

SCOTTISH STUDIES

SCHOOL OF SCOTTISH STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

# The Great Caledonian Forest of the Mind: Highland Woods and Tree Symbolism in Scottish Gaelic Tradition

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ABSTRACT

No abstract



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John MacInnes's brief but penetrating article 'Samhla na Craoibhe' ('The Symbol of the Tree') begins with the observation *Chan eil samhla nas bitheanta ann am bardachd na Gàidhlig na samhla na craoibhe* ('There is no more common symbol in Gaelic poetry than the symbol of the tree') (Mac Aonghuis 1983: 64-9). The cumulative weight of this imagery should alert us to its importance. Our scientific knowledge about the physical environment of Scotland – the flora, fauna, soil quality, carrying capacity of the land, and so on – has developed extensively since the 1990s, not least due to the leadership of T. C. Smout. Our understanding of the social, cultural and imaginative dimensions of aspects of the landscape has not, however, kept pace with the historical and scientific data.

The title of my contribution is intentionally mischievous. The Great Caledonian Forest is a symbol, an archetype, deeply rooted in the Gaelic imagination which has triggered scepticism, even derision, in recent publications about the history of Scottish woods. Smout has implied, for example, that the modern scholar needs to clear the imaginary woods of literature from the scientific record of real trees: 'Let us begin with the Great Wood of Caledon. It is, in every sense of the word, a myth' (C. Smout 2000: 37).

If we are to take the word 'myth' seriously in all of its facets, we must consider what the narratives and symbolic expressions about the Great Wood meant to the people who told them, and why they created and told them. Although Smout has invited 'the ecologist and the historian' to 'plan a partnership of research and interpretation' (1997: 21), he has overlooked the importance of the anthropologist, linguist and literary scholar who can address questions of meaning for human communities.

It is not that Smout is unaware of the literary record or its potential for unravelling the development of conceptions about the Caledonian Forest or of trees generally: he examines Roman sources and their influence on anglophone antiquarians musing about the Scottish landscape, and recognises that trees were potent icons in Scotland's poetry, English and Gaelic, well before the Romantic movement (2000: 15–18, 41–6, 59–61). It is, then, jarring when he claims that 'In its modern form, the Caledonian Forest is a product of German Romanticism, mediated through the excitable and fantasy-filled minds of the Sobieski Stuarts' (44). He makes the mistake of equating 'modern' with 'anglophone', denying the possibility that Gaelic literature and tradition has had its own trajectory of development.

These cavils are not intended to devalue Smout's contributions, but are meant to highlight the neglect of Gaelic sources and perspectives in the field generally, issues which are crucial if we are to understand the mindsets and cultural expressions of the people who actually lived in such environments.

Scholarly efforts to date have generally focused on biological data or documents recording tree cover, financial transactions, claims of ownership of woodland resources and contentions over them, and have primarily led to conclusions about the élite of Scottish society and the

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commodification and exchange of resources. By directing our attention to lexical items, idioms, oral tradition, folklore and literature, we can more broadly address the cultural and social dimensions of human ecology: What did forests, tree species, and even individual trees, mean to people? What motivated them to claim, defend, or exploit them? How did their political institutions, cultural values, religious impulses and literary expressions inform and direct their interactions with the environment? When did they accept responsibility for ecological degradation – and when, and why, did they blame others? What did they understand about connections between the vitality of the environment and the human community? I hope to demonstrate in this short article, amongst other things, that the history and economic exploitation of woods as physical commodities often contrasts with their role as social signifiers, cultural landmarks and literary devices in Gaelic tradition.

Arboreal symbolism is pervasive in Gaelic literature, epistemology and cosmology, as it is in many parts of the world. I have examined tree symbolism in detail elsewhere (1998; 2009: 114, 237–42), but will summarise some salient points here. The Gaelic language uses overlapping terms, and offers homologies, between human body parts and the elements of trees (foliage as hair, sap as blood, bark as skin, limbs as arms, legs and fingers, etc.), between human individuals and entire trees (the terms *crann*, *craobh*, *faillean*, *fùran*, *fleasg(ach)*, *gallan*, *gas(an)*, *geug*, and *ògan(ach)* can be used for either), and between groves and forests on the one hand, and families and clans on the other (*doire*, *coille*, *craobh-ghinealaiche*, *craobh-sheanchais*, etc.). Other tree terms are used, both positively and negatively, to describe different human qualities and characteristics. The metaphorical potential of these tropes has been exploited extensively throughout the history of Gaelic literature, oral and written, and the semantic parallels reinforce the notion that humankind is inextricably a part of nature and can be understood within the same terms and in the same frames of reference (Bateman 2009; Newton 2009: 290–6). An excerpt from the eulogy by the wife of Major Alasdair MacLeod of Steinn of the Isle of Skye to Sir John MacPherson (c. 1770) will serve as an illustration (MacLeòid 1811: 104–5):

