



# Trees and Tradition in Early Ireland<sup>1</sup>

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Old and Middle Irish nature poetry has long been appreciated for the vividness of its description of the natural world. In this paper, we will show that the inventory of trees and bushes upon which poets drew was based less upon direct observation of nature than upon a traditional taxonomy found in a completely different genre, the law tracts dating back to the seventh century, notably the tree list edited by Fergus Kelly in 1976 from *Bretha Comaithchesa* 'Judgments Concerning Neighborhood Law'. Thus, the economic and aesthetic value of trees and bushes as discussed in law tracts and nature poetry were part of a single continuous tradition of taxonomy and silviculture stretching over at least 500 years. We will end by discussing the relationship between this tradition and the Ogam letter names (McManus 1997).

**Keywords:** Irish nature poetry; Old Irish tree list; Ogam letter names

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate continuity and influence in early Irish nature writing<sup>2</sup> between two genres widely separated in time and style: the Old Irish law tracts of the seventh century and Middle Irish nature poetry in such texts as *Buile Súibhne*, 'The Inspired Vision of Sweeney'. In what follows we will focus exclusively on trees and bushes because of their importance in the legal literature (Binchy 1971; Kelly 1976), in nature poetry, and in the Ogam letter names (McManus 1986, 1988, 1997). In addition to the Old Irish tree list in

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  - 2 For a detailed analysis of the creation of the myth of the Celts as supremely 'natural' in the writings of Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, see Sims-Williams (1996).

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*Bretha Comaithchesa* ‘Judgments Concerning Neighborhood Law’ (Kelly 1976), to which we will return below, there are four passages in early Irish featuring extensive references to trees:

1. The early legal poem *Ma be rí rofesser* (‘If you are a king, you should know’) edited by Binchy in *Celtica* 9, which shows that tree law, including a tree list, was already in existence in the seventh century
2. The Middle Irish text *Buile Súibhne*
3. A second Middle Irish text, *Aided Fergusa Maic Léiti*
4. The ninth-century poem ‘King and Hermit’

That some version of the *Bretha Comaithchesa* tree list was current in the seventh century is clear from the reference to neighborhood law in *Ma be rí rofesser*:

*Slán cach comaithches  
cuirther gellaib*

‘Valid is every neighbour-law  
that is contracted by pledges’ (Binchy 1971: 157, ll. 23–24)

The text goes on to list penalties for cutting *fidnemid* ‘sacred trees’ (ll. 37–38; cutting can be less or more serious: lopping a limb; cutting the stem). The *fidnemid* are explicitly connected with the *airig fedo* ‘nobles of the woods’ of the Old Irish tree list in the following line of the poem (l. 39).

The first tree to be named is the hazel:

*Briugid caille,  
Coll eidnech*

‘The hospitallers of the forest,  
the ivied hazel’ (ll. 34–35)

The hazel is the second of the ‘nobles of the woods’ in the Old Irish tree list. The first is the oak, which appears next (l. 51), then the yew (l. 54), then the holly (l. 55), the hazel again (l. 56), and the apple (l. 57). The first five trees mentioned are all ‘nobles of the woods’ (the only ones that are missing are *uinnius* ‘ash’ and *ochtach* ‘Scots pine’, about which more below).

The poem then lists eight more trees and plants: *beithe* ‘birch’ (l. 61), *fern* ‘alder’ (l. 62), *sail* ‘willow’ (l. 63), *scéith* ‘whitethorn/hawthorn’ (l. 65), *draigen* ‘blackthorn’ (l. 66), *raith* ‘bracken’ (l. 68), *rait* ‘bog-myrtle’ (l. 69), and *ain* ‘rushes’ (l. 69). The first four are *aithig fedo* ‘commoners of the woods’; *draigen* is the first of the *fodla fedo* ‘lower divisions of the woods’; *raith* and *rait* are *losa fedo* ‘bushes of the woods’; and *ain* is the only plant of the thirteen that does not appear in the Old Irish tree list. Not only are twelve out of thirteen plants on that list, but they appear in order of their four categories: first the nobles, then the

commoners, then the lower division, and finally the bushes. The categories are strictly observed.

