

Trees noble and servile

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I HOPE you have enjoyed reading Andrew Currie's 'tree alphabet', in the weeks alternate to my own pieces, as much as I have. It has set me thinking about how trees are represented in Gaelic literature and tradition, and perhaps in a future article I'll venture into that complicated topic of which letter of the ogham alphabet represents which tree or trees and why. That is, if I can make any sense of it at all.

In the meantime, I'd like to offer a lesser mystery, and I'd be delighted if it stimulates Andrew's thoughts in the way his pieces have stimulated mine. The mystery I refer to is the traditional classification of trees as *saor* and *daor*, noble and servile.

In her famous elegy for Alastair of Glengarry, who died in 1721 or 1724, the MacDonald poet Sileas na Ceapaich has this to say:

*Bu tu 'n t-iubhar thar gach coillidh,
Bu tu 'n darach daingean làidir,
Bu tu 'n cuileann 's bu tu 'n draigheann,
Bu tu 'n t-abhall molach blàthmhor;
Cha robh do dhàimh ris a' chritheann
No do dhligheadh ris an fhearna:
Cha robh bheag annad den leamhan —
Bu tu leannan nam ban àlainn.*

('You were the yew above each forest, / You were the strong steadfast oak, / You were the holly and the blackthorn, / You were the rough-barked blossomed apple; / You were unrelated to the aspen / And paid no tribute to the alder: / You had little of the elm in you — / You were desired by lovely women.')

She thus introduces us in a spectacular way to five trees that are reckoned to be noble, and three that are reckoned to be servile. Her five **noble** trees are the *iubhar* or yew, the *darach* or oak, the *cuileann* or holly, the *draigheann* or blackthorn, and the *abhall* or apple. Her three **servile** trees are *critheann* or aspen, *fearna* or alder, and *leamhan* or elm.

I should add that recent translations of the song have made 'lime' of *leamhan*, following Professor Watson who wrote very confidently in "Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig" that '*leamhan* here means the lime tree, whose wood is soft, rather than the elm', but I think he may have been misinterpreting something in Alexander MacBain's dictionary, so I have gone back to 'elm'.

Now why should trees be divided in this way? One way of answering this is simply to say that it is traditional wisdom. Watson points out that a medieval tract called *Auraicept na nÉces*, 'The Scholars' Primer', lists seven trees which are chieftains, and seven which are servile. The seven **chieftains** (using the old spellings) are *dair* or oak, *coll* or hazel, *cuileand* or holly, *abhull* or apple, *uindsin* or ash, *ibur* or yew, and *gius* or fir. That is Sileas's five, minus blackthorn, plus hazel, ash and fir.

The seven **servile** trees of the *Auraicept* are *fern* or alder, *sail* or willow, *bethi* or birch, *lemh* or elm, *scé* or hawthorn, *crithach* or aspen, and *caerthand* or rowan. That is Sileas's three, plus willow, birch, hawthorn and rowan.

This difference between the trees in early Gaelic society, as between the people, is defined as one of caste. The chieftains are *saor* (free, now also meaning cheap); the serfs are *daor* (unfree, now also meaning expensive). The most practical distinction here I suppose is between trees that may be chopped down for firewood, and trees that must be carefully preserved for nobler purposes. This is the subject of an early Irish poem mentioned by Watson, which must I think be a product of the Celtic legal system. In it *feithlenn* or woodbine is the king of trees, rowan is the tree of the druids, and willow is a noble tree (*saor*, in the spelling *sáir*), while yew is the wood of feasts — in other words, it may be burned, but only in the interests of hospitality, which is a sacred function.

So far, then, we have a total of nine trees which seem to have been consistently **noble**: in alphabetical order, apple, ash, blackthorn, fir, hazel, holly, oak, woodbine and yew. We have found two which have been once noble, once ignoble: rowan and willow. And we have met five which seem to have been consistently **servile**: alder, aspen, birch, elm and hawthorn.

Traditional verse underlines the contrasting status of one from each main group, the yew and the alder. The Book of the Dean of Lismore, written between 1512 and 1542, includes a pair of stanzas by a poet thought to be from the isle of Gigha, in which he contrasts two Irish chiefs, the generous MacDiarmid of Moylurg and the mean Maguire of Fermanagh. He says:

*Dá urradh i n-iath Éireann,
Díogha is rogha raimhéirsheang —
Criopal sean gortach Gallda
Is fear sochrach saorchlannda.*

('Two chiefs in the land of Ireland, / The dregs and the choicest of slim fingers — / An old stingy anglicised cripple / And a bountiful man of noble race.')

