

## *Craobh nan Ubhal: A Gaelic Panegyric*

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The waulking song *Craobh nan Ubhal* is well known to followers of Gaelic music. The renowned singer Flora MacNeil (1928–2015) popularised it, recording it as the final item on her second commercial album in 1976.<sup>1</sup> She also named the collection after the song. Hailing from the Isle of Barra, a hotspot for oral Gaelic tradition, Flora was surrounded by numerous excellent singers during her youth.<sup>2</sup> This period, from the late thirties to the early fifties, coincided with an increased interest in the oral traditions of the Hebrides, during which more songs and stories came to light. Flora's own family were tradition bearers, and many of her songs came from within that milieu. Flora chose to name the album for the song for several reasons. It was one of her mother's favourites and among the earliest that she learned from her;<sup>3</sup> but Flora was also mindful of the generations of singers who had carried the songs, and this song for her represented a testament to the tenacity of tradition and its transmission. As her daughter Maggie MacInnes remarked, 'the reference to the many branches of the tree or Clan Chiefs represented or symbolised to her the generations and relations of a family who have carried the songs for centuries'.<sup>4</sup>

Since it was first recorded, *Craobh nan Ubhal* has become a well-known and widely performed song, and has been recorded commercially by others. Recently, a riveting performance by Pàdruig Moireasdan and Claire Frances MacNeil, featuring the recording made by J. L. Campbell from the singing of Roderick MacKinnon (Ruairidh Iain Bhàin), marked the celebrations for the official re-opening of the Canna House archives.<sup>5</sup> With the creation of the online archive Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o' Riches, other audio recordings of the song have become more accessible to the public and researchers alike.

As reported to John Shaw, Lauchie Mac Lellan's blind uncle Neil's advice to him, as he himself learned songs in Cape Breton Island, was: *Tuig an t-òran* ('Understand the song').<sup>6</sup> Following this sound advice, this paper explores the song through an examination of what has been written about it to date, a brief description of the additional recordings now available, and an analysis of the text. The aim is to gain a greater understanding of the song's background, context, and purpose.

Let us first explore Gaelic cultural concepts of the tree, including its link with the Ogam script, and the classification of trees in Gaelic culture into nobles and commoners. This provides a broad

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<sup>1</sup> Flora MacNeil, *Craobh nan Ubhal: Traditional Gaelic Songs from the Western Isles*. Tangent Records (TGS 124), 1976, vinyl LP.

<sup>2</sup> John Lorne Campbell names some fifteen Barra singers whom he recorded between 1938 and 1951; see J. L. Campbell and Francis Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs II: Waulking songs from Barra, South Uist, Eriskay and Benbecula* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kennedy, *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland* (London: Cassell, 1976), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Maggie MacInnes, by Facebook Direct Messenger to author, 15/04/2025.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DK9873tOhhL/?hl=en>. J. L. Campbell's archive recording can be heard on Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o' Riches at: <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/39299?l=en>.

<sup>6</sup> John Shaw, 'Language, Music and Local Aesthetics: Views from Gaeldom and Beyond', *Scottish Language* 11/12 (1992–1993): 55.

context for an examination of the commentary on the song and allows the broadest possible parameters for an interpretation of the lyrics.

Trees are an important part of symbolic expression in cultures worldwide, and Gaelic culture is no exception.<sup>7</sup> John MacInnes states the case unambiguously:

*Chan eil samhla nas bitheanta ann am bardachd na Gàidhlig na samhla na craoibhe.  
Chan e craoibh neo crann a-mhàin a gheibhear ach na bhoineas don chraoibh, stoc,  
duilleach, meas, geug, meanglan, gallan, fiùran agus a' choill è fhèin.*<sup>8</sup>

There is no commoner image in Gaelic poetry than the image of the tree. It's not trees in general, or any particular tree, that we find, but all that pertains to the tree – trunk, foliage, fruit, branch, bough, sapling, shoot, and the forest itself.

