

## **Transcript: The Hawick Hawthorn**

*Treelands Podcast Mini-Series*

*Hosted by Lewis Winks, with Miwa Nagato-Apthorp as guest.*

### **Intro:**

Welcome to this Treelands podcast. This miniseries was developed by the Lestari in association with Stellaria Media in 2023 on behalf of Forest Research as part of their work to explore the cultural and social value of trees outside of woodland. Despite making up around a fifth of the tree cover in Great Britain, trees outside of woodland, particularly in rural and peri urban areas, remain an understudied part of the treescape. This project is funded and supported by Defra as part of the Nature for Climate Fund program of work. You can find out more information about the project by following the links in the show notes. We hope you enjoy listening.

**Lewis:** I've travelled to the Scottish border town of Hawick to meet the musician and artist Miwa Nagato- Apthorp. In particular, I've come here to speak with Miwa about her song 'The Hawthorn', and to journey with her into the hills above Hawick to meet this edgeland tree, which is perhaps most strongly associated with life outside woodlands. In this episode we'll be exploring through hawthorn how folk tradition can be a form of veneration of trees in our landscape, whilst at the same time allowing new stories to emerge. And through Miwa's song, learn more about this hardy tree.

**Lewis:** Hello. Hello, nice to meet you!

**Miwa:** Nice to meet you.

**Lewis:** Shall we get a coffee?

**Miwa:** Yeah, let's get a coffee.

**Lewis:** Here we are in the Heart of Hawick Cafe. So, before we talk about the song, could you tell me a bit about your own work as an artist, as a musician, what that work means to you in this place?

**Miwa:** So, I guess I've always sung. Both of my parents love music. And when I moved up to the Borders when I was seven, I have a really strong kind of memory of these two women coming to the tiny rural school that I attended about eight miles in that direction. And they ran a series of workshops where they taught us traditional songs in Scots, two of which I still know very well and perform. That really, I think, awoke in me a real love of singing and of traditional music. And I think when I look back, that's kind of the point at which I felt an initial, really deep connection to this land. Before that, I had lived in England, but that was the kind of starting point of this relationship with the Borders in a kind of artistic and musical way. Our school, it since closed down actually because it was so small. I just remembered we actually came as a school, all 12 of us, and performed in the Heart of Hawick. I had completely forgotten that.

**Lewis:** In this place that we're sat now?

**Miwa:** In this place, in the auditorium. It's just through that door. Yeah.

**Lewis:** And can you tell us a bit about where we are Miwa?

**Miwa:** So, we're in the centre of Hawick, in an old mill building which has a café but also upstairs is the Office for Alchemy Film and Arts, which is where I did a residency last year and wrote the song that we're going to be talking about.

**Lewis:** Right. And so you've taken that, I guess, the love of music now into your own singing and songwriting, and you've written some amazing songs that we're going to hear a bit of today, but also taken it into an interest in folk tradition as it evolves from the kind of historic context into a contemporary modern context. And one of those examples is the Hawthorn song.

**Miwa:** Yeah, so when I started my residency, I had this idea that I wanted to create a kind of fast-forwarded oral tradition because I'm interested in the way that traditional folk music kind of travels. It's interpreted by many different people, and it changes on the journey. And I guess I was thinking about that as a songwriter and thinking about what the role of the writer is in folk tradition, when a lot of the time the writing is actually lost to history. So, we wanted to try this as an experiment. So, I wrote the song with the intention of it having a kind of quite simple folk format that would be easy to teach. So, I was thinking more about how to kind of simply express the message of what I wanted the song to be about. Then I taught it to the singing group that we'd set up, who taught it to another musician who taught it to another musician. So, it sort of went on this journey. And so, when I perform, it, it feels like I'm performing a song that's come through the community, so I don't necessarily associate it so much with myself. There's a sort of level of richness to the story of the song that feels like I'm there kind of representing us all in a way: everyone that learned it and hopefully still sings it to this day.

**Lewis:** It sounds like almost gifting the songs to the community by allowing other people to shape it and to write it.

**Miwa:** I guess I have had the experience of being a person who is a musician, who has learned traditional songs throughout my life and enjoys performing them. And there's a kind of interesting thing in who gets to sing certain songs and why. Like I'm a Japanese English person, but Scotland is my home, and one of the ways that I sort of ground myself in this place, in this land, is by singing songs, by singing Scottish songs, which feels like a very direct connection. So I think I maybe have like quite an open idea of, of where a song gets to go. I think if somebody can perform it with that sort of integrity, then that's the only real condition.