### I. *Buile Súibhne*

Let us turn now to our second example: the poem which is spoken by the man of nature *par excellence*, mad King Suibne of Dál nAraide in north-eastern Ireland. Most of what we know about Suibne's career comes from three twelfth-century tales about the events surrounding the Battle of Mag Rath (modern Moira, Co. Down), which took place in 627, and especially from *Buile Súibhne*, edited by J. G. O'Keefe in 1931. This text includes the prose tale and a number of Middle Irish verses, including a list of trees. James Carney summarized the story in *Studies in Early Irish Literature and History* (1955: 131):

Suibne, king of Dál nAraide, offended St. Rónán, and slew one of his clerics. As a result of the saint's curse, Suibne became a *gelt*, or madman, at the battle of Mag Roth. After this he lived in the woods, grew feathers, could jump from tree to tree, and from mountain-top to mountain-top. He utters poems, some in praise of the wild life, others bemoaning its hardships. He is befriended by St. Molling. The curse of Rónán works in full when Suibne suffers at the hands of Mongán, Molling's swineherd, the same death that he had inflicted on Rónán's cleric.

The Irish valued Suibne's inspired verses very highly, and his condition was called one of the three *búada* or 'triumphs' of the Battle of Mag Rath. The story is told in the introduction to *Bretha Éitgit* (formerly called the *Book of Aicill*):

*Teora buada in catha-sin: maidm ar congall claen ina anfir re domnall ina firinne, 7 suibne geil do dul ar geltacht, 7 a incinn dermaid do buain a cind cind faelad; 7 nocan ed-sin is buaid ann suibni do dul ar geltacht, acht ar faeab do scelaib 7 do laidib dia eis i neirind.* (CIH: 250.36ff.)<sup>3</sup>

Three were the triumphs of that battle: the defeat of Congal Claen in his falsehood by Domnall in his truth, and Suibne Geilt having become mad, and Cennfaelad's brain of forgetfulness having been taken from his head. And Suibne Geilt having become mad is not a reason why the battle is a triumph but it is because of the stories and poems he left after him in Ireland. (O'Keefe 193: iv)

The Suibne story has been the object of many studies: of its British affinities (with the Welsh Myrddin and the Scottish Lailoken; Frykenberg 1984); of the motif of the threefold death, which Celtic shares with Germanic and other traditions (in Celtic it is usually some combination of burning, hanging, stabbing and drowning; Frykenberg 1984: 115, n. 26; Jackson 1940; Ó Concheanainn 1973; Ó Cuív 1973; Radner 1983; A. & B. Rees 1961); of Suibne as a shaman (Beneš 1960/61), and so

3 There is a variant version at CIH: 926.1ff.

on. But let us concentrate on part of a poem that Suibne utters to eulogize the trees of Ireland (O’Keefe 1931: 64–66, §40), which Gerard Murphy edited in his *Early Irish Lyrics* (1956: 46). The trees and plants that Suibne names are:

§3	<i>dair</i>	oak
§4	<i>fern</i>	alder
§5	<i>draignén</i>	blackthorn
	<i>birar</i>	crass
§6	<i>suib</i>	strawberry
§7	<i>aball</i>	apple tree
	<i>cáerthann</i>	rowan
§8	<i>driseóc</i>	blackberry
§9	<i>ibar</i>	yew
	<i>eidenn</i>	ivy
§10	<i>cuilenn</i>	holly
	<i>uinnes</i>	ash
§11	<i>beithe</i>	birch
§12	<i>crithach</i>	aspen
§13	<i>dair</i>	oak (= §3)

The final line thus returns to the term with which we started, in good *dúnad* style.<sup>4</sup> Two of these plants have special associations with Suibne: *birar* ‘crass’, which is his staple food<sup>5</sup> (and is the food of hermits and ascetics generally in Irish tradition); and *suib* ‘strawberry’, which is an encoding of Suibne’s own name.

4 The repetition of the adjective *duilledach* ‘leafy’ reinforces the *dúnad*, and shows that this part of the poem is a unit. There are other plant names scattered throughout the rest of the poem:

§19	<i>eidnech</i>	ivied
§26	<i>birar</i>	crass
	<i>fothlacht</i>	water-parsnip
§27	<i>eidnech</i>	ivied
	<i>sail</i>	willow
	<i>ibar</i>	yew
	<i>beithe</i>	birch
§38	<i>eidnech</i>	ivied
§63	<i>raithnech</i>	brackened

but they are not organized into a distinct section or catalogue. Still, of these, only *birar* and *fothlacht* do not occur in the Old Irish tree list.

