**Introduction to the Question**

The effect of Spring magic on mortal bodies and minds is well-attested. Members of the Briar Lineage are often tough, impulsive and physical by nature, honest and straight-forward by disposition.

The price many Briars pay for this relentless vitality is difficulty controlling it; struggling with their boredom, restlessness and frustration, many suffer from inappropriate outbursts of emotion. While caution is only Wise, in many nations this has developed into prejudice — and particularly in the Marches, where Briars are frequently denied traditional burial rites, owing to the widespread belief that the Spring energy in their bodies will prove harmful to the land. This belief is not unique to the Marches, but further investigation is outside the scope of this paper.

Investigation of the question reveals several layers to it:

 (1) Is there an observable magical effect attached to Briar burial-sites?

 (2) Is there a specific magical effect of Briar burial-sites unique to the Marches?

 (3) If (1) or (2), then what is that effect?

Point (1) is beyond the scope of this investigation. Answering (2) is necessary to establish the relevance of (3), but that quest is beset with problems: chief among them, that if this is a Hearth Magic effect of any kind, then (2) may turn out to have the simple and true answer “sometimes”. However paradoxical this may seem, it is not an uncommon answer when dealing with Hearth Magic.

Further problems are threefold and interrelated: the prejudice, the paucity of Briar burials, and insufficient data-collection on farming yields in general to perform numerical analysis. In the absence of numerical records in significant quantities, the investigators are left reliant on stories of questionable credibility and pre-existing scholarship.

For these reasons, this investigation will focus on several principal sources: the *Tales Out of Upwold*, the *Wayford Almanac*, the testimony of Hob of Mitwold, and the work of Archmage Dougie Swift. Each source has obvious biases, but only the Archmage seems particularly concerned with veracity over storytelling — and even he has his own agenda, which I shall define in time.

**Tales Out of Upwold**

The *Tales Out of Upwold* was an early movable-type book which featured the single greatest collection of early Marcher folk stories. No extant copies are known to the Civil Service[1], but fragments are preserved in the work of Dougie Swift, a mid-third-century Archmage of Spring. The stories feature Lineaged figures prominently.

Those tales which feature Briars dying include “The Desolation of Sutton”, “Dafyd of Ashbrook”, “The Steward’s Favourite Sow” and “The Bleeding Dolmen”. Each makes different, contradictory claims about the effect of a Briar’s presence in farmland.

In ‘Dafyd of Ashbrook’ (which is really a collection of tales), the eponymous Dafyd is a Navarri who has settled in the Marches with his husband Tom. His Briar vitality and strength carry him through various comical misadventures, but he is told that he must pay a price for his unnatural vigour, or his family will. He stubbornly denies this, and the story ends on a low note as the prediction comes true. Dafyd dies and is buried beneath the tree where he married Tom. That winter, the tree dies, and Tom with it. Their adopted son and daughter must run away to join the Navarri, and never again is anything grown on the land which they cultivated.

‘The Steward’s Favourite Sow’ is a roundabout tale in which a Briar steals the eponymous pig from a neighbouring Household as a prank. After some misadventures, the two families come to blows, and the sow is returned. However, she has fed on grain from the Briar’s hand, and so gives birth to piglets with meat as tough as wood. The Steward confronts the Briar, and in a rage, the Briar kills him. In penitence, she is forced into the Wicker Man. At the height of the burning ceremony, she screams to the forest for vengeance, and all the fields burst into flames. The Steward’s household are all burned, and when morning comes, only choking red weeds, “grown fat on the family’s blood”, coat the land for acres around.

‘The Bleeding Dolmen’ tells the story of Rose, a good Briar who fends off a band of “bandits” (implied to be *vory* of Temeschwar), but is fatally wounded. She dies of her wounds leaning against a dolmen in the Birchland woods. Her body immediately “goes back into the land”, but the dolmen is tainted. It grows a surround of choking weeds which only a wicked Sorcerer can walk through. The Sorcerer sows her enemies’ lands with the Briar-blood which seeps from the dolmen, and all their crops grow vicious thorns, like roses. Eventually a Virtuous Landskeeper kills the Sorceror and purifies the dolmen.

The worst of the accusations comes in ‘The Desolation of Sutton’, which claims that the soil beneath Sutton was once the most fertile in the Marches, until a “Green Man” visits the village and lays with its women and men alike. Each bears him a Briar child in unnatural time, and those children violently replace their parents. Each one a Briar, they try to live as Marchers, but do not understand the customs, or even how to farm. Neighbouring households discover the “cuckoos” and come to raze the village. They drive the Briars into a cave, where they first declare a curse to strip the land of its life, and then kill themselves. The soil dutifully turns to white granite, and indeed, it is mined there to this day.