*Chunnaic mise as mo chadal  
A' chraobh ùrail bu taitnich  
'S a duilleach cur fàsaidh air ceudan;*

*As na freumhaichean sùghmhor  
A ghineadh o thùs i:  
Gur brìghmhor an ùir às na dh'èirich.*

I saw in my sleep / the flourishing, most pleasing tree / with its foliage sheltering hundreds; From sap-laden roots / was it begotten from the start: / virile is the soil from which it rose.

This text has a fairly explicit representation of a healthy ecosystem: the tree is rooted in a particular locale, drawing nutrients from the soil which are carried by networks of sap through its limbs, allowing the tree to flourish and foliage to grow, which in turn provides the benefit of shelter to other organisms around it. This ecological awareness is implicit in many other texts.

It is worth noting that this repertoire of literary devices is paralleled by the iconography of sculpture for the Gaelic élite. A recent survey notes: ‘The most prevalent type of design or pattern in West Highland sculpture is foliage, normally stylised leaves arranged in scrolls or trellises. There is no apparent significance to this’ (Caldwell, McGibbon, Miller and Ruckley 2010: 39). The ubiquity of tree imagery in poems to these same patrons gives me cause to doubt the authors’ claim that foliage imagery of this kind is insignificant.

This symbolic system extends at a more abstract level to comment upon the structure and operation of the social order and the relationship between the human order and the cosmos. It might easily be assumed that the relative paucity of expository prose and the marked preference for narrative forms in Gaelic literature hints at some intellectual deficit, but John Carey's comments about symbolic expression in Irish tradition, and its ability to explore ideas and reveal truths, holds equally true for Scottish Gaelic (1992: 102):

The literature is as rich in metaphor and image as it is poor in theory and abstraction, and it is surely here that the key is to be found. The indigenous Irish mentality tends to find expression in symbolic rather than in analytic terms: concepts are not extracted from phenomena in order to be manipulated on the plane of 'pure reason', but are instilled and contemplated in concrete entities. [...] A symbol, unlike an abstract concept, is alive and therefore inexhaustible: it can embrace contraries, point the way into deeper or subtler realms of thought, or be itself transformed and reinterpreted by the unfolding of history.

The material experience of trees and forests informed Gaelic literary symbolism, especially those which were considered sacrosanct in the Scottish landscape: 'The power of the tree kenning is ultimately derived from the great legendary trees of Gaelic tradition' (MacInnes 2006: 284). Some of the names of the sacred woods in Scotland retained the P-Celtic element *neued*, cognate with the *nemeton* of the ancient continental Celts: Barrow has identified an impressive 27 candidates (1998: 56–9).

Many such archaic beliefs were resilient enough in indigenous Gaelic tradition to survive virtually within living memory, and to manifest themselves in literary expression. The inauguration of rulers was often conducted at a sacred tree (*bile*) from which a rod of sovereignty was cut and given to the new leader. Place names and oral tradition attest to the presence of *bilean* near seats of power associated with several dynasties in the *Gàidhealtachd* (Newton 2009: 132–4). One anecdote from the late nineteenth century inextricably ties the life of a sacred tree to the MacDonalds of Glencoe (John Cameron 1894):

The magnificent family representative tree in front of Glencoe House fell on the memorable Saturday night's storm. Although there was great destruction among other trees by previous storms, the giant of the forest suffered no damage. On the night referred to, however, it and the gable of a mansion-house which was built the year before the massacre of Glencoe, and which was set fire to at the time, were thrown down. This was taken as a bad omen. The news of the heir's death and the other occurrences taking place on the same week-day, completed the reading of the omen.