5 See the pathetic dialogue between Suibne and his former queen Éorann, who has married another man, in *Early Irish Lyrics* 45.7–8 and 47.8:

45.7 *Córa duit serc ocus grád*  
*don fhuir ‘gá tai th’ áenarán*  
*iná do geilt gairb gortaig*  
*úathaig omnaig urnochtaig.*

## 2. Old Irish Tree List

To understand where the rest of the terms come from, however, we must go back four or five hundred years to the Old Irish legal tracts. In the eighth-century tract *Bretha Comaithchesa* ‘Judgments Concerning Neighborhood Law’ there is a list of four groups of seven trees each, which Fergus Kelly discussed in a model study in *Celtica* 11 (1976). The choice of seven in each category clearly copies the seven grades of nobles in the tract on social status, *Crith Gablach* ‘Branched Purchase’ (Binchy 1941), and the seven ecclesiastical offices of the Irish Church (*Crith Gablach*: 98–99). The four sevens are called *airig fedo* ‘nobles of the woods’, *aithig fedo* ‘commoners of the woods’, *fodla fedo* ‘lower divisions of the woods’, and *losa fedo* ‘bushes of the woods’.<sup>6</sup>

The reason that the tree list has been preserved at all, and in *Bretha Comaithchesa*, is that different trees had differing status under early Irish law.<sup>7</sup> Thus we are told that ‘the class into which a tree or shrub is placed [in the tree list] depends upon its economic importance’ (Kelly 1976: 108).<sup>8</sup> For example, the oak is put first among the ‘nobles of the woods’ because of *a mes 7 a saire* ‘its mast and its rank’. The class or rank to which a tree belonged was important

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- 45.8      *Dá tuchta mo roga dam*  
*d’ fheruib Éirenn is Alban*  
*ferr lem it chommaid gan chol*  
*ar uisce ocus ar birar.*
- Suibne:      It were better for you to give love and affection  
to the husband who has you as his one wife  
than to an uncouth famished dreadful  
fear-inspiring wholly-naked madman.
- Éorann:      Were my choice given me  
of the men of Ireland and Scotland  
I should prefer to live blamelessly with you  
on water and on cress.  
(Murphy 1956: 121, with minor changes)
- 47.8      *Dúairc in betha beith gan tech;*  
*is trúag in betha, a Christ cain:*  
*sásad birair barrglais búain;*  
*deog uisce úair a glais glain...*
- Gloomy is the life of one who has no house;  
it is a wretched life, good Christ:  
everlasting green-topped cress for food;  
cold water from a clear stream for drink...  
(Murphy 1956: 141)

6 This last is something of a catch-all in several manuscripts. It has eight rather than seven members, with three manuscripts agreeing upon *eidenn* ‘ivy’ as the eighth.

7 For detailed identifications of which trees and bushes these are, see Kelly (1999).

8 The anonymous *Studia Celtica Fennica* reviewer points out to us that both economic and cultural importance may play a role in this ranking.

because if a trespasser damaged a tree or cut off its branches, or worst of all, cut it down altogether, the *brithem* had to know how heavy a compensation to assess. Cutting down an oak, the noblest of the *airig fedo*, carried the penalty of five *sét*'s (Kelly 1976: 108); cutting down an alder, or any other *aithech fedo*, demanded the compensation of two *sét*'s (= one milch cow); the extirpation of a blackthorn carried the penalty of a *dairt* (a yearling heifer; Kelly 1976: 116); and one could uproot bracken for only one sheep (according to one family of manuscripts). The other manuscript tradition is even more lenient, and says that cutting a single stem of one of the *losa fedo* is exempt from penalty, and only the destruction of a whole stand of bushes calls for the compensation of one *dairt* (Kelly 1976: 120).

Table 1: The 'canonical' Old Irish tree list

A. 'nobles of the woods'		
1	<i>daur/dair</i>	oak
2	<i>coll</i>	hazel
3	<i>cuilenn</i>	holly <sup>9</sup>
4	<i>ibar</i>	yew
5	<i>uinnius</i>	ash
6	<i>ochtach</i>	Scots pine
7	<i>aball</i>	apple tree
B. 'commoners of the woods'		
1	<i>fern</i>	alder
2	<i>sail</i>	willow
3	<i>scé[i]th</i>	hawthorn/whitethorn <sup>10</sup>
4	<i>cáerthann</i>	rowan <sup>11</sup>
5	<i>beithe</i>	birch
6	<i>lem</i>	elm
7	<i>idath</i>	wild cherry (?) <sup>12</sup>
C. 'lower divisions of the woods'		
1	<i>draigen</i>	blackthorn
2	<i>trom</i>	elder

9 Ogam xxi MAQUI-COLINE Mac Cuilinn. All references to particular Ogam inscriptions follow the numbering of Macalister's *Corpus* (1945) or McManus' *Guide* (1997) depending on the date of their discovery.

10 The manuscripts agree on the oblique form instead of the expected nominative *scé*.

11 Ogam 40 MAQI-CAIRATINI Mac Cáirthinn, a sixth-century king of Leinster killed at the Battle of Mag Femen (Devane 2005). Mac Cáirthinn (d. 506) was also the name of a companion of St. Patrick, who became a saint himself and the first Bishop of Clogher.