These examples illustrate the breathtaking variety of forms which this belief takes. With so little agreement on the form of the “taint”, it is difficult to conceive that it could be anything more than a collective superstition, but unfortunately for this investigation, collective superstitions are the stuff that Hearth Magic is made of. The “taint” either causes the land to turn barren slowly after a burial, or causes sudden explosions of murderous weeds upon death, or creates a poisonous substance full of malevolent Spring magic, or can be used to fuel devastating curses. Hypothetically, these may all be true, but it is telling that their common element — a dead Briar leading to a loss of agricultural productivity — reflects the more vague modern belief.

It is interesting that with the exception of ‘The Desolation of Sutton’ (which is the odd-one-out in many ways), the Briars are portrayed as generally Virtuous, but subject to forces beyond their control - vigour (‘Dafyd’), rage (‘Sow’), and the raw magical power of Spring itself (‘Dolmen’). This and other reasons apparently motivated Archmage Swift to attempt to “rehabilitate” the Briar Lineage, arguing that if Wise direction could keep them from endangering themselves and their families, there was no reason they might not be returned to the soil they had always worked, and “serve it Loyally in death as [they] did in life”. We shall return to this point in more detail later.

(Nevertheless, recognising his views as radical, Archmage Swift mentions that elsewhere in the book, Marchers are advised either to lay Briars to rest in running water, so that they are carried away, or burnt, or “traded to the Navarri, who know what to do with them”. It is unclear what this last means).

Is the modern belief an extrapolation of the common element of these sorts of stories? Or are the stories’ obvious exaggerations founded on the underlying superstition? The next chapter deals with a text which explicitly addresses the question.

[1] There is a small reward available for lost texts of historical interest.

**The *Wayford Almanac***

A rare first edition of the *Wayford Almanac*, a largely obsolete farming almanac which has long-since fallen out of use, was discovered in the course of this investigation. It is both explicit and vehement in its opinions — problematically so, since it is clear that its author *despised* Briars, as well as the Dawnish, the Highborn, crows, the Cabbage White butterfly, gout and several prominent contemporary figures it would be inappropriate to name here.

For all its questionable Virtue, it provides the investigation with a cited list of instances of Briar burials which do not show the literary embellishment of the *Tales* or of similar stories elsewhere. The possible consequences which await the unwary farmer include:

 rampant growth of choking weeds,

 rapid spread of groundsel [also called Old-Man-of-the-Spring],

 “an explosion of Orache”,

 a sudden increase in biting and stinging insects,

 small animals becoming strangely aggressive, especially rabbits,

 crops growing and dying too quickly to be harvested, and wheat growing so tall that its stalks fall and break,

 single trees nearby growing explosively, but all other life dying.

Instead of burial on farmland, the Almanac advises thorough immolation — which is to say, “till not even bone remains” — though how to achieve this is undefined. Alternatively, it refers to “the Rot-Lord’s Rest”, and includes a ritual text uncomfortably resembling a prayer to the Eternal Llofir (though by all the usual measures, the ritual itself is a variant of “Turns the Circle”). By this ritual, the Spring energy of the body is supposedly expunged.

The text also exhorts farmers firmly to send Briars away when their Lineage manifests, particularly to the lands of neighbouring Households, or “any other family begrudged”. This idea seems cruel and counter-productive, but it may explain a reference found elsewhere to Mitwold Beaters often being Briars: they were, perhaps, *de facto* outcasts.

This practice will become relevant later in the discussion, when the Archmage Swift invokes the Virtue of Loyalty to counteract the fear of Briars’ magical influence continuing on past their deaths, to the detriment of their families.

**The “Witness Accounts”**

So-called ‘witness accounts’ of the various evils which the *Wayford* author rails against are included in an Appendix to at least the first edition of the *Wayford Almanac*. They are much better-attested than the stories in the *Tales Out of Upwold*, but they nevertheless range from the sublime to the ridiculous in their accusations.

Just before the authors left Mitwold, they were made aware of a children’s book titled *The Hungry Tree and Other Stories*, which they were unable to find in the time remaining to them, which Ms. Rodder believed contained these two stories and others. The authors recommend attempting to discover this book [see note 1].