MacInnes further explores tree imagery in his renowned essay 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background'; and the theme has been further developed and extended more recently by Meg Bateman and Michael Newton.<sup>9</sup>

The five sacred trees of ancient Ireland are well documented, and the characteristics attributed to them continue to influence imaginative engagements with Gaelic tradition. The importance of these trees, named as *Bile Tortan*, *Eó Rois*, *Eó Mughna*, *Bile Uisnigh*, and *Craeb Daithi*, has been comprehensively described by A. T. Lucas.<sup>10</sup> For Lucas, 'sacred' means trees or woods that were venerated in certain ways that protected them from damage. The term *bile* is used interchangeably with *craeb* for these trees; the word *Eó* can also stand for any tree, although it often signifies a yew. Such an understanding is important, because our song is known as *Craobh an Iubhair* ('The Yew Tree') as well as *Craobh nan Ubhal* ('The Apple Tree').

To state that this variation links back to early understandings of the categorisation of trees is difficult, since, prosodically, *craobh nan ubhal* and *craobh an iubhair* are identical. The sacred trees were mainly oak, ash and yew, all in the *airig fedo* ('nobles of the wood') category. Although the word *bile* no longer occurs in everyday speech in Ireland, it is still widely attested in placenames. It is relevant here to note the particular character of the *Eó Mughna*, an oak tree in Kildare. Not only did it produce the expected acorns in abundant quantities, but it was also believed to give apples and hazelnuts. This association between the apple and the *bile* whose title is *Eó* (in one meaning yew, though as we have already said, the tree was an oak) is interesting. Focusing on this interlinkage and co-identification therefore provides another clue as we explore our song. *Bile Tortan* was said to be *mac an chraind a parrdus* ('the son of the tree of Paradise'); but the *Eo Rois* (a yew) is perhaps the most interesting of all, having what Lucas calls 'a curious rhapsodic litany of thirty one epithets'

<sup>7</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Papermac, 1987 [1922]), 159–60.

<sup>8</sup> Iain Mac Aonghais, 'Samhla na Craoibhe' in *Sàr Ghàidheal: Essays in Memory of Rory Mackay* (Inverness: An Comunn Gàidhealach and the Gaelic Society of Inverness, 1986), 64.

<sup>9</sup> John MacInnes, 'The Panegyric Code in Gaelic Poetry and its Historical Background', in *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 284; Meg Bateman, 'The Image of the Tree in Gaelic Culture', in *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 6*, ed. Nancy R. McGuire and Colm Ó Baoill (Aberdeen: An Clò Gàidhealach 2013), 31–42; Michael Newton, 'The Great Caledonian Forest of the Mind: Highland Woods and Tree Symbolism in Scottish Gaelic Tradition,' in *Craobh nan Ubhal: A Festschrift for John MacInnes*, ed. Virginia Blankenhorn, *Scottish Studies* 37 (2014): 164–173.

<sup>10</sup> Lucas, A.T. 'The Sacred Trees of Ireland', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society* 68/207–208 (1963): 16–54.

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recited to it by a poet named as *Druim Suithe* ('Ridge of Knowledge'). The tree was located at Leathghlenn (Leighlin in modern day County Carlow):<sup>11</sup>

|                           |                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Eo Rosa</i>            | Tree of Ross             |
| <i>roth ruireach</i>      | a king's wheel           |
| <i>recht flatha</i>       | a prince's right         |
| <i>tonn tuinni</i>        | a wave's noise           |
| <i>dech duilib</i>        | best of creatures        |
| <i>diriuch dronchrand</i> | a straight firm tree     |
| <i>dia dronbala</i>       | a firm-strong god        |
| <i>dor nime</i>           | door (?) of heaven       |
| <i>nert n-aicde</i>       | Strength of a building   |
| <i>fó foirne</i>          | the good of a crew       |
| <i>fer ferbglan</i>       | a word-pure man          |
| <i>gart lánmhar</i>       | full-great bounty        |
| <i>ren trinoit</i>        | the Trinity's mighty one |
| <i>dam toimsi</i>         | a measure's house        |
| <i>maith máthar</i>       | a mother's good          |
| <i>mac Maire</i>          | Mary's son               |
| <i>muir mothach</i>       | a fruitful sea           |
| <i>miadh maise</i>        | beauty's honour          |
| <i>mal menman</i>         | a mind's lord            |
| <i>mind n-angel</i>       | diadem of angels         |
| <i>nuall betha</i>        | shout of the world       |
| <i>blad Banba</i>         | Banba's renown           |
| <i>brig buadha</i>        | might of victory         |
| <i>breth bunaid</i>       | judgement of origin      |
| <i>brath bruthach</i>     | judicial doom            |
| <i>brosna suad</i>        | faggot of sages          |
| <i>saeriu crannaib</i>    | noblest of trees         |
| <i>clu Galion</i>         | glory of Leinster        |
| <i>caemiu dossuib</i>     | dearest of bushes        |
| <i>dín bethra</i>         | a bear's defence         |
| <i>brig bethad</i>        | vigour of life           |
| <i>bricht n-eolas</i>     | spell of knowledge       |
| <i>Eo Rosa</i>            | Tree of Ross             |