12 This may be an invented word like *idad* 'yew' (McManus 1988: 164, 168 n. 62).

3	<i>féorus</i>	spindletree
4	<i>fin[d]choll</i>	whitebeam <sup>13</sup>
5	<i>caithne</i>	arbutus
6	<i>crithach</i>	aspen
7	<i>crann fir</i>	juniper (?)
D. 'bushes of the woods'		
1	<i>raith</i>	bracken
2	<i>rait</i>	bog-myrtle
3	<i>aiten</i>	gorse
4	<i>dris</i>	blackberry
5	<i>fráech</i>	heather
6	<i>gilcach</i>	broom (?)
7	<i>spin</i>	wild rose (?)
[8	<i>eidend</i>	ivy]

Now let us look back at the list drawn from the Suibne poem. With the exceptions of *birar* 'cress' and *suib* 'strawberry', whose inclusion was explained above, all of the trees and shrubs that Suibne names are found in the Old Irish tree list, and what is more, Suibne's list, which is only fifteen items long, includes all but one of the seven *airig fedo*, the 'nobles of the woods'.

The missing member is A6 *ochtach*, the Scots pine, *Pinus sylvestris*, and there is a very curious fact about this tree. The word *ochtach*<sup>14</sup> survives into Middle and Modern Irish in the meanings 'bedpost' and 'ridge-pole', which were presumably made from the wood of the Scots pine at one time; the original meaning 'pine' was already passing out of use in the Old Irish period. Until recently, botanists were divided upon the question of exactly when the Scots pine finally became extinct in Ireland; it has survived to this day in Scotland, whence its name (Kelly 1976: 111–112). However, a relic population has been discovered in the Burren, and a study of local pollen profiles provides strong evidence that it is a survival rather than a reintroduction (Roche, Mitchell, Waldren & Stefanini 2018). Now the Old Irish tree list was compiled in the seventh or eighth century, but the *ochtach* had become very uncommon by the time the Suibne poem was composed in the twelfth. We would suggest that the poet either knew the Old Irish tree list by heart, or else had it in front of him, and included all of the *airig fedo* in his poem except for the one with which he was unfamiliar.

13 Literally, 'white hazel', although the whitebeam, *Sorbus aria*, is a member of the rose family and is related to the rowan, whereas the hazel is related to the birches.

14 See now Sims-Williams (2018), who reconstructs *\*puk tākā*, following NIL 553; cf. Gk. *πέύκη*, OHG. *fohta* 'pine'. We thank the anonymous *Studia Celtica Fennica* reviewer for this reference.

### 3. Aided Fergusa Maic Léiti

We can confirm the impression that Middle Irish literati like the author of the Suibne poem drew upon the Old Irish tree list by looking at our third example, another Middle Irish poem, from the later version of *Aided Fergusa Maic Léiti* (O'Grady 1892: 1. 245). O'Grady's edition contains many silent emendations and a few inaccuracies, so it may be useful to give a fresh transcription of the sole manuscript, London, British Library, MS Egerton 1782, f.32, and a literal translation of the verses.

*Do bí Fer Deedh .i. in gilla tened ac fadógh tened hi fiadhnuisi Iubdáin 7 do  
chuir fēthlend fō chrand uirri 'maille cinél gacho crainn eli 7 atbert Iubdán:  
nā loisc righ na gorann, ar sé, uair ní dleghar a lloscud 7 a Fir Diaedh, dá  
ndernta mo chomair[le]aid beth gābud maro nó tīri ort 7 atbert in láid ann:*

- 1 *A fir fadó's tene<sup>15</sup>  
ac Fergus na fledh  
ar muir nó ar tír  
nā loisc rígh na feadh.*
- 2 *Airdríg fedha Fáil  
im nach gnáth sreth slúiaig  
ní fann in feidm rígh  
sním im gach crand cruaidh.*
- 3 *Dā loisce in fidh fann  
budh mana gréch nglonn  
[ro sia]<sup>16</sup> gābadh rend  
nó bádhugh trén tond.*
- 4 *Nā loisc aball án  
na ngéc faroll fāen  
fid [man] gnáth bláth bán  
lam cháich 'na cend chāem.*
- 5 *Deōradh draigen dūr  
fidh nach loiscend sāer  
[gáirid] ealta én  
trena chorp cidh cáel.*
- 6 *Nā loisc sailig sāir  
fidh demin na dūan*

15 *Tene* is not a good acc. sg., and the line is one syllable too long: the metre is *lethrannaigeacht mór* (51 51 51 51) (Murphy 1961: 57). We suggest restoring \**tefi/n*, the short variant of the accusative (originally proper only to the dative; see McCone 1978). Cf. the parallel construction: *righ loiscfes ten* in the *Annals of Tigernach* 532 (Stokes 1896: 133); see also *Saltair na Rann* (Greene: 54, l. 1475) and the *Metrical Dindsenchas* (Gwynn 1913 iii: 50, l. 31). *Ten* will also consonate with *fled* and *fed*, perfectly if we allow for a variant with a broad *n*, and only imperfectly if we believe that the *n* was always slender in this form. Imperfect consonance is also found in §§6, 10 and 15, and it is always the first line of the stanza which disagrees in quality with the others; this may have been permitted (Murphy 1961: 36 n.).