As they are short enough to reproduce in their entirety, the authors include the two examples including the Briar burial superstition (offensive epithets have been excised):

 **Testimony of Martha Reader, also called ‘Smart Marta’, of the village of Mintwater in Mitwold:** In the time when my grandmother’s grandmother had her first teeth, the Brookthorpes had a [Briar] daughter who was a thorn in our side. Often as a child she would steal from us, and her Steward would not punish her, nor would the Magistrate, who always said the stealing could not be proved, because she was very clever. When she had lived fifteen years she drowned in that brook and was brought out of it by her family. We were sad for the child but she was a [Briar] and got herself in trouble doing [Briar] things. They insisted on burying her on their land, despite the advice of the Landskeeper and our Steward, and other Wise folk besides. The next year, in spite of fine weather, our fields and theirs, and many others besides, all failed without our ever knowing why, save for that Briar-body stealing all the life from the land.

This account is undated, but the opening “In the time when…” is a storytelling device communicating extreme age. Such tales are usually passed from parent to child.

To the objective eye, crop failure may be attributed to many causes beside the weather, but to the Marchers involved (and especially the *Wayford* author) there can be no explanation besides the Briar burial in the soil there. Note that no additional growth is cited, no plague of groundsel or single monstrous tree — just a widespread die-back.

 **Testimony of Malcolm Longstride, Beater of Mitwold:** In the time when my grandmother’s grandmother walked on all fours, her father was a Beater like me. He was walking the bounds of Bregasland when he saw a great tree he had never seen before, surrounded by a patch of bare, dry earth. It was like no other tree, covered in leaves so bright they shone like gems, and it had a figure hanging from it. He went to see if he could help, for he was a kind man. As he came close, he saw another body beneath it, a [Briar] body, and it seemed the tree was growing out of that fresh body, which was dead no longer than a week. When he got there, he found it the hanging figure was no person, but a hollow cage of branches in the shape of a person. He knew none would believe what a thing he’d seen, so he went to cut it down, but it opened and snapped at him like an ankle-trap. He fled and came back with a wood-axe and a strong Landskeeper to hack down that tree and burn it. He swore the truth of this until the day he died, though none ever believed him.

Here is a story which makes a direct connection between Briars and the Vallorn Phenomenon. The authors of this paper find it fascinating that it took them so long to uncover such a tale, when the initial comparison is so instinctual as to keep recurring in society. There must be some reason that the comparison is *not* made elsewhere — yet the persistence of this story over multiple generations shows that it has never been considered so unworthy as to be discarded.

The tale shares a number of common elements with most other accounts: a dead Briar whose body has not been destroyed; dead ground surrounding its resting place; the single, unique[3] tree spawned from the body. The confounding factor is the tree’s hunger and aggression, which imply it to be a Vallorn phenomenon conflated with a traditional Briar-taint story.

So far we have seen a huge disparity of accounts of Briar “land-taint”, with a common thread persisting: that the death or improper disposal of a Briar’s body on farmland results in one problem or another for growing crops on that land.

The fact that this is the modern belief in a nutshell cannot be overlooked. However, an undercurrent of doubt exists. Seeking to explain away both the ancient prejudice and the persistent stories, one former Archmage of Spring carried out extensive research which is partially preserved, and to which we shall turn our attentions next.

[3] (The authors admit that the Eternal Yaw’nagrah’s involvement can never be discounted, but believe that invoking the Forest Mother automatically disqualifies an account from being considered “representative”).

**The Counter-Argument**

**Swift’s Two-Pronged Objection**

There are two principal counter-arguments, both put forward by Archmage Dougie Swift of Bregasland in the 250s Y.E.

The first is methodological, and we have touched upon it already. Given the reasons noted in the Introduction for mistrusting Briars, an ancient prejudice exists which is periodically renewed every time a Briar loses their temper. This has several effects: it provides an exciting, memorable catch-all answer for various possible misfortunes; it contributes to reporting bias (the tale of how a citizen’s burial went without incident is not interesting enough to repeat); and it prevents an investigator from gathering information.

Therefore, a threefold Opinion Bias is formed: firstly, data-gathering is hindered; secondly, contradicting incidents are less likely to be reported; thirdly, the non-specific nature of the “taint” encourages false reporting, both malicious (motivated by prejudice) and unintentional (motivated by the belief itself). As Archmage Swift discovered, it is extremely difficult to refute a belief with the power to create its own evidence; indeed, it is difficult to conceive of even *how to do it* without gathering more data, a duty which must seem as tasteless to the Marchers as it is macabre.