This litany is a eulogy, or perhaps a lament, for the tree, given that its composition is linked to the fall of the tree. Grigory Bondarenko summarizes the significance of this poem as follows:

<sup>11</sup> Bondarenko, Grigory, 'The Alliterative Poem *Eó Rossa* from the Dindsenchas' in *Studies in Irish Mythology* (Berlin: Curach Bhán, 2014), 69–76. See also Alden Watson, 'The King, The Poet and the Sacred Tree,' *Études Celtiques* 18 (1981): 165–180. My thanks to Professor Mícheál Ó Mainnín, The Queen's University of Belfast, for drawing my attention to these sources.

The poem... is full of Christian imagery being mixed with or over-laid upon that of the poetic, secular or pre-Christian essence.... Moreover Eó Rossa acquires its sacredness in the poem not only in association with its tribal or all-Leinster importance: it is sacred as a symbol of Christ and within the Christian mind belongs to the divine sphere. There are several levels in the list of epithets attached to Eó Rossa: a level of poetry and poetic craft, a level of heroic and local imagery with both heroic kennings and place-names involved, and a level of Christian adoration where a natural phenomenon is seen as a symbol or a living and tangible icon of Christ Himself.<sup>12</sup>

In light of our song, and the section in which the speaker showers blessings for strength and good fortune on *craobh nan ubhal/an iubhair*, I believe this poem is significant. The prominence of Christian imagery is decidedly more muted in *Craobh nan Ubhal* than in the older poem, not unsurprisingly, because the speaker is a secular woman not bound up in monastic life. However, the heroic imagery and kennings are given full range. Given the older magico-religious contexts outlined above, the similarities should not seem at all incongruous.

*Bretha Comaithchesa*, an eighth century legal text, divides trees into four groups of seven, founded on their practical value and mirroring of societal hierarchies. The first group, *airig fedo* ('the nobles of the wood'), includes oak (*daur*, also *dair*), hazel (*coll*), holly (*cuilenn*), yew (*ibar*), ash (*uinnius*), pine (*ochtach*), and apple (*aball*). This classification is clearly significant for the song, as is the identification of the *airig fedo* as *fidnemedá* ('sacred trees').<sup>13</sup> Both yew and apple are considered noble, reflecting their close connection and giving a clue to the way in which one may occasionally represent the other, as well as the high social status of the heroic subject of the song.

Also important here is the story of the first appearance of the sacred trees, which manifested with the birth of Conn Cédchathach, in which the symbol of the tree was directly linked with the idea of kingship, and by association, with sovereignty. Lucas points out the tie between the *bile* and particular places, especially a king's or a chief's dwelling. Although the song *Craobh nan Ubhal* could ostensibly be read as a song of praise for a lover, the identification of the *bile* with the kingdom and the personage of the chief underlies its meaning. The connection between significant places and *bileadha* is also, as both MacInnes and Bateman have noted, a feature of Scottish placename lore. To draw attention to these connections is not to suggest that the makers or the performers of *Craobh nan Ubhal* were overtly aware of the song's historical trajectory. Rather, these understandings were implicit in their inherited tradition and came to them as a matter of course through cultural transmission.

The trees received quite a lot of attention in various early texts, where they stand as cosmological symbols of the Gaelic world, *fidnemedá*, sacred trees,<sup>14</sup> in a way similar to the importance of Yggdrasil, the cosmic ash that stands as a symbolic axis mundi in Norse mythology. The *fid* element in this term stands for a tree, and is also the term used for a letter in Ogam. The modern *fiodh* is found in Ireland in placenames now, but in Scottish Gaelic it is the ordinary word for 'timber'.