Air fonn :— *Flowers of the Forest*

*Tha sgeul an-diugh air Dhòmhnach  
Do Chomhunnaich tha brònach  
Gun d' leagadh Craobh nan Dòmhn' llach:  
'S o-chòn, cha bu chlàth!*

*Ged leag an doinionn mhillteach  
An doire tiugh 's a milltean  
Sheas gallan nan seachd linntean  
Deas dìreach gun dìth.*

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*Bu shoilleir geur an saobhadh  
Nuair a thuit an gallan aobhach  
'S bha cuid againn a smaoinich  
Air taghadh chrann na frìth.*

*Thug sgeula bàis an oighre  
Sgal 's a' chluais as buidhre  
Is deòir o'n t-sùil as duibhre  
Nach c<e>ill,<sup>1</sup> ach daoine, 'bhrìgh.*

We have a tale today about Sunday which is sorrowful for the people of Glencoe: that the Tree of the MacDonalds was brought down; alas, it was not weak!

Although the devastating storm felled the dense grove and thousands like it, the stalk of seven generations stood straight and elegant without defect.

The omen was clear and concise when the lovely stalk fell: and some of us thought about the pick of the trees in the forest.

The tale of the death of the heir has brought a shriek to the deafest ear and tears from the toughest eye – it will not hide the significance of it [this omen], even if people will.

The centrality of tree symbolism in Gaelic literature and tradition seems to bear scant relationship to the physical landscape of the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles: many areas have had little or no tree cover for centuries; few non-élite Gaels are likely to have been mobile enough to have experienced a variety of tree types; and humans have intervened in diverse ways in the depletion and/or regeneration of woodlands and specific trees. So what is the relationship between the physical environment and the literary representation of woods and use of arboreal symbolism in Gaelic tradition? Do these tropes arise from the direct experience of trees, or are they just 'pre-packaged' poetic conventions?

The Irish law-tracts categorised trees into four grades based on human social classes (Kelly 1976). Using similar logic, Scottish Gaelic tradition divided trees into noble and non-noble classes. Creating an exhaustive classification requires a thorough knowledge of tree species and their different qualities, a familiarity demonstrated by Sileas MacDonald of Keppoch, Lochaber, in her c.1721 elegy to Alasdair MacDonald of Glengarry (Ó Baoill 1972: 70–5). Even though there is considerably more surviving Gaelic poetry composed by Hebridean poets than by mainland poets, nearly all of the references to the noble / non-noble division are from texts composed on the mainland of Scotland. Thomas Sinton's collection of Gaelic poetry from Badenoch (1906) contains references to practically the full arboreal diversity of the Highlands. By contrast, there is hardly any tree imagery in the surviving song-poetry from the island of St Kilda (MacFhearghuis 1995).<sup>2</sup> Although the professional poetic order developed a sophisticated framework for tree symbolism (McManus 2006) and their literary productions were highly influential in their own and lower social ranks, only those poets who had a first-hand knowledge of trees tended to employ these devices to good effect.

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<sup>1</sup> This letter is unclear in the original microfilm: it is likely either 'a', 'e', or 'o' and I have chosen 'e' and interpret the word as 'ceil' as this seems to make the most sense.

<sup>2</sup> Even if what survives is a small and perhaps unrepresentative sample of what once existed.

The emigrant experience in North America offers another scenario against which we may measure the significance of the tree and forest in the Gaelic world view. The notoriety of the song popularly known as *A' Choille Ghruamach* (or *Òran do dh'Ameireaga*) by the Bard MacLean (Dunbar 2008: 44–5) has cast a long and unnecessarily negative shadow over the relationship between immigrant Gaels and the 'unimproved' landscape. The woods are given far more positive treatment in other song texts, composed before and after emigration (MacDonell 1982: 42, 60, 142; Dunbar 2008: 66–7).

In 1802, well before the appearance of the Sobieski Brothers, the Rev. Augustin McDonald commented from Pictou, Nova Scotia, 'The landscape around and position of the forms are very handsome. But the whole country is as covered with the beautifullest woods of every description and variety as we may suppose old Caledonia to have been...' (MacInnes, Harper and Fryer 2002: 185). A Skye emigrant in the Canadian Maritimes, writing in 1848, not only demonstrated appreciation for the trees native to his adopted country, but also displayed a thorough knowledge of the Gaelic terms for them (Sgitheanach: 236):