16 Visible to O'Grady, but not from the microfilm copy. Same for *man* §4.3, *gáirid* §5.3, and *-asc* §8.3.

- beich 'na bláth ac deól*  
*mian cáich in crō cāem.*  
 7 *Caert[h]ann fidh na ndrúadh*  
*loisc cāemchr<sup>and</sup> na gcāer*  
*sechain in fidh fann*  
*nā loisc in call cāem.*  
 8 *Uinnsenn dorcha a dath*  
*fid luáiti na ndroch*  
*echl[asc] lám lucht ech*  
*a cruth ac clādh chath.*  
 9 *Crumm fedha déin dris<sup>17</sup>*  
*loiscc fēin in géir nglais*  
*fendaigh gerraidh cois*  
*srengaid nech ar ais.*  
 10 *Bruth feda dair úr*  
*ō nach gnāth nach sēim*  
*tinn cend tís o dúil*  
*tinn súil o grís ghéir.*  
 11 *<Na><sup>18</sup> fern úr badb fedha*  
*in crand is teó I ngliaidh*  
*lo[i]sc go derb do[d] deōin*  
*in fern is in sciáigh.*  
 12 *[Q]uilenn loiscc a úr*  
*quilenn loiscc a crín*  
*gach crann ar bith becht*  
*cuilenn is dech dib.*  
 13 *[T]romm dana rúsc rúadh*  
*crann fírghona iar fír*  
*loisc co mbeith 'na gúal*  
*eich na sluag a sídh.*  
 14 *Fidh 'na far[r]adh fāen*  
*bethi ba bladhbūan*  
*loisc go deimin derb*  
*cainnli na mbalg mbūan.*  
 15 *[L]ēig sis madat maith*  
*crithach rúadh na rith*  
*loisc co mall co moch*  
*crand 's a barr ar crith.*  
 16 *[S]innser fedha fois*  
*ibar na fledh fis*  
*dēna ris innois*  
*dabcha donna dis.*  
 17 *Dā ndernta mo thoil*  
*a fir daeada dil*  
*dot anam dot chorp*  
*nī budh olcc a fir. A fir. f.t.*

17 Cf. *Corann liath lethet baisi/ rolas oc losgud drisi* (Strachan 1905: 229, §1).

18 Since *na* is hypermetrical and does not make sense syntactically, we have deleted it.

Fer Déed, the fire-lad, was kindling a fire in Iubdán's presence, and he put honeysuckle wrapped around a branch on it together with a 'kind' of every other tree [that is, one of each]. And Iubdán said, 'Do not burn the king of the trees,' said he, 'since it is not right to burn it. And Fer Déed, if you would follow my advice, you will not suffer danger at sea or on land.' And he recited this poem:

- 1 O man who kindles fire near Fergus of the feasts,  
At sea or on land, do not burn the king of woods.<sup>19</sup>
- 2 High king of the wood of Fál, around whom/which a battle-line is not  
usually found,  
Not weak the kingly action: twisting around every hard tree.
- 3 If you burn the weak wood, it will be a portent of screamings of fierce deeds,  
Danger of weapons will come, or mighty drowning waves.<sup>20</sup>
- 4 Do not burn the bright apple tree of the great sloping branches,  
A tree which usually bears white blossoms; everyone's hand reaches  
towards its fair head.
- 5 Obstinate blackthorn is a wanderer, a wood which the wright does not burn;  
Flocks of birds chatter throughout its body, slender though it is.
- 6 Do not burn the noble willow, true wood of the poems;  
Bees drink from its blossoms,<sup>21</sup> the delight of all is the fair stand.
- 7 Rowan, wood of the druids,<sup>22</sup> burn the fair tree of the berries.  
Shun the weak wood, do not burn the fair hazel.
- 8 Ash whose color is dark, the wood which moves wheels;  
A switch for hands but a burden for horses,<sup>23</sup> its form turns the tide of battles.
- 9 Blackberry is a crooked one among fast [-growing] woods; definitely burn  
the sharp green one.  
It flays, it wounds the foot, it drags a person back.
- 10 Green oak is molten metal among woods; no one may be at ease with it.  
Headache which comes from wanting it, and eyestrain from its intense  
embers.