<sup>12</sup> Bondarenko, 'The Alliterative Poem *Eó Rossa*', 76.

<sup>13</sup> Fergus Kelly, 'The Old Irish Tree List', *Celtica* 11 (1976): 107–124; Lionel S. Joseph and Brian Drayton, 'Trees and Tradition in Early Ireland', *Studia Celtica Fennica* 17 (2021): 54–73.

<sup>14</sup> P. L. Henry, *Saoithiúlacht na Sean-Ghaeilge* (Baile Átha Cliath: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1978), 233–235; see also 145.

Since many waulking songs reflect a substratum of Gaelic aristocratic culture that continued to thrive into modern times, it is worthwhile also to look at the occurrence of trees in the more formal aristocratic Gaelic verse from the bardic period.

MacInnes shows that the tree as a kenning for the warrior is a widespread and common feature of Gaelic vernacular praise poetry, which he sees as an outgrowth and development of earlier professional bardic conventions, ultimately related to the idea of the *bile*, the sacred tree, exemplified by the five great sacred trees of Ireland:

The heroic virtues are expressed in a variety of kennings for the warrior. He is a tree: ‘bile,’ ‘crann,’ ‘craobh’ (especially ‘abhall farsaing / freumhach’, ‘darach’, and other ‘noble’ woods); ‘craobh chosgair / chomhraig / as airde ’san doire / shìochaint’; ‘fiùran’, ‘gasan’, ‘fleasgach’, ‘slat’.<sup>15</sup>

Writing well before MacInnes, John Lorne Campbell understood the importance of this link though he did not have time to explore it fully. Describing the apple tree as a ‘kenning’ for a chief, he cites as evidence a twelfth-century Irish praise poem that he argues indicates the importance of the historical depth of the use of the apple tree as symbol.<sup>16</sup> The poem in question is ‘Táinig an Croibhdherg go Crúachain,’ a poem composed by Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe for Cathal Croibhdherg Ó Conchubhair (1153–1224), King of Connacht. Here is the twenty-sixth quatrain:<sup>17</sup>

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Uille gach abhla re talmhuin</i>  | The elbow of each apple tree on the ground      |
| <i>a tír Chathail Cruachna hAoi,</i> | In the land of Cathal of Cruachain Aoi          |
| <i>gach coll úr re heigin innte</i>  | Every fresh hazel there compelled <sup>18</sup> |
| <i>léigidh a ghlún fillti fáoi.</i>  | It bends its knee below it.                     |

This quatrain illustrates part of the stock of conventional images expressing the fertility and abundance associated with the rule of the rightful king, spouse of the earth goddess, indicating a superabundance of fruits resulting from their just and sacred union. Campbell’s identification of this stanza as a ‘kenning’ is, however, problematic, as a kenning is a compressed metaphor, normally no more than two words in length, that stands for what it represents. But while the reference to the apple tree in this verse is not a metaphor for the king, it does stand as a manifestation of the fecundity of the land due to his successful and just rule. The association of these ‘nobles of the wood’, the apple and the hazel, with the ideals of kingship is entirely of a piece with the whole symbolic apparatus of Gaelic panegyric.

In *A History of Ireland in 100 Words*, the entry for ‘apple’ indicates the high regard in which apples were held, both ‘as high-value and delicious food items’ and, when used metaphorically, ‘in medieval literature to refer to distinguished persons’. The editors also point out the close association with the

<sup>15</sup> MacInnes, ‘The Panegyric Code’, 284.

<sup>16</sup> John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs made by Donald MacCormick* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 190. Campbell refers to *Prolegomena to the Study of the Later Irish Bards 1200-1500* (E. C. Quiggin, Oxford, 1911), 26 where the poem is quoted in translation as follows: ‘The arms of each apple-tree are weighed to the ground in the land of Cathal of Cruachan-Aoi, each bright hazel therein perforce bends down’.