Unfortunately, all the authors can do to support this very reasonable point is to encourage data-gathering[4], and to remind citizens of the transience of the mortal body (a Senate motion or payment from the Conclave to compensate any citizen whose lands were “tainted” may also help).

Archmage Swift’s second point delves deeper into the prejudice itself and seeks to deconstruct it. Rather than presuming the worst of Briars, he argued that their stereotypical traits were no more harmful than those of any Lineage, and that a fourth factor might have helped to account for all the stories of dead Briars’ bodies tainting the land around them with dangerous magic: the Briars’ own hatred and lust for vengeance after lifetimes of abuse at the hands of their families and Households. Though there is not space to reproduce them here, he cited a number of ghost stories of a kind common to all the nations of the Empire, in which the spirit of the deceased was held in place by its hate of those who harmed it, and could not move on into the Labyrinth.

This is a compelling point, since Imperial ghosts show no bias towards any particular Lineage or nation, and carry out the same kinds of mischief or malevolence wherever their former lives came from. If the Briar “taint” is considered to be, rather than an *uncontrolled* outpouring of magic, a violent reaction to their oppression in life, then the answer, simply put, would be to end the mistreatment of Briars. How to do so?

A lifelong member of the Sevenfold Path, Swift’s answer lay in Virtue. Relying on Marcher familial partisanship, he made the case for training Briars in the way of Loyalty *specifically* to their families and no greater unit. Although their inborn magic might not discriminate between friend and foe, it was entirely within the reach of their reasoning faculty to make such distinctions. If they could be encouraged to turn their power to beneficial ends in life (especially by learning Spring magic, chirurgery or potion-brewing, or growing healing herbs), and could be Dedicated in the Way of Loyalty, then there was every reason to hope that they would be able to control their power in death.

He published open letters, both in his capacity as Archmage and as a member of the Sevenfold Path, encouraging both this practice and a more bare, explicitly experimental paradigm. Since the Loyalty Method would take years to begin working, he encouraged a lesser, more respectful synthesis of the two sets of Marcher funeral customs that he hoped would help the Briars of the Marches to have some dignity in death: that their ashes should not be scattered over water or in special graveyards, but spread across some part of the Household lands which mattered to them, the same as any other body might be buried.

Some return correspondence exists, much of it abusive (he was not a popular fellow), but a small amount, over the following years, expresses surprise and gratitude that their “experimental” fields did not wither away. The death of the Archmage ends this correspondence, but it is interesting to note that this option still persists today, and that it was initially created as a more honourable synthesis than cremation-and-disposal.

During the Freedom Heresy, when Crescenia i Marusa i Riqueza encouraged Briars to withdraw from human society, Archmage Swift’s name came up frequently. Although the Montane rebels treated their Briar dead with reverence, we cannot assess whether this putative Hearth Magic conferred any benefits, as accounts are rare, hot-blooded and hyperbolic. A ritual is rumoured that uses a Briar family member’s ashes to encourage swift and productive growth, but appears to only be a copy of “The Blessing of New Spring.”

**The Testimony of “Hob” of Mitwold**

During the research for this paper, a Briar scholar who wished only to be referred to as “Hob” approached the authors. He claimed to be an expert on the history of what he fancifully called “his people”, and of Spring magic and creatures in general. He had heard of our research and asked to tell two tales: the latter must be published in payment for hearing the former. The latter, which he said “would be recognised”, is included hereinafter for the benefit of whatever reader he may have in mind. Both tales are fanciful, but only the first is directly relevant to the question.

Hob told that in the days before the March out of Dawn, Briars were given special consideration among the yeomanry. They were considered lucky (in the sense of personally fortunate, rather than beneficial to others), and often lived apart from society as travelling minstrels, like modern Troubadours. Their blessing was also sought for births and funerals; in fact, the Dawnish monarchy kept a Briar on hand to bury their dead in a graveyard which is now at the heart of the Castle of Thorns’ Rose Garden.

These practices, although different, clearly indicate that attention was paid to Spring’s place at the turning of the circle of life and death, which may be related to the modern belief (it is particularly interesting to hear the Rose Garden invoked, following last year’s incidents there). However, these practices were positive in nature: rather than assuming a Briar’s power to be ravenous and uncontrolled, they posited a degree of control which could potentially be beneficial.