*Do thaobh àireimh agus gné nan craobh, cha fhreagair e ach beagan a labhairt anns an àite seo. Cha lugha na ceithir seòrsa deug giubhais, còig seòrsa beithe, agus ceithir seòrsa daraich, a gheibhear anns a' cheart eilean seo. 'Se an giuthas buidhe as luachmhoire, oir chan e a-mhàin gum bheil e 'na dheagh fhiodh, ach tha e fàs gu meud anabarrach mór. Is minic a gheibhear craobhan de'n ghiuthas seo a thomhaiseas còig troighe deug mu'n bhun, sia fichead troigh ann an àirde, agus ceithir fichead troigh dhiubh sin, air nach faighear aon mheur no meanglan. Ameasg nan seòrsa eugsamhla fiodha tha fàs 's a' Cheap, feudar na leanas ainmeachadh: giubhas, darach, aiteann, faighbhile, leamhan, uinnseann, caorann, beithe, feàrna, maple (às an dèanar an siùcar), critheann, agus mar sin sìos. A thuilleadh air gach fiodh dhiubh seo, tha iomadh seòrsa eile ann air nach eil Gàidhlig [...]*

*Chan eil teagamh sam bith nach taitneach an sealladh na coillte[an] seo gu léir do na Gàidheil a chaidh air imrich do dh'America, á ceàrnaibh àraid de'n Ghàidhealtachd, agus às na h-eileanaibh an iar, far nach robh a bheag sam bith de'n choillte a' fàs, agus far am b' éiginn daibh dol gu minic air bàtaichean astar cheudan mìle a dh'iarraidh beagan mhaidean cama crotach air son cheangal agus chabar d'an taighibh. Bu mhath, dà-rìreabh, anns an Eilean Sgitheanach fhéin agus anns an Eilean Fhada, o Rudha na Circe gu Barraigh, beagan de'n bharrachd fiodha a tha aig muinntir a' Cheap. Dhèanadh iad sòlas nach bu bheag ri nì a tha 'nan crìochaibh fhéin cho luachmhor agus cho gann.*

Regarding the number and species of trees, it is only suitable to say a little here. There are at least fourteen different species of pine, five species of birch, and four species of oak that are found in this same island. The yellow pine is the most valuable, because it is not only excellent timber, it grows to be exceedingly big. Very often trees of this species of pine are found that measure fifteen feet around the base, one hundred and twenty feet in height, and eighty feet of that height are free of branches and limbs. Amongst the different kinds of wood that grow in the Cape the following can be named: pine, oak, juniper, beech, elm, ash, rowan, birch, alder, maple (from which syrup is made), aspen, and so on. Besides each of these woods, there are many others for which there is no Gaelic term [...]

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There is no doubt whatsoever that the Gaels who immigrated to North America from particular parts of the Highlands and from the Western Isles, where there was hardly any forest growing, and from which they often had to go on boats for distances of hundreds of miles in order to seek a few crooked and bent sticks for the couples and rafters of their homes, thoroughly enjoy the sight of these forests. It would be good, indeed, for some of the excellent wood that the people of the Cape have [to be] on the Isle of Skye itself and in the Long Island from Point to Barra. They would greatly celebrate having something that is so valuable and rare in their own territory.

This is not to assert that all Canadian Gaels – especially those attempting to make a space in the ‘wildwood’ to build houses and conduct agriculture – waxed lyrical about the forest. In reality, Gaels had a wide variety of attitudes about and perceptions of trees: there are Gaelic narratives and song-poems about immigrants whose impatience to clear unwanted woodlands by lighting fires ended in disaster, for example (Dunn 1968: 29). What we see in immigrant literary expressions are not necessarily explicit commentaries about ecological integrity or the aesthetic evaluations of woods, but rather the use of tree symbolism to express a variety of personal feelings and experiences. In other words, poets used arboreal images and metaphors as rhetorical devices and environmental backdrops upon which to project messages about their own individual aspirations and concerns.

Just as we project our current values and preoccupations into our readings of history, so do Gaelic historical narratives which incorporate the forest primeval – the ‘Great Caledonian Forest’ in the Scottish context – reveal perceptions of and values related to woodlands from the contexts of their authors. No later than the twelfth century, Gaelic literati fashioned an historical narrative accounting for the origins of the Gaelic people which demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the connections between agriculture, a stratified, patriarchal social order, and the clearing of the forests: in other words, the essence of ‘civilisation’ in a technical sense (Bitel 2002; Newton 2003: 189–90).

By the late medieval period, an alternative narrative to explain the loss of the primeval forests had taken hold in Gaelic vernacular tradition, shaped by the polarisation between Gael and Norse: jealous of Scotland’s resources, which they are not able to exploit, the Norse decide to destroy them (Newton 2003: 185–8; 2009: 284–6, 289). Although this tale (found in many variants) has been dismissed as lacking rational merit (Smout, MacDonald and Watson 2007: 36), it tells us that Gaels saw the destruction of the forests – the remnants of which they found in bogs and deep in the soil – as a tragic loss perpetrated by enemies. The narrative, which has counterparts in Ireland (Ó Catháin and O’Flanagan 1975: 74), indicates the intrinsic value of woodlands, the need to account for the loss of primal integrity and a subconscious desire to deflect blame away from self and onto the Other.

