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The trees of Easter Week

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

NEXT week is Easter week, the greatest week in the calendar, at least to those churches which are still willing (as were all our forebears for a thousand years) to set one week above another. This Sunday they celebrate Christ's triumphal entry to Jerusalem, next Thursday the Last Supper, next Friday the Crucifixion, next Sunday the Resurrection.

These events were fundamental to how our forebears behaved and viewed the world around them. Because of the Last Supper, Thursday of Holy Week was the day on which they made an offering of food to the sea to encourage a good crop of seaweed with which to fertilise their crops. Because of the nails that pierced Christ's flesh at the Crucifixion, they used no iron on Good Friday. Some people used no iron on any Friday at all – a perfect example of Thomas Aquinas's definition of superstition, 'religion taken to extremes'.

And then there are the trees. The simplest example is the *sgitheach* (whitethorn or hawthorn), which is cursed because it was said to have been the tree that provided the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head as He hung upon the Cross. As the Argyll poet David MacKellar put it in the eighteenth century:

Crùn sgithich an àite crùn rìgh
Mar thailceas is mar dhìmeas mòr;
Domblas agus fìon geur
'N deoch a thug iad dha ri h-òl.

("No crown for a king, but a whitethorn crown / In foul derision and disrespect; / Gall and vinegar were the drink / That they offered Him for His thirst.")

Traditions like this were important to how our forebears used and managed this vital resource. In the early middle ages we read much of a classification of trees into those which were *saor* ('noble') and those which were *daor* ('servile'). This I am sure was of pre-Christian origin. In practical terms a 'servile' tree was one which could be used for firewood, such as alder or elm, while a 'noble' tree was one which had to be carefully preserved for a higher purpose, such as oak or yew.

In later times however we hear more of a classification of trees into those which were *beannaichte* ('sacred', 'blessed') and those which were *crosta* ('crossed, cursed, banned, profane'). This was slightly different, and seems to have had to do with whether or not it was safe to bring a particular type of wood into the house. Another reason for the change was scripture. Scripture must be taught and understood, so the old concepts of *saor* and *daor* had to be brought into line with the Bible.

Unfortunately the Bible can be an uncertain guide. For example, there is a saying *cho crosta ris an dris*, 'as crossed as the bramble'. But whether the *dris* was sacred or crossed seems to have depended on what part of scripture people liked to quote. Alexander Carmichael points out in volume 2 of 'Carmina Gadelica': "Alone, and in combination with the ivy and the rowan, the bramble was placed above the lintel of the byre door to ward away witches and evil spirits. It is spoken of as 'an druise beannaichte' – the blessed bramble. It is said that a branch of the bramble was the wand with which Christ hastened the ass when going into Jerusalem, and the rod with which He drove the money-changers from the Temple."

He then quotes a proverb which suggests that the *dris* was seen as a blessed plant, at least in comparison to the *droigheann* or blackthorn:

S fheàrr an drise na 'n droigheann,
S fheàrr an droigheann na 'n Donas.

("Better is the bramble than the blackthorn, / Better is the blackthorn than the Devil.")

On the other hand, the story that suggests that the *dris* is not a blessed wood comes from the Old Testament. In Judges 9 we find: "The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, 'Reign thou over us!' But the olive tree said unto them, 'Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?'

"And the trees said to the fig tree, 'Come thou, and reign over us!' But the fig tree said unto them, 'Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees?'

"Then said the trees unto the vine, 'Come thou, and reign over us!' And the vine said unto them, 'Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees?'

"Then said all the trees unto the bramble [*an dris* in the Gaelic Bible], 'Come thou, and reign over us!' And the bramble said unto the trees, 'If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow; and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.'"

It's clear from this that the olive, the fig, the vine and the cedar have the potential of being regarded as sacred trees, while the bramble does not. However, the Old Testament seems not to count for much in these matters, and this would point to such superstitions being formed at a time when the O.T. was not much in fashion.

The fig is a case in point. In Luke 13. 6-7 Christ preaches repentance by uttering the parable of the fig-tree. "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, 'Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?'