<sup>17</sup> Bardic Poetry Database, stanza 26 of 36, <https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/poem/1769>. Accessed 02/09/2025

<sup>18</sup> See under *éicen* in eDIL 2019: *An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, based on the *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–1976. [dil.ie/19711](http://dil.ie/19711). This line is glossed as ‘overpowering exuberance,’ entirely in keeping with the sentiments in our song. Accessed 15/02/2026.

otherworld, citing the ‘magical apple that sustains a king’s son Connlae and does not diminish’.<sup>19</sup> A search of the database of bardic poetry reveals a plethora of references to apples and apple trees, many used in a religious context, others in the conventional language of eulogistic praise. An exhaustive analysis of the corpus goes beyond the capacity of this short paper, but of interest are metonymical references to the patron as an apple. One appropriately Scottish example will suffice here. The poem, ‘Triath na nGaidheal Giolla-Easbuig’ praises Giolla-Easbuig Campbell (fl. 1640), first Marquis of Argyll. When eulogising Cailín, the patron’s eponymous ancestor, the unknown poet states:<sup>20</sup>

*Deich nglúine uaibhsi san fhéin curadh  
Cailín iongnadh na n-éacht mbúan;  
ubhal cumhra chríoch na nGaidheal:  
ní fríth umhla d’aoinfhear úadh.*

Ten generations from you in the catalogue of champions / [is] Cailín of the wonders and the lasting [heroic] achievements; / the fragrant apple of the lands of the Gael: / No man received submission from him.

This quatrain can justifiably be termed a kenning because the hero, Cailín, ancestor of Clan Campbell, is called an apple, if not actually an apple tree. The tie between nobility and the apple is reinforced in the context of panegyric, making this more recent Scottish example all the more relevant to our exploration of *Craobh nan Ubhal*.

Meg Bateman gives a brief but comprehensive account of trees in Gaelic culture with a special focus on the Scottish dimension. Her description of the Fortingall Yew in Perthshire as the *axis mundi* of Scotland is a compelling mirror image of the Irish *Bile Uisnigh*. Also relevant to this paper are her references to trees as symbols in Gaelic poetry. She argues convincingly for a changing but continuous strand in Scottish culture recognising and honouring the sacred nature of trees. The use of tree references by Sileas na Ceapaich and other poets down to the present shows the centrality of the tree as part of the panegyric code of praise, from which poets drew endlessly, adapting it as their purpose required.<sup>21</sup>

With that background in mind, I turn to the song itself to see what text may reveal. For this purpose, I use here the text transcribed by Donald McCormick and published by John Lorne Campbell and Francis Collinson, and the settings collected in Barra by Alexander Carmichael and edited by Angus Matheson.<sup>22</sup> These two sources provide the longest texts of the song. James Ross refers briefly to *Craobh nan Ubhal* in his detailed paper on classification of Gaelic songs, pointing out that the tree imagery is highly developed, but saying that such literary expression is on the whole rare in the waulking song tradition.<sup>23</sup> Derick Thomson, following Carmichael, cites the praise of a member of the clan MacKay from the Rhinns of Islay, possibly a man called Brian or Niall,<sup>24</sup> dating it to the late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> Thomson himself learned this song from his mother, and

<sup>19</sup> Sharon Arbuthnot, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Gregory Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2019), 48.

<sup>20</sup> Bardic Poetry Database, stanza 27 of 36, <https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/poem/1870>.

<sup>21</sup> Bateman, ‘The Image of the Tree’.

<sup>22</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, 144–149 (text and translation), 188–189 (notes) and 330–332 (musical transcriptions); Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. 5, ed. Angus Matheson (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954), 2–8.

<sup>23</sup> James Ross, ‘A Classification of Gaelic Folksong’, *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957): 114–116.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Derick S. Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1990 [1974]), 94–95.