Another significant item in Gaelic oral tradition relates to the *Cailleach Bheur*, the female personification of wild nature and creator of the landscape. In this brief anecdote, the Cailleach is found dethroned and keening the destruction of the forest, bringing us back to the correlation between agriculture, patriarchal desecralisation and the loss of woodlands implied in the earlier Irish myth of origins (Newton 2009: 324).

Every culture in every age is liable to glamorise or deprecate natural environments in ways that contradict how people actually live and earn their sustenance. Such disparities are the stuff of modern debates about ecological sustainability (‘Do we exploit the resources of the landscape or preserve its beauty?’) and we might ask if medieval Gaels were aware of the inconsistencies

between their own attitudes and practices. I believe that there are clues in Gaelic tradition that indicate a consciousness of the inherent contradictions of idealising forests while still needing to exploit them and ‘keep them at bay’ for agriculture.

A proverb which first appears in a collection written by the early eighteenth-century antiquarian Uilleam MacMhurchaidh illustrates such tensions: ‘*Mol an lom-thìr is na ruig i; dì-mhol a’ choille is na trèig i*’ (‘Praise the bare-land and don’t go to it; dispraise the forest and don’t leave it’) (Alexander Cameron 1894: 502). The first printed collection of Gaelic proverbs contains a close variant of this: ‘*Mol am mona[dh] is na ruig e; diomuil a’ choille ’s na fàg i*’ (‘You may extol the bleak hill but go not thither; you may vilify the wood, but quit it not’). This is given the gloss ‘Analogous to “praise the sea but keep on dry land”’ (Macintosh 1785: 54–5). These two variants are complemented in the later Nicolson collection by ‘*Mol a’ mhachair is na treabh; diomuil a’ choille is na tréig*’ (‘Praise the plain and plough it not, &c.’) (Nicolson 1882: 318). These aphorisms clearly reflect ambivalence about contrasting environments and probably also the social classes associated with them: Gaelic warrior-aristocrats had the privilege of hunting in the woods, but the peasantry was tied to working the soil of the fields (MacInnes 2006: 27). The élite maintained their noble status by both avoiding such agricultural drudgery and ensuring that it was safely delegated to reliable trustees.

Literary resources supplemented the physical environment in maintaining ecological diversity in the cultural imagination. On the one hand, the arboreal diversity of any particular Gaelic community was in fact reflected in its literary expressions; on the other hand, the cosmological and literary inheritance of Gaeldom rooted the human experience in a world view which valued trees highly and perpetuated their presence conceptually in an idealised landscape of the mind, even when they were poorly attested in the local environment.

In a broad study of cognitive models derived by cultures from environmental experience, James Fernandez suggests that

the landscape offers, among other contiguous experiences of human life, primary images out of which or on the basis of which men and women, turning contiguities into similarities, can construct their senses of themselves, of their social relations and of their world – of their moral obligations, in short, in the widest sense of the term (1998: 104).

It is tempting to read something of this affection for woodlands much further back into Gaelic history and identity. It is well established that the ethnonym *Goídil*, which the Gaels used for themselves, was actually a borrowing from their Brythonic neighbours meaning something like ‘forest-people’ or ‘wildmen’. John Koch has recently argued that *Goídil* originated in a cluster of narratives that the Gaelic literati appropriated in the late seventh century for their own purposes (Koch 2000). Although the original Brythonic ethnonym did not present Gaelic speakers in a flattering light, could the adoption of this term indicate some subversive attitude on the part of the literati who were willing to embrace this association with trees and the wild?<sup>3</sup> Does this lead us back to the idea of the nature-loving Gaelic monk-poet, who recent scholars have insisted is a chimera of the modern literary imagination (Ó Corráin 1989) as illusory as the Great Caledonian Forest? Perhaps scientists and poets will only find common ground on these matters in the imagination itself.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth pointing out that the ethnonym *Féni* – which could be used restrictively to refer to a particular descent group, but also more broadly to refer to all of the Irish – may be derived from the same Proto-Celtic root \**wēdu*. See Koch 2006.

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