**Lewis:** So we've talked a bit about the song, but we haven't talked very much about the tree and I'm interested - why did you choose hawthorns as subject for this song?

**Miwa:** So, when I was doing my research for the project, I learned that the word 'hawthorn', the name 'hawthorn' is a potential root for the name Hawick, which is something that I'd never known having lived here for 17 years. So it felt like an amazing opportunity because hawthorns are so significant mythologically and folklorically and medicinally that it felt like there was a lot to unpack there and an interesting story to tell with the Hawthorn at the centre of the meeting point.

**Lewis:** Well, I'm looking forward to going to perhaps see some hawthorns today, and I am very much looking forward to hearing the hawthorn song. Are there any particular hawthorn's that we're going to visit today?

**Miwa:** Yeah, so there's a very small line of trees at the top of the Wellagate cemetery in Hawick, which I just kind of stumbled across because it's near my allotment and it became a place that I would go and visit because I really like the fact that they kind of sit at the cusp of the cemetery. So that ties in with the fact that hawthorn is supposed to be a kind of meeting point between worlds. So it had already become a strong place for me in my sort of daily wanderings, so the song was kind of inspired by that place, really.

**Lewis:** Shall we go?

**Miwa:** Let's go.

**Miwa:** We're pretty in a straight line actually ... Hello, How are you doing?

**Lewis:** So we're heading up the hill.

**Miwa:** We're going up, up, up. I live at the top of the hill, so I know it well. It's quite, keeps you fit.

**Lewis:** We'll get a good view up there.

**Miwa:** Yes it's really, really beautiful. Hawick is very hilly and it's sort of nestled in amongst all of the hills.

**Lewis:** Wow, look at these.

**Miwa:** This is where I come to forage rosehips.

**Lewis:** They're full of vitamin C aren't they?

**Miwa:** Yeah, I make rosehip sirup, elderberry sirup and bramble vinegar. And sees me all through the winter usually. And Rosebay willowherb which you can make tea with

**Lewis:** You can make tea with Rosebay Willowherb?! I've never heard of that. With the flowers?

**Miwa:** With the leaves and the Rosebay willowherb is really starting to turn and that's why it's called 'fireweed'

**Lewis:** Ah, because it goes yellow?

**Miwa:** It goes yellow, but it also goes like really pink. So if you catch it at the right time, it's sort of green to pink to yellow, and it does look like a... I mean, it's really quite luminous. It's really beautiful. In a way a landscape totally changes once you get to know plants. When I get to know a plant, it's like making a friend.

**Lewis:** That's a lovely way of putting it, yeah.

**Miwa:** This is Wellagate cemetery.

**Lewis:** A steep hill, surrounded by gravestones. Just behind me I can see through the trees, the rooftops of Hawick.

**Miwa:** It's spreading out quite far into the distance. It's bigger than it seems, Hawick. So that line of trees right there is where there is a hawthorn. And I like it because there's also rowan and elder and oak and they're all quiet kind of folklorically significant trees. Can you see it there, there's a bench just under it.

**Lewis:** Oh yeah. The bench next to... ah I can see it! A hawthorn in a hedge. It's funny isn't it, because hawthorns don't really grow particularly tall compared to some trees in woods but they're very striking and just looking at the stems and the trunk of this hawthorn and they are gnarly and they're sort of embracing one another and twisting and eventually it stretches up into a canopy of thorns because even the stems have thorns on them, but probably only about three metres, four metres tall this tree, but yet it does really stand out at the edge of the cemetery.

**Miwa:** Especially at this time of year where everything's kind of starting to lose its colour. And the hawthorn just then puts on an amazing display of blood red, sort of colour of vitality. And you can really spot it in the landscape.

**Lewis:** Hawthorn's are kind of gatekeeper trees. The May blossom as it's called in May or perhaps earlier, depending on where you are. And then at the end of the year, the beautiful red berries. It feels like that they're bookending the year with the blossom and the berries.