"And he answering said unto him, 'Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it; and if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.'"

The word used for the fig tree in the Gaelic Bible is *crann-fige*, but according to Carmichael, the bird-cherry (*fiodhag* or *fiodhagach*) takes its place in popular lore. “The people say that the wild fig-tree is banned because of the incident of the barren fig-tree,” he says. “They do not use it for any structural purpose.” And he quotes:

Gach fiodh sa choill ach fiodhagach
Gach fiodh sa choill ach fiodhagach
Gach fiodh sa choill ach critheann crainn,
Droigheann dreang, iubhar cam is fiodhagach.

(“Any tree in the forest save the wild fig-tree, / Any tree in the forest save the wild fig-tree, / Any tree in the forest save the aspen tree, / The blackthorn of pain (?), the crooked yew, and the wild fig-tree.”)

This seems to suggest that aspen, blackthorn, yew and *fiodhagach* were all crossed, or it may simply mean that as gnarled, curved timbers none of them were suitable for house-building. My understanding is that blackthorn and yew were sacred but the other two were not. Fr Allan McDonald put on record from Uist that Christ at the Resurrection cursed the aspen and set it quivering forever because it was on a cross of aspen that He had been crucified.

A chrithinn sin ’s a chrithinn chrìn,
Sann riut a chrochadh mo Rìgh;
Mollachd air gach sùil a chì
Nach mollaich an critheann crìon.

(“O you aspen, O weakly aspen, / It’s on you that my King was crucified; / A curse on every eye that sees / And does not curse the weakly aspen.”) Yet Sheriff Nicolson (a Skyeman, with different traditions) sees the aspen in a different light. He quotes a proverb: *Fear sam bith a dh’òlas bainne capaill le spàin chrithinn, cha ghabh e ’n triuthach ach aotrom*. “He that drinks mare’s milk with an aspen spoon will take hooping-cough lightly.” Remarking that the first part of this prescription is rational, he says: “The virtue of the spoon was supposed to be derived from the sacred character of the aspen tree.”

The status of the various woods is summed up for us by two more pieces of eighteenth-century poetry. First there is Sìleas na Ceapaich’s praise of Alastair Dubh of Glengarry, who died in 1721.

Bu tu ’n t-iubhar ás a’ choillidh,
Bu tu ’n darach daingeann làidir,
Bu tu ’n cuileann, bu tu ’n droigheann,
Bu tu ’n t-abhall molach blàthmhor;
Cha robh meur annad den chritheann,
Cha robh do dhlighe ri feàrna:
Cha robh do chàirdeas ri leamhan —
Bu tu leannan nam ban àlainn.

(“You were the yew from out of the wood, / You were the strong and steadfast oak, / You were the holly, you were the blackthorn, / You were the knotted blossoming apple; / There wasn’t a finger in you of aspen, / You had no connection with the alder: / You had no relationship to the elm — / You were the sweetheart of beautiful women.”) This is neatly reversed by James Macintyre of Glen Noe in his satire on Dr Johnson, published in 1776.

Cha bu tu ’n droigheann no ’n cuileann
No ’n t-iubhar fulannach làidir,
Chan eil mìr annad den darach
No de sheileach dearg nam blàran;
Tha chuid as mó dhiot de chritheann,
Ìngnean sgithich ’s làmhan feàrna —
Tha do cheann gu léir de leamhan,
Gu h-àraidh do theanga ’s do chàirein.

(“You were not the thorn or the holly / Or the tough enduring yew, / There’s not a bit in you of oak / Or the red willow of the plains; / Most of you is of aspen, / With whitethorn nails and alder hands — / Your whole head is made of elm, / Especially your tongue and your gums.”)

For those readers who would like to read more of the poems I have cited by David MacKellar, Sìleas na Ceapaich and James Macintyre, they are among 63 items which I have brought together in a new book called ‘An Lasair: Anthology of 18th Century Scottish Gaelic Verse’. It’s to be published later this month by Birlinn of Edinburgh.

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