

Trees sacred and crossed

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I discussed the traditional concept of woods being divided into two classes, *saor* (noble) and *daor* (servile). This distinction was based on a social division in human society. In this one I would like to look at an alternative classification.

This classification derives from religious belief, woods being either *beannaichte* ('blessed, sacred') or *crosta* ('crossed, banned, profane'). For example, speaking in volume 1 of 'Carmina Gadelica' of the making of the *slat Bhrighe* or St Brigid's wand, Alexander Carmichael tells us that "the wand is generally of birch, broom, bramble, white willow, or other sacred wood, 'crossed' or banned wood being carefully avoided."

Now this word *crosta* meaning 'crossed', that is, 'banned', seems to have been prone to misunderstanding, because it also means 'cross', that is, 'stubborn'. For example, there is a saying *cho crosta ris an dris*, which I would assume means 'as crossed as the bramble', but in his book 'Gaelic Proverbs' Sheriff Nicolson translated it 'as cross as a bramble'. Perhaps he had a point, because he quotes another saying, *Am fear a bhios fearg air a-ghnàth s coltach a ghnè ris an dris*. This he translates, 'He who is always angry is of nature like the bramble.'

In any case, there appears to be uncertainty as to whether the *dris* was sacred or crossed. This is perhaps because it depends what part of scripture you want to quote. On the one hand we have the New Testament, as pointed out by Carmichael. The *dris* was much valued by the old Highlanders, and where not indigenous was cultivated, he says in volume 2. He goes on: "The fruit was used for food, the root for dyeing, and an infusion of the leaves was used for medical purposes. 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 druisse 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 couple of proverbs, and these certainly suggest that the *dris* is regarded as a blessed plant, at least in comparison to the *draigheann* or blackthorn, which provided the crown of thorns for Christ's head at the crucifixion.

*S fhearr an drise na 'n draigheann,
S fhearr an draigheann na 'n Donas.*

('Better is the bramble than the blackthorn, / Better is the blackthorn than the Devil.') And:

*Am fear a readhadh san drise dhomh,
Readhainn san draigheann da.*

('He who would go into the brambles for me, / I would go into the blackthorn for him.') And: *Ás an dris anns an droigheann. 'Out of the bramble into the blackthorn.'*

The story that suggests that the *dris* is not at all a blessed wood, on the other hand, comes from Judges 9. Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal goes to his mother's kin the Shechemites and asks them, "Whether is better for you, either that all the sons of Jerubbaal, which are threescore and ten persons, reign over you, or that one reign over you? Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh."

They are sympathetic and give him money. He hires some ruffians and slays all his brothers, except Jotham, the youngest, who escapes. So the Shechemites make Abimelech king.

When Jotham hears this he goes to the top of Mount Gerizim and cries, "Hearken unto me, ye men of Shechem, that God may hearken unto you. 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.'

"Now therefore," concludes Jotham, "if ye have done truly and sincerely, in that ye have made Abimelech king, and if ye have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have done unto him according to the deserving of his hands, then rejoice ye in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you; but if not, let fire come out from Abimelech, and devour the men of Shechem, and the house of Millo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem, and from the house of Millo, and devour Abimelech."

Then Jotham flees and goes into hiding. The Shechemites fall out with Abimelech. They make wine, get drunk, worship their god and curse Abimelech, then fortify the city of Shechem against him. Abimelech attacks and destroys the city of Shechem and everyone in it, then brings wood from Mount Zalmon and burns down the tower of Shechem and slaughters everyone in it.

He does the same to the city of Thebez, and finally attacks the tower of Thebez. As he is piling wood against the door to set it on fire, a woman drops a piece of millstone on his head and breaks his skull. He asks his armour-bearer to slay him with his sword, so that no-one can say that a woman slew him. The armour-bearer obliges.

So does God punish Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal for slaying his seventy brethren, and so does God also bring upon the Shechemites the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.

It is 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 this would point to such superstitions being formed at a time when the Old Testament was not as 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.’”

Now 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 in volume 2. “They do not use it for any structural purpose, but in some districts a decoction of the wood is made for certain diseases in cattle . . .” 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 's 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 would seem to suggest that the aspen, along with the blackthorn, the ‘crooked yew’ and the *fiodhagach*, was crossed, and that is certainly my understanding. Fr Allan McDonald put on record from Uist that Christ at His 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 Righ;
Mollachd air gach sùil a chi
Nach mollaich an critheann cròn.

(‘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.”

Blackthorn may be in doubt, but whitethorn is not. This is the *sgitheach*, and of the *sgitheach* was made the crown of thorns placed on Christ's head at the crucifixion. For instance, the poet David MacKellar said:

Crùn sgithich an àite crùn rìgh
Mar thailceas 's mar dhìmeas mór.

(‘Whitethorn crown instead of king's crown / For scorn and for great insult.’)

Finally there is *eidheann* or ivy. Of this, Carmichael says in volume 2: “Ivy is one of the many sacred shrubs of the Celts. It is used as a protective for milk, milk products, flocks, and by lovers as an emblem of fidelity. An old man in Uist said that he used to swim to an islet in a lake in his neighbourhood for ivy, woodbine, and mountain ash. These, sometimes separately and sometimes combined, he twined into a three-plied ‘cuach’, ring, which he placed over the lintel of his cow-house and under the vessels in his milk-house, to safeguard his cows and his milk from witchcraft, evil eye, and murrain . . .”

So what did the sacred/crossed distinction mean in practical terms? What was its purpose? The best clue is given I think by Carmichael when in volume 1 he describes the baking of the special cake called the *srùdhan* at Michaelmas. “The fire should be of ‘crionach caon’, sacred fagots, such as the fagots of the oak, the rowan, the bramble, and others. The blackthorn, wild fig, trembling aspen, and other ‘crossed’ wood are avoided.” So while **servile** and **noble** woods are respectively those that are suitable for burning and those that should be kept for better purposes, **sacred** and **crossed** woods appear to be those that may safely be brought into the house and those that may not.

God help the child who ran into the house with a sprig of whitethorn flowers for her grandmother. It would be thrown out the window with crossings, prayers and cries of terror.