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- 19 *Féithlenn* 'honeysuckle', according to the prose text which immediately precedes this poem. For honeysuckle as a substitute for C5 *caithne* 'arbutus' in the Dublin, Trinity College MS 1337 (H.3.18) version of the Old Irish tree list, see the discussion of 'King and Hermit' below. As we see in the next stanza, the honeysuckle is kingly because it can twist around every tree.
  - 20 In the context of burning, references to death by weapons and drowning would probably have suggested the theme of the 'threefold death' to the poet and his audience.
  - 21 In *Briatharogam Maic ind Óc*, the Old Irish kenning on S *sail* 'willow' is *lúth bech* 'sustenance of bees' (McManus 1997: 42–43).
  - 22 In what is admittedly a late source, Keating (ii: 348–350) tells us that the druids spread the raw hides of sacrificial bulls over hurdles of rowan in order to obtain visions. Similarly, in the Irish Life of St. Berach, the druids go to their rowan hurdles (*ar a ccliathaibh cáerthainn*, Plummer 1922 i: 34; O'Rahilly 1946: 324).
  - 23 Compare the Old Irish kenning on O *onn* 'ash' from *Briatharogam Morainn mic Moin: congnaid ech* 'wounder of horses' (McManus 1997: 42–43). The first author is indebted to John Armstrong for pointing out to him that *echlasc lám* and *lucht ech* are parallel constructions.

- 11 Green alder, Badb of wood, the tree which is hottest in battle,<sup>24</sup>  
Burn certainly, at your will, the alder and the hawthorn.
- 12 Holly, burn when green, holly, burn when dry,  
Of every tree in the known world, holly is the best of them all.
- 13 Elder which has strong bark, tree of true wounding,  
Burn it so that it may become charcoal, the horses of the hosts from the *síd*.
- 14 A wood sloping beside it, birch of lasting fame,  
Be sure to burn the ‘candles’ [strobiles] of the lasting buds.
- 15 Lay down [onto the fire], if it seems good to you, the strong aspen of the  
courses;  
Burn late or early the tree whose crown quakes.
- 16 Eldest<sup>25</sup> of enduring trees, yew of the feasts of knowledge,  
Make from it now little dark vats.
- 17 If you were to do my will, O dear Fer Déed,  
For your soul and for your body it would not be bad, O man.

If we extract the tree names from this poem, we get the following list:

Table 2: Trees from Aided Fergusa Maic Léiti

Name of tree or shrub	Placement on the Old Irish tree list
<i>aball</i>	apple tree A7
<i>draigen</i>	blackthorn C1
<i>sail</i>	willow B2
<i>caerthann</i>	rowan B4
<i>call</i>	hazel A2
<i>uinnsenn</i>	ash A5
<i>dris</i>	blackberry D4
<i>dair</i>	oak A1
<i>fern</i>	alder B1
<i>sciaig</i>	hawthorn B3
<i>q/cuilenn</i>	holly A3
<i>tromm</i>	elder C2

24 Cf. *Cad Goddeu* (Haycock 2007: 177, l. 75), where the alder is listed first among the warrior trees: *Guern blaen llin/ A want gysseuin* ‘Alder, foremost in lineage, wielded a weapon in the forefront.’

25 The yew is also characterized as the eldest of trees in the *Auraicept* (Calder 1917: 282, ll. 5593–5594): *is do ibar as ainm siniu fedaib* ‘it is to yew that the name “eldest of trees” belongs’. This is botanically accurate today: ‘All our oldest trees are yews’ (Johnson 2011: 162). However, the picture is complicated by the use of *I idad* in the Ogam letter names. The kennings in both *Briatharogam Morainn mic Moin: sinem fedo* ‘oldest tree’ and *Briatharogam Maic ind Óc: cainem sen* ‘fairest of the old’ (McManus 1997: 42–43) are consistent with *ibar*. The Irish were well aware of this: *idedh .i. iobhar*, see in the *Auraicept* (Calder 1917: 234, l. 4299).

<i>beithe</i>	birch	B5
<i>crithach</i>	aspen	C6
<i>ibar</i>	yew	A4

Again, apart from the trivial replacement of the Middle Irish form *uinnseann* for *uinnius* ‘ash’, all fifteen of the trees names in the poem appear in the Old Irish tree list. More significantly, it can hardly be an accident that all of the *airig feda* appear except A6 *ochtach*, which was already (becoming) unknown in Ireland when this poem was written.