*Ní cionta ré chéile a gcur,
Slat fhearna agus slat iubhair;
Slacán don fhiodh fhearna fhiar,
Agus m' fhiodh feartha fírfhial.*

(‘It’s no crime to compare them, / A rod of alder and a rod of yew — / A cudgel of crooked alder wood / And my manly right generous timber.’) Yew, of course, is strong and supple, the best wood there was for making bows, while alder is one of the poorest kinds of timber. In another poem in the Dean’s Book, Finlay, *am Bard Ruadh*, says that he needs a new bow, and that the best yew is to be found at the court of MacGregor. Over two centuries later, the Jacobite poet Alexander MacDonald remarks of Colin Campbell of Glenure, the so-called ‘Red Fox’ who was later murdered,

*Ge toil leam Cailein Ghlinn Iubhair,
B’ fhearr leam gum b’ iubhar ’s nach b’ fhearna.*

(‘Though I like Colin of Glenure, / I wish he were yew and not alder.’) Glenure is, of course, ‘the Glen of Yew’. Later still, James Shaw, the Lochnell poet, describes Campbell of Airds as

*Slat den iubhar uasal
A bhuaineadh á taigh Chaladair.*

(‘A branch of the noble yew / Hewn from the house of Cawdor.’) This very revealing proverb contrasts alder not with yew but with the other most noble and hard of woods, oak: *Sníomhaidh tighearna fearna tuathanach daraich*: ‘an alder laird will twist an oak tenant’. Alternatively, *Toinnidh an t-uachdaran fearna an t-íochdaran daraich*, which means the same thing, really — ‘the alder landlord will swindle the oak tenant’. In quoting it in his book “Gaelic Proverbs”, that distinguished Skyeman, Sheriff Alexander Nicolson, adds wryly that the story of the man who was encouraged by his wife to ‘gang up and be hangit, to please the laird’ may be taken as an illustration of it from the ‘good old times’.

In fact, the proverbs in Nicolson’s book speak more of alder than of any other wood, probably reflecting that it was often the only timber which the people were allowed to take for themselves. It is soft and brittle, so this was how you split it: *Gach fiodh ás a bharr, ach am fearn’ ás a bhun*. ‘All wood from the top, but alder from the root.’ Again, *S odhar gach sean, ’s is geal gach nodha, gu ruig snodhach an fhearna*. ‘Everything old is dun, and everything new is white, even to the sap of the alder.’ The alder when stripped of its bark is very white, says Nicolson, but very soon the colour changes to reddish brown and dun.

But the people made the best of things, as always, and used alder for doors and rafters if they had to. *S olc a’ chliath fhearna nach toir bliadhna san ursainn*. ‘It’s a poor alder hurdle that won’t spend a year in the doorpost.’ *S olc an cabar fearna nach dean ràidhl’ air taigh*. ‘It’s a bad stick of alder that won’t make a rafter.’ (That is Nicolson’s translation. Is *ràidhl’* the English word ‘rail’?)

Another of Nicolson’s proverbs refers to the *uinnsean fiadhaich* or wild ash. *Thachair ludh an uinnsinn fhiadhaich dha — cinnidh e gu math, ach millidh e ’chraobh a bhios an taice ris*. ‘The way of the wild ash befell him — it grows well, but kills the tree that’s near it.’ *Auraicept na nÉces* made the ash (*uindsin*) a chieftain among trees. Is this the way a chieftain behaves?

It occurs to me in any case that the status of a particular wood might well have varied from time to time, and from place to place. One local factor that could influence it could be its use as the badge of a kindred. *Cruaidh mar am fraoch, buan mar an giuthas*: ‘Hard as the heather, lasting as the pine’ — Nicolson points out that this refers to the MacDonalds and MacGregors respectively. It is hard to imagine the pine being anything but noble amongst the MacGregors, but conversely one wonders how it was regarded amongst their enemies.

A final factor, a big one, was religion and superstition. There were sacred woods and ‘crossed’ (banned) woods, but it is such a big topic that I had better leave it till next time. I will end instead with what Alexander Carmichael called ‘Choice of Timber’. This is a traditional rhyme, recorded in slightly different versions by various collectors, which describes the optimum environment of each of a number of species. In Carmichael’s version every tree is prefaced by *tagh* ‘choose’ — *Tagh seileach nan allt* ‘Choose the willow of the streams’, and so on. Other versions have no verb at all, like this from Duncan Campbell’s collection, edited by Donald Meek:

*Seileach nan allt
’S calltainn nan creag,
Fearna an lòin
’S beithe nan eas;
Uinnsean an dubhair
’S darach na gréine,
Leamhan a’ bhruthaich
’S iubhar an lèana.*

(‘The willow of the streams / And the hazel of the rocks, / The alder of the bog / And the birch of the waterfalls; / The ash of the shade / And the oak of the sun, / The elm of the hill / And the yew of the plain.’) The *lòin* where the alder grows is best defined, I think, as a marshy bit of pasture draining into a little burn.

Nicolson's version is briefest of all: simply *Seileach allt, calltainn chreag, fearna bhog, beithe lag* (or *beithe a' chnuic*), *uinnseann an deiseir*. 'Willow of streams, hazel of rocks, alder of bogs, birch of hollows (or of the knoll), the ash of the south-facing slope.' Which is right for the ash, Campbell's shade or Nicolson's sunny south-facing slope?

WHFP 26.4.96