**Miwa:** One of the interesting things is that they represent so much, so on the one hand the bottom in the spring is kind of associated with like joy and fertility and sort of innocence and youth and the coming of warmer weather. But then also the blossom when it starts to decay, it smells like rotting flesh, which I think is where it gets that strong association with death. So with hawthorn, there's always this kind of parallel thing where it's, it's sort of much beloved, I guess, as a symbol of sort of joy, but then also there's this otherworldly, like slightly eerie, I don't want to say sinister, but it's quite, it's quite a serious energy, and there's a lot of stories around what happens to people if they cut down a hawthorn tree. And my initial kind of interest in hawthorns as trees began before I discovered that Hawick might be named after the hawthorn tree. I'm interested in a lot of the kind of folklore around hawthorns as places where fairies live, as a bridge between worlds, as a kind of boundary marker between this

place in the next. And I guess also, it's quite a strong tradition in Japan as well, that trees and places of nature like trees, mountains, lots of things are believed to possess a spirit called a Kami. So it's, in a way that kind of ties together two sides of my heritage, and in terms of my kind of exploration of relationship with land, the idea that a tree can have a spirit and hawthorn's the perfect tree through which to delve into that idea because it has such strong connotations and such a large presence in the history of this country.

**Miwa:** So this is 'Hawthorn Song' or 'Hawthorn', and this is the first time that I'm playing it next to the tree that I wrote it for. So let's hope that she likes it.

*Miwa's song: The Hawthorn is played.*

**Lewis:** That was beautiful Miwa, thank you. So I'd heard that song before as a recording, the original recording, but this one had a new verse in it! Tell me about that new verse.

**Miwa:** Yeah, the new verse is a sort of is a nod to the journey that that song made. So I wrote it with the intention of it travelling via this kind of fast forwarded oral tradition that we were trying to set up. And when it came back to me, the verse 'many the noble ones' had been added. And so it returned to me with that verse, and now it feels like it was always there.

**Lewis:** And so what does that verse mean to you then?

**Miwa:** I think when I first heard it, 'many the noble ones', noble can be a positive quality. And then as the verse kind of goes on, it becomes clear that it's about nobility, I guess, and about this idea of trying to kind of bend nature to your will and make nature conform. So the idea of 'planting my kin in lines'. Also the fact that after the land started to be divided up, I'm not I'm no historian, but one of the boundary markers of the way that the land was being divided up by nobility was to plant hawthorn, so that's why it's kind of a hedgerows between fields and things. I guess the person who wrote this verse, one of their associations was with about the way that it's been used as a marker, not only as a boundary like we see here, but also as a way to divide land and control it.

**Lewis:** As a form of enclosure in a way.

**Miwa:** Yeah.

**Lewis:** So shall we talk about some of the other verses that in that song? There's a verse which relates to 'the curse of the thorn'. There's a little bit, there's a little bit of fear. And is that something that you were seeking to get across in this song, that there was there's a mixture of emotions?

**Miwa:** Yeah, I guess I was trying to kind of wink to a lot of the different sort of associations that people have with the hawthorn. And in this song, the, you know, it's the cruel hearted ones who are the ones who come to cut down a tree and the tree sort of saying 'but don't worry, because no one ever saw it again', which is, that's a nod to stories of actually local

people often protecting hawthorn trees because they're afraid of what fate might befall them if they tamper with them or chop them down.

**Lewis:** And do you think there's a place for these songs and stories now in guiding our relationship with trees in the present day in the contemporary context?

**Miwa:** Yeah, I think the reason why song is such a powerful tool and why writing a song from the perspective of a tree felt like the right thing to do for me, is that our relationships with non-human living things are often very kind of objectifying, and I wonder if that's partly because we don't hear stories that are told from the perspective of non-human beings and the idea of this of a tree as possessing a spirit and having a kind of personal power and an energy which attracts humans to it, I think it immediately commands more respect than something that you perceive as just an object. And these types of stories, I hope, can work hand-in-hand with, you know, greater environmental and ecological awareness. We understand the environmental significance of trees and why we need them, but in terms of viewing them as fellow community members and beings that should be coveted and protected and respected. To me, it feels like a way to do that is to tell stories about them as though they were alive in a way that we can understand.

**Lewis:** To bring the living quality of the songs as you've done with the 'Hawthorn Song', to breathe life into it, which allows the community to shape it and even to shape it to the extent that it comes back to you with a whole new verse, so that it's not something like a museum piece that we can pick up and look at as an insight into what it used to be or our relationship with, with nature as it once was. But instead is something which is alive and well here in these lands and in relation to how people see and belong to and with the world around them.

**Miwa:** Yeah, I've noticed that lots of people since I wrote this song and many people that either have learned it or know it, have come back to me this year and said that the hawthorn blossom's just amazing and it feels like it's more at the forefront of their consciousness to notice these things because they've been a part of telling that story and the song is what it is because it was shared. And that's always the way it was supposed to be written was a thing that becomes what it is through being shared, which to me is the sort of essence of folk tradition and community practice and storytelling. Yeah, it's nice to have played a small part in that.