recordings in Tobar an Dualchais attest to at least three different settings from different communities in Lewis: Uig, Keose and Breascleite respectively.<sup>26</sup> Campbell's text had not appeared when Thomson wrote, so he defers to Carmichael's version as fuller and more complete. The song is of a piece with the waulking song corpus, praising the charismatic chief, whose personal magnetism is abundant and transformative. For example, the man praised has magical attributes, being able to turn wool into silk, water into wine, and white foam into butter. The erotic element found in many waulking songs expressing the speaker's physical attraction to and relationship with the chief is also strongly present in *Craobh nan Ubhal*, the tree itself having a distinct, if muted, phallic significance. *Craobh nan Ubhal* conforms well to Campbell's observation that 'in the older waulking songs, the clothing and the arms and social habits are those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.<sup>27</sup> The strongly magical element in the praise of Mac Aoidh, manifested in his power to accomplish transformations of the mundane into the aristocratic, (wool into silk, water to wine, clay into drinking vessels etc.), is consistent with the supernatural force deemed to reside in the true king. He is the spouse of the goddess, having undergone the *heiros gamos* – the sacred marriage known as *banais rigi* – emblematic of the rites of installation of a royal personage.<sup>28</sup> A line occurring in both of Carmichael's texts calls upon *Somhairle mór agus a chliar* [great Somerled and his band] to support the hero, a clear invocation of the idea of *Triath nan Eilean* [the Lord of the Isles] or *Rìgh Innse Gall* [The King of the Hebrides], and Islay's importance as the original centre of the Lordship.<sup>29</sup> Such mythology underpinned a system through which tribute was collected by the chief, but also, crucially, redistributed by him among the clan, in order to ensure that everyone had enough resources. R. A. Dodgshon comments:

In character, rents in kind formed part of an economy of direct consumption. In an environment in which poor harvest meant 'not scarcity but emptiness,' having command over a surplus provided a powerful ideological weapon in the search for chiefly status. Though craftsmen of various sorts were given rent-free or discounted holdings, there are no indications that Highland chiefs used the food which they gathered to support such craftsmen directly. Instead, we need to see food rents as providing the basis for a primary circuit of consumption, enabling chiefs to support kinsmen and tenants in times of crisis, to support household men of the chief's retinue, to sustain display of feasting and feuding, and to build alliances through marriage and bonds of manrent with other chiefs and their families.<sup>30</sup>

This sort of distribution bears resemblances to patterns identified by Mauss in his seminal work *The Gift* – which elucidates the dynamics of economies based upon prestige accrued and lost in the

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<sup>26</sup> Sung by Margaret MacIver from Lochs, Lewis, who names her source for each version; Tobar an Dualchais <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/131255?l=en>. See also Otto Andersson 'On Gaelic Music from the Isle of Lewis,' *The Budkavlen* 31/1-4 (1952): 42 and Comunn Gàidhealach Leodhais, *Eilean Fraoich: Lewis Gaelic Songs and Melodies*, (Stornoway: Acair, 1982 [1938]), 61.

<sup>27</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> 'A feast, significantly known as *banais rigi*, "wedding-feast of kingship", formed an essential part of the ceremonies with which Irish kings were inaugurated.' T. F. O'Rahilly, 'On the Origin of the Names Érainn and Ériu', *Ériu* 14 (1946): 14.

<sup>29</sup> Carmichael (ed. A. Matheson, *Carmina Gadelica V*, (1987 [1900]), 4–7

<sup>30</sup> Robert A. Dodgshon, *From Chiefs to Landlords: Social and Economic Change in the Western Highlands and Islands, c. 1493–1820* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 77.

symbolism of material gift exchange.<sup>31</sup> The system enhanced those who were successful through battle and feuding, marriage alliances, celebrations of feasting and extravagant consumption, displays that enhanced the chief's political stature and his status among his own clan followers. Without the circularity of the moving gift, the system would not have worked.

All of these ideas are of a piece with *Craobh nan Ubhal/an Iubhair*. A major difference between this song and earlier eulogistic poetry, however, is that the speaker is female. Although it was not unknown for earlier professional poets to occasionally adopt a female persona in their praise of the king, the waulking song corpus generally is one where, unusually in Gaelic tradition, women's voices predominate. Some of the songs, particularly those in which female poets with allegiance to rival chiefs address one another in poetic rhetoric of satire and disparagement are attributed to women known by their patronymics e.g. Nic Dhomhnaill,<sup>32</sup> Nic Iain Fhinn or Nic a' Mhanaich.<sup>33</sup> The best known of these women poets is undoubtedly Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, Mary MacLeod.

