Earth Day

My friends and colleagues in Woods for the Trees wondered how we might mark Earth Day on April 22nd. This was my blogging response…

The irony of having a single day in the year when the wellbeing of the whole planet is celebrated is not lost on us at Woods for the Trees. Even so, we have been asking ourselves how to mark it. It's a lousy time of year for planting trees (at least in the Northern hemisphere); and it has no particular cosmic significance (part way between the Spring equinox and the Summer Solstice); but in an Environmental calendar full of reminders to get out there and do something for nature, or use less plastic, or stop flying, there's something to be said for thinking about the earth. And, as an archaeologist, when I think of earth I mean soil: the fine particles of rock ground down by weathering and accumulated by erosion, graded into sand, silt and clay by rivers and lakes, and left around much of the planet conveniently as a medium for plants to grow.

All the soils I have ever dug in – from the Thames clays and Cheviot brown earths to the caliche of the American South-west desert, have had a human component: soils are artefacts as much as they are 'nature'. And just as ancient woodlands are social ecologies – partnerships between nature and sustained human management – so soils, much less visible but so important for planetary health – are the accumulated record of that relationship: what archaeologists call the stratigraphy.

What gardeners think of as good quality topsoil combines silt, sand and clay in more or less equal proportions (a 'loam'), with decayed vegetable matter to create a rich growing medium full of nutrients. Moles, earthworms (a favourite subject of Charles Darwin, who devoted his last book to their study) and other invertebrates aerate and process the soil and its vegetable matter, turning it into a fine tilth. Plants like legumes trap atmospheric nitrogen with root nodules to increase fertility. Tree roots combine with tiny filaments of mycorrhizal fungi to share sugars and trace minerals. Leaves, those miraculous but understated solar panels, fall, rot, and replenish. In woodland soils that have been stable, self-sustaining micro-habitats for hundreds or thousands of years, unique biomes of bugs, fungi and bacteria evolve.

You could cut down all the trees in an ancient wood (please don't); but the soil would still be ancient woodland soil: complex, precious, full of carbon and very fragile. So far as I am aware, it is not known just how long a new woodland takes to acquire its own genuine woodland soil. My young trees still grow in what is former pasture and arable earth. I suspect that it'll still be pasture soil for a while after I'm gone. But I watch each batch of autumn leaves falling and being consumed; make sure to leave trimmings and branches lying on the ground to rot – attracting, I hope, all those wood eating fungi and beetles that will process it; I let moles and worms do their thing. And every day, every passing year that

the land has trees on it takes it a tiny step towards being something to celebrate, on another Earth Day, many years in the future.

Vikings: a Reading List

I was asked by a book blogging site, Shepherd.com, to come up with a list of five books that I would recommend on the Viking period. The quid pro quo is that they plugged *Ælfred's Britain*. I was actually struggling to think of five books about that period that I liked enough to recommend; there is quite a bit of dull literature on Vikings – ironically. Anyway, here's a link to what I came up with: The Best Books About the Viking Period

Other pieces

When I look back on the first few months of this year I realise now why I have been feeling a bit strung out – it's because a whole rash of people wanted me to write articles for one magazine, paper or another. And I like to oblige if I can. I wrote an opinion piece for *Small Woods*, the monthly magazine for owners of woodlands. There had been a quite opinionated piece the previous month arguing that we shouldn't plant trees, and I felt I had to answer. I'm not sure how I get a link to it, since it's not published online; but I might post it on *The Ambulist* blog at some point. And then, I had written a paper for the *Donegal Annual*, whose editor Seán Beattie, is a friend of mine. There were very erudite papers in the volume celebrating St Columba, so I wanted to contribute something from my own perspective. I chose to write about Columba as a territorial lord (in keeping with a running theme in *The First Kingdom*). When Seán sends me a PDF I'll post that too. This edition has been very handsomely produced, I must say. Seán has also very kindly reviewed *The First Kingdom* – to be included in the next Newsletter…

The Wood Age

I have now completed 9 chapters in draft form – that's about 80,000 words or two-thirds of the anticipated length. One of the frustrations is that I'm having to leave out large amounts of material to keep the narrative flowing. But I also know that's a good thing: it means that the book won't be 'content'-driven or, to use a phrase I trot out from time to time, it won't suffer from 'Includitis' – the idea that a non-fiction author has to include all their research. Some years ago Jenny Uglow did that with her treatment of *The Lunar Men* and I must say I thought that, as a read, it suffered from the burden of her research. Authors read hundreds of books and articles to master their subject precisely so that their readers don't have to! Sorry Jenny – but it would have been much better with 100 fewer pages. Self-editing is one of the arts of the writer, often neglected when books are valued by the number of words. And I'm saying that as someone who often writes 120,000 words or more. Less is more; or, as I think Hemingway said, remember, after the first 100,000 words you're not being paid…