**Miwa:** We're heading to a trig point up past the Wellagate cemetery....

**Lewis:** So as the Englishman in Scotland, I have to say, I'm feeling a little bit trepidatious about to walk on to some farmland. We're just walking through a farmyard and into a gate.

**Miwa:** It's funny, I guess. Like I'm so used to it, having grown up here, that trespassing isn't really a thing, but obviously you behave respectfully. So it's almost something that you don't think about until somebody like you, you have a friend that comes from England and they're like, 'are we allowed in there?' And I'm like 'what do you mean?'

**Lewis:** 'you should be allowed to be here?!'

**Miwa:** Yeah!

**Lewis:** We're quite a bit higher up now.

**Miwa:** Yeah

**Lewis:** The true meaning of panoramic. I can see a squall of rain coming in over there. Look at that, wow. I'm going to say hello to this hawthorn. I mean we feel intrepid being up here but these hawthorn's live here

**Miwa:** It's the only thing that's growing besides the gorse.

**Lewis:** I guess also kind of providing shelter for the livestock and you see some sheep's wool down there.

**Miwa:** I think I read somewhere that where you find a lone tree, it's often it was historically a meeting point and I guess it's hard to say, like if they've been left out here for that reason or if people started meeting them because they survive on their own, I guess I don't, I wouldn't know which came first. They have the sort of ability to survive out on a windswept hill, so it's an easy marker place to arrange to kind of gather.

**Lewis:** A tree that's survived against the odds where nothing else will establish I imagine holds some reverence amongst the community. Yeah, Yeah.

**Lewis:** So I often think about hawthorns as being the tree outside of woodlands, the typical tree that you would find on open land like this, and in many ways an edgeland tree.

**Miwa:** Yeah, I suppose I've given quite a lot of thought to the idea of borders and spaces where two things meet. You know Hawick is on a confluence of two rivers, the Slitrig and the Teviot. So already there's a sense of this kind of meeting place and borderlands. It's not about necessarily in betweenness; it's about where two things meet. And as a person with mixed heritage, I've spent quite a lot of time re-imagining ideas of boundaries and borders as being a series of meeting points, and particularly in Hawick but also other border towns, there's a really strong tradition of kind of riding and reaffirming areas of common land through ritual practice and rather than sort of setting definitive boundaries with, you know, big walls and things like that, it's a custom to sort of go and annually check on the sort of edges of the land. And I just really like that as an idea of custodianship and hawthorn as well as a kind of keeper of those edges in both the practical and the sort of magical way. Yeah.

**Lewis:** Well, it's been a wonderful day. I've really enjoyed learning more about the folklore and the myth of the hawthorn, but also the practical uses of it and getting to know this tree through your singing and your songwriting Miwa, but also meeting some of the trees that are important to you.

**Miwa:** Thank you. Thank you for coming to Hawick.

Lewis: What would you like to see happen with these songs and stories as we move into the future?

**Miwa:** I guess I feel now more than ever that music and storytelling is an important way to pass information between people, but also for a kind of collective catharsis and a way to carry a message through feeling rather than necessarily fact. With 'Hawthorn Song', I wrote about a particular hawthorn tree at the top of Wellagate Cemetery in Hawick because that's the hawthorn tree that I know. But the themes of magic and edges and boundaries and sort of the wisdom of nature, I think that's, that's something that a lot of people will be able to relate to. And I could imagine a lot of people singing the song, you know, with, with the voice of the hawthorn imagining in hawthorns that they know and that they care about. And I guess my hope is that singing from the perspective of a tree helps to sort of bridge that gap that's been created between human beings and the natural world. And I would really love to invite anybody who, who feels that they would like to learn the song, please do so, and to interpret it in the way that they would like and to add to it as well, and add feeling aspects of hawthorn trees that you know, and then the song can travel that way and be taught and learned by many people. So please do, and if you do, send it back to me - I'd love to hear it.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to this Treelands podcast. Accompanying music by Nick Hayes, edited by Stellaria Media. This episode was hosted by Lewis Winks, featuring Miwa Nagato-Apthorp as guest. Miwa played her own song 'The Hawthorn'. This work is funded and supported by Defra as part of the Nature for Climate Fund Program of Work. You can find out more information about the project in the show notes.