#### 4. ‘King and Hermit’

The only other catalogue of trees in an early literary text which we have found is in the ninth-century verse dialogue called ‘King and Hermit’ (Murphy 1956: 8), a dialogue between Gúaire, a historical king of Connacht (d. 663 or 666), and the hermit Marbán, who is supposed to have been his half-brother. This poem involves us in an interesting textual problem: there turns out to be more than one version of the Old Irish tree list in the legal manuscripts. The ‘canonical’ list which we have been using is that established by Kelly (1976); it is based on four manuscripts: Rawlinson B 487; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1433 (E.3.5); Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1336 (H.3.17) and Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1387 (H.5.15). But the list we can extract from ‘King and Hermit’ agrees better with another manuscript tradition (represented in Dublin, Trinity College MS 1337 (H 3.18) and E.3.5 Commentary, which we will call the ‘alternative’ list) in one interesting detail: both substitute *féith(lenn)/e(i)dlenn* ‘honeysuckle’ for C5 *caithne* ‘arbutus’ (cf. the reference to *fēthlenn* in *Aided Fergusa Maic Léiti*, above).<sup>26</sup>

26 Fergus Kelly kindly pointed out to the first author (in a letter of 5 September 1986) that the honeysuckle is a much more common plant than the arbutus in Ireland, which may explain the substitution:

*E(i)dlenn* ‘honeysuckle’ and *eidenn* ‘ivy’ are so similar in spelling that one might expect them to be confused. However, both manuscripts of the ‘alternative’ list have *lecla* ‘rushes’ as item D8 (where *eidenn* sits in the ‘canonical’ list). *E(i)dlenn* is kept distinct, and is the replacement of C5 *caithne* ‘arbutus’ (Kelly 1976: 119). *E(i)dlenn* and *eidenn* are associated in only one text, ‘Traigrúth Firirchertne’ (Meyer 1910 iii: 43, l. 18): *glaisem gelta .i. edlenn nó edhend* ‘greenest of pastures, that is honeysuckle or ivy’. Cf. *Auraicept* (Calder 1917: 92, l. 1189): *glaisiu geltaibh gort .i. edind* ‘greener than pastures is gort, that is ivy.

For the variant forms *féith(lenn)/e(i)dlenn*, see DIL *s.vv.*, and for a proposed etymology, Marstrandner (1910: 410). The legal tracts have the spelling without *f-*: *eidlenn* (CIH: 582.18) = *eidleann* (CIH: 202.30) (item 6 in the *fodla feda*), while the *Auraicept* has the spelling with *f-*: *fedlenn* (Calder 1917: 90, l. 1156) = *feithlenn* (232, l. 4250) (item 5 in the *fodla feda*).

Table 3: ‘King and Hermit’ and the ‘alternative’ Old Irish tree list

‘King and Hermit’	The ‘alternative’ tree list	
<i>dair</i> (gen. <i>darach</i> ) 13 <sup>27</sup>	A:	<i>dair</i> oak
<i>coll</i> 8, 14, 22, 26		<i>coll</i> hazel
<i>uinnius</i> 8		<i>cuilenn</i> holly
<i>ibar</i> 13, 15		<i>uindius</i> ash
<i>ochtgach</i> 1		<i>ibar</i> yew
<i>aball</i> 14		<i>ochtach</i> Scots pine
		<i>aball</i> apple tree
	B:	<i>fern</i> alder
		<i>sail</i> willow
		<i>bethe</i> birch
		<i>lem</i> elm
<i>fidat</i> <sup>28</sup> 15		<i>crithach</i> aspen
		<i>idad</i> (uncertain)
<i>cáerthann</i> 19		<i>caerthann</i> rowan
	C:	<i>sci</i> hawthorn
<i>draigen</i> 19		<i>draigen</i> blackthorn
		<i>trom</i> elder
		<i>feorus</i> spindle tree
<i>(crann) fir</i> 15		<i>crann fir</i> juniper
<i>féith</i>		<i>eidlenn</i> honeysuckle
		<i>findcholl</i> whitebeam
<i>dristen</i> 22	D:	<i>dris</i> blackberry
		<i>aiten(d)</i> gorse
<i>fraech</i> 9, 27		<i>fraech</i> heather
		<i>spin</i> wild rose
		<i>gilcach</i> broom
		<i>rait(h)</i> bracken
<i>ailm</i> 30 ‘pine’ <sup>29</sup>		<i>lecla</i> rushes

27 The numbers refer to stanzas in Murphy (1956: 11–19).

28 Pedersen (1913 ii: 47) derived *fidot* ‘aspen’ from \**widu-ntā*, and cited examples from Germanic and Balto-Slavic in support of his idea that words for ‘aspen’ and ‘tree’ were related in these languages.