Make no mistake: Briars were still mistrusted in this pre-Imperial Dawn, the nation’s reverential attitude born of respect for their power, rather than genuine good faith. As Hob told it, several Briars played key parts in the rebellion and the March, which eradicated that specific respect permanently. Following that, the generalised opposition of Marcher opinion to anything Dawnish whatsoever left Briars disliked on both sides of the border.

Should this remarkable oral history be true[5], two things are demonstrated: the remarkable power of the oral tradition[6], and that Briars have always been regarded as possessing power over life and death in some way. We can hardly hope to receive information from further back than the age of the Dawnish monarchy, and Eternal consultation is beyond the scope of this paper, so this will have to suffice.

[4] Please speak with either of the principal authors at Anvil to enquire further.

[5] The authors suggest a follow-up project in Astolat.

[6] We must still write everything down.

**A “Tall Tale”**

Finally, as payment demanded, Hob’s tale is presented here in full.

 **The Tale of Hob of Mitwold:** I was walking through the forest, my heart flowing over with love of the trees above and the soft-smelling ferns beneath, when I first heard her singing. She was [insert description of whoever we got to play Melyanna in [[Plot:Rosalene’s Eternal Quest]] here]. Now I have travelled far and wide, and no more graceful woman had I ever seen. My mistress would surely love her for a companion, I thought.

So I followed her voice to where she bathed, and she did seem unconcerned with my nakedness, and I with hers. We were both creatures of Spring — though I more than she — and she rutted fit for the part.

I followed her to her yeoman’s home, where she lived with only the memories of her parents, and now, with me. In time, she asked for my hand, but my duties to my mistress did not permit it. She said she wanted my child, and I asked her, is it not misfortune that a yeoman bear a child of Spring?

She was a Weaver of great skill, and she wove a spell of words and fabric for us to put our trust in. She said it would keep our child safe in her belly, and her safe from its hunger besides.

But after her daughter was born, she would never let me take her to see her grandmother, though I pleaded. We argued, and I left her for greener forms. Instead, she met a different lover, and they raised my daughter together, until he grew jealous of her and drove her out.

I saw her again only months ago. She seemed well, and pleased to see me. Of my daughter by her, I only know she headed north. And that is the truth, sure as the tongue in your head.

It must be noted that the teller was wearing clothes when he told this, and did not explain why he would be traversing any particular Dawnish forest naked. One presumes the spell referred to is an elaboration upon the “Midwife’s Recourse” ritual.

**Summary**

The sources presented here are difficult to assess with clarity. Firstly, insufficient record-keeping prevents proper numerical analysis. Secondly, the prejudice itself dramatically reduces the instances we have to assess, leaving us dependent on poorly-attributed folktales. And finally, the subject is emotionally charged and bound in centuries of prejudice and Hearth Magic, either or both of which can account for bias.

The accounts in the *Tales Out of Upwold* are simultaneously compelling and fantastical, but once those fantastical elements are pared away, what remains is a belief similar to that found in the modern age. The detail provided in the *Wayford Almanac* elaborates on the broad array of possible “taints”. Finally, the “Witness Accounts” included therein, although both modern and reliably attributed, are presented by a text with bias that verges on loathing, racial slurs included - and they, too, vary dramatically in form.

The authors conclude that the hypothesis that burying Briars on Marcher farmland is "bad for the soil" is strongly supported by the available anecdotes, but it is next-to-impossible to assess the credibility of those anecdotes. These problems with credibility can only be answered by further study: a duty which, though morbid, the authors encourage for the dignity of Briars across the Empire.

On the other side of the coin, those who have argued against the belief have often done so not by denying the charge, but by invoking it, and making conscious attempts to turn it on its head. Archmage Swift’s argument for training Briars in Loyalty requires the strong acknowledgement of the "taint" existing, and even in the remarkable history described by the Troubadour(?) Hob, relevantly similar beliefs are present.

Archmage Swift claims, in those papers which we still have, that he studied the problem intensely. If we are to take him at his word, therefore, his attempt to defeat the “taint” by first acknowledging it and then turning it back on itself is the strongest evidence we have. However, his practice also involves reversing it with proper training and discipline —contrary to the many tales of Briars overwhelmed by forces beyond their control, he believes the modern Briar could earn the right to lie alongside their family in death. It is an encouraging and Proud lesson to teach, and may help to inform troubled Stewards how best to employ members of their families whom they might otherwise view with suspicion and distrust. For this reason, and because we believe it to be true, we the named authors swear this as our conclusion and affix to it the seal of our office.