple fall on Isaac Newton's head? Robin Hood's tree in Sherwood Forest is still pointed out to visitors, and those of you who have been to Carmarthen in South Wales must have seen the old oak stump, now railed around, on which the fate of the town has depended for several hundred years. Tyburn tree may have been a particularly suitable one for hanging from before the same name was given to the gallows erected nearby.

Glastonbury thorn in the grounds of the Abbey is said to have grown from the staff of Saint Joseph of Arimathea and now flowers on Christmas Day. A fine cutting from the Glastonbury Thorn grows in the church yard at Tavistock in Devon, and another in a garden in Holmbury St Mary in Surrey. A better authenticated example of cut wood taking root can be found in Cebu, one of the Phillipine Islands, where a cross set up in the sixteenth century has grown into a fine tree, to which a black Madonna has since been fixed. At Kew Gardens a solitary rubber nut, sent to the director at his request from Brazil, grew into the tree from which every rubber tree in British plantations throughout the world was ultimately descended.

However, these are but mere striplings. A particular tree of an age comparable with ours is, or was, the Bo tree at Uruvela under which Gautuma Buddha rested and attained the peace of Nirvana about the year 524 B.C. This tree survived and was venerated until it was destroyed by a storm in 1876, giving it a historical life of over 2,400 years. Happily it has been survived by an off-shoot growing in Ceylon.

So we come back to our own little ceremony today, dreamed up by Professor Gibson and fostered by Dr Robin Pinsent, to plant a seedling of the Tree of Aesculapius here in our garden in London. The College owes them both a debt of gratitude for their inspiration. We hope other groups and individuals connected with our medical profession in these islands may also wish to receive and plant their own seedlings. We are grateful also to our other distinguished guests for graciously coming to support this symbolic ceremony. Your Excellency, we express our particular thanks again to your predecessors—Ambassadors Melas and Mostros—who obtained for us our precious gavel, carved in Cos of wood from the famous tree, and to yourself for coming here today with a token of Greek soil in which to plant our seedling.

I hope that in a moment your Excellency may be willing to tell us something about the island and its tree, and that Professor Gibson will speak about the International Hippocratic Foundation as well as telling us more about the harvest of nuts and seedlings from the tree which he has collected in Canada. May I then invite Dr White Franklin, Mr Ancrum Evans and Dr McConaghey each to tell us something about their interest in these matters before we rise from the table for the planting ceremony. To close my remarks, as there will be no other formal toasts, may I ask you to raise your glasses and drink to the continued health of the Tree of Aesculapius.