29 *Ailm*, not *aball*, represented the Ogam letter A (McManus 1997: 38). This rare word is only attested here, in the *Briatharogaim*, and in other letter name lists (McManus 1988: 161).

The two lists ('canonical' and 'alternative') clearly reflect a common system of classification, even though *crithach* 'aspen' and *scé/scéith* 'hawthorn' have switched classes, and there are differences in the order of the items within each class.

While the tree list is adapted to each of the literary texts that draw upon it, the fact that it is used at all shows that at least one aspect of nature was seen by Middle Irish poets through the lens of a tradition that was many centuries old.

## 5. Certogam

There is one more early Irish source in which trees are part of a list, and that is of course the names of the letters in *certogam* 'correct Ogam', the alphabet upon which all other Ogam alphabets were based. Some scholars (Derolez 1954; Marstrander 1928; Vendryes 1948) believed that originally, all of the *certogam* letters corresponded to tree names.<sup>30</sup> However, Howard Meroney (1949) demonstrated that most of the traditional names associated with the *certogam* letters are not tree names at all, but are mostly well-known Irish words with non-vegetal meanings. He identified only five out of the twenty *certogam* letters which have the names of trees and shrubs: *beithe* 'birch', the first letter in the Ogam system; *fern* 'alder'; *sail* 'willow'; *daur/dair* 'oak'; and *coll* 'hazel'. This is not quite accurate: as McManus showed in his brilliant reassessment of Ogam (1986), the correspondence Q *cert* (cognate with W. *perth* 'bush' and ultimately with L. *quercus* 'oak' (McManus 1997: 37) proves that the correspondence between at least some Ogam signs and key words was handed down accurately from the Primitive Irish period, when *cert* (\*QERT) still began with /k<sup>w</sup>/ (which later fell together with /k/; *ibid.*: 33). A *ailm* may have meant 'pine', though it is such a rare word that this is uncertain (*ibid.*: 38). That would still leave at least thirteen out of twenty *certogam* which are not plant names. McManus agreed with Meroney that Vendryes' 'alphabet végétal' is a fiction (*ibid.*: 35).

*Table 4: certogam letter names which are tree names*

B	<i>beithe</i> 'birch'	W. <i>bedw</i> < Celt. * <i>betujā</i> (Schrijver 1995: 326), Bret. <i>bezv</i> , 'birch'; OCor. <i>bedepen</i> (with <i>wyn</i> ) 'poplar' (Graves 1962: #693).
F	<i>fern</i> 'alder'	Celt. * <i>wernā</i> (EDPC: 414; Schrijver 1995: 65–66; IEW: 1169), W., Bret. <i>gwern</i> , OCor.

30 Derolez (1954: 147): 'apparently they were all the names of trees'; Vendryes (1948: 85): '*C'est un alphabet "vegetal"*' 'It is an alphabet based on plants'. It was this mistaken belief that formed the centerpiece of Robert Graves' remarkable foray into Celtic studies, *The White Goddess* (1948).

- guernen* gl. *alnus*, Romano-Brit. *Durovernum* (in the ‘Antonine Itinerary’, see Rivet & Jackson 1970: 73), Gaul. VERNODUBRUM (the Verdoube), divine name *Vernostonus*, which Delamarre (2017: 194) analyzes as *\*uerno-sth<sub>2</sub>-o-no-*.<sup>31</sup>
- S *sail* ‘willow’ Italo-Celtic *\*saliks* (EDPC: 319–320; IEW: 879), OW. *helic*, OCorn. *heligen*, MBret. *haleguenn*;<sup>32</sup> L. *salix* ‘willow’ (Schrijver 1995: 259), British Ogam gen. SALICIDUNI (LHEB: 179).
- D *dair* ‘oak’ OW. *deruen*, MW. *derw*, Bret. *deruenn* ‘oak’, Gaul. DERVUS, British *Derventio* ‘the Derwent’ (for a discussion of the etymology, see Schrijver 1995: 385; EDPC: 91; IEW: 215; Friedrich 1970: 140ff.; LHEB: 282).
- C *coll* ‘hazel’ Ogam v MAQI-QOLI (for -COLI,<sup>33</sup> McManus 1991: 122), OW.+ *coll*, OCorn. *col-widen* gl. *corillus* ‘hazel-wood’, OBret. *limn-collin* gl. *tília* ‘linden’; L. *corulus* < *\*koselo-* (Falileyev 2000: 34; Schrijver 1995: 433).
- Q *cert* W. *perth* ‘bush’; L. *quercus* ‘oak’ (as above).
- [A *ailm* if ‘pine’]

31 Wodtko (2003: 24) cites Gaul. *Uernogenus* = OIr. *Ferngen*; OW. *Guerngen* ‘alder-born