The gaze in *Craobh nan Ubhal/an Iubhair* conforms generally to that of other similar waulking songs of praise for the nobleman or chief. However, it is unique in its use of the tree name in the refrain, and unusual in that repetition of the tree's name is integral to the refrain, as most other older waulking songs comprise only non-lexical vocables. There is an ambiguity as to whether each repetition of the chorus actually addresses the subject or not, with the difference resting in the lenition of the initial consonant of *craobh* – indicating the vocative case – or its non-lenition. In her recording of the song, Flora MacNeil uses both forms:<sup>34</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the Gaelic song 'Craobh nan Ubhal'. It consists of four staves of music, each with a line of Gaelic lyrics underneath. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: 'O chraobh nan ubh-al o Craobh nan ubh-al geug nan abh-al'. The second staff starts with a '9' and the lyrics: 'O chraobh nan ubh-al o Aith-nich fhèin a chraobh tha le-am-sa o'. The third staff starts with a '18' and the lyrics: 'chraobh nan ubh-al o Craobh nan ubh-al geug nan abh-al o'. The fourth staff starts with a '26' and the lyrics: 'chraobh nan ubh-al o Craobh is muth-a 'sis mil - s'ubh-lan o.' The music is written in a simple, folk-like style with various note values and rests.

*O chraobh nan ubhal O,  
Craobh nan ubhal, geug nan abhal,*

*O Tree of apples O  
Tree of Apples, branch of orchards*

<sup>31</sup> Marcel Mauss. *The Gift: Expanded Edition*, ed. & trans. Jane I. Guyer. (Illinois: Hau Books, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> James Carmichael Watson, *Òrain agus Luinneagan Gàidhlig le Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh/Gaelic Songs by Mary MacLeod*, Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1965, 2, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs II*, 232.

<sup>34</sup> MacNeil, *Craobh nan Ubhal*. Transcribed from the recording; my thanks to Sean Williams for supplying the musical transcription. In the text, '[my]' represents the use of the vocative indicated by lenition of the initial consonant. *Abhal* can mean simply a tree or also an orchard. Using the latter suggests the chief as one among many, but imbued with supremacy over others by the poet's praise, implying a *bile ós chrannaibh*. For this phrase, see Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh, 'The Mutational Effects of the Preposition Ós: *Bile ós chrannaibh* and related matters', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 30 (2016): 73–111.

## LILLIS Ó LAOIRE

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O Tree of Apples O</i>                         |
| Aithnich fhèin a' chraobh tha leamsa     | Recognise the tree that belongs to me             |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| Craobh is mutha 's is milse ubhlan       | The biggest tree with the sweetest of apples      |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples branch of orchards</i>          |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my]Tree of Apples O</i>                     |
| A bun sìos is a barr a' lùbadh           | Its stock [growing] downwards and its top bending |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| Craobh nan Ubhal, gun robh Dia leat      | Tree of Apples, may God be with you               |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| Gun robh an aird an-ear 's an-iar leat   | May the east and the west be with you             |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O Tree of Apples O</i>                         |
| Gun robh gach gealach agus grian leat    | May every moon and sun be with you                |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my]Tree of Apples O</i>                     |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| Gun robh gach sian a tháinig riamh leat, | May everything that ever existed be with you      |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O,</i>            | <i>O [my] Tree of Apples O</i>                    |
| <i>Craobh nan Ubhal, geug nan abhal,</i> | <i>Tree of Apples, branch of orchards</i>         |
| <i>O Chraobh nan Ubhal O.</i>            | <i>O [my]Tree of Apples O</i>                     |

When reproducing waulking songs in writing it is usual to include the refrain only once, a method which undoubtedly saves space, but which also serves to disguise the cumulative, incremental effect of its repetition. By writing each refrain out in full, we are confronted with the fact of repetition, and are therefore compelled to contemplate its impetus and power. The repetition of *craobh / chraobh* pervades the whole song, in total considerably longer than the version sung by Flora MacNeil, the use of apostrophe serving to decrease distance between the speaker and the subject, invoking the chief's presence and cancelling an implied absence.<sup>35</sup> However, by concentrating on these particular lines and by singing the song at a slower tempo than that of a waulking group, the singer provides her own personal setting of the song as one held in especially high esteem. This view is undoubtedly justifiable given the long trajectory of Gaelic tradition that precedes it and lends a dignity and gravitas to the performance that appeals to a modern listener. According to her daughter Maggie MacInnes, their family considered that this and other songs such as *Nach Fhreagair Thu 'Chairistiona* and *Ailein Duinn an nì 's an nàire*, belonged to a different class of song to waulking songs:

<sup>35</sup> M. Whelton, *Teagmháil agus Tnúthán: Staidéar ar an Apostrófi bhFílocht na Nua-Ghaeilge* (An Daingean: An Sagart, 2008), 12–13.

Although the structure is that of a waulking song, my mother didn't sing it as one would for shrinking the tweed, more a chant-like love song. But I think it was like others, e.g. *Cairistiona* and *Ailein Duinn an nì is an nàire*, which she heard when growing up sung as slower laments, to which mum said there were two versions. She was very definite that her mother never sang *Ailein Duinn an nì is an nàire* as a work song, yet there are versions as a waulking song.<sup>36</sup>

Flora's MacNeil's repetition of the full refrain after each line differs from the approach taken by other Barra singers. The majority of these are men, including Ruairidh MacKinnon (Ruairidh Iain Bhàin, 1858–1944),<sup>37</sup> his son, Captain Joseph Donald MacKinnon ('An Eòsag', 1907–1962),<sup>38</sup> and Calum Johnston (Calum Aonghais Chalum 1891–1972).<sup>39</sup> Mary Morrison ('Bean Phluim', 1895–1978) provides the only recording from a Barra woman from the generation preceding Flora MacNeil.<sup>40</sup> Calum Johnston represents the southern Barra tradition, whereas the MacKinnons' variants belong to the north end of the island. Ruairidh MacKinnon repeats the full chorus at various points in the song, whereas both his son and Calum Johnston sing the full refrain only at the beginning of the first stanza and following the last one. MacCormick's version includes the term '*atharraich*' no fewer than eight times, which signifies a repetition of the full chorus.<sup>41</sup>

These various approaches to the song demonstrate the choices available to performers depending on the context of their singing. Constraints of time and other considerations may have dictated the delivery of their performances. Some of the performances are marked by memory lapses, suggesting that this item was not performed that frequently, linked almost certainly to the 'cessation of the handloom production of tweed'.<sup>42</sup> Comparing the Tobar an Dualchais recordings to the settings in *Carmina Gadelica* or those recorded by Donald MacCormick reveals that more recent performances are generally shorter, reflecting a decline in the frequency of performance with a resulting loss of some of the lines. On the other hand, MacCormick's text may represent a composite of many performances, as his manuscript does not indicate the names of his sources.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the audio versions, taken in total, generally give most of the elements found in the earlier textual versions.

Whether it is called 'Craobh nan Ubhal' or 'Craobh an Iubhair', this is an exceptional song for many reasons, especially so because of its links to the Gaelic symbolic taxonomy of trees, and the way in which it deploys that system in a panegyric to a living chieftain. It certainly has religious references, but these are lesser in comparison to earlier monastically based poems. The tree symbolises the chief and is at the same time a cosmic representation of the success and prosperity

<sup>36</sup> Maggie MacInnes by Facebook Direct Messenger to author, 04/09/25.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/39299?l=en> (1938), recorded by John Lorne Campbell.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/13426?l=en> (1953), recorded by Dr Alasdair Maclean; <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/93809?l=en> (1957), recorded by James Ross.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/21234?l=en> (1949), recorded by John Lorne Campbell, who later included it on a commercial recording, *Gaelic Songs from the Island of Barra* (Linguaphone Institute for the Folklore Institute of Scotland, 1950); Calum Johnston recorded this song on many subsequent occasions for the School of Scottish Studies, including <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/85477?l=en> (1954), recorded by James Ross. Thanks to Cathlin Macaulay, Curator, School of Scottish Studies Archives, University of Edinburgh, for help in identifying the recordings.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/track/65737?l=en>

<sup>41</sup> Campbell and Collinson *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, 144–148.

<sup>42</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, ix.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell and Collinson, *Hebridean Folksongs: A Collection of Waulking Songs*, 34.

enjoyed by those who follow him, a mythical entity connecting heaven and earth and ensuring the clan's continued success. Though much of the imagery is found in other songs, the invocation of the tree is a unique feature marking the song as one of special and enduring interest for both scholars and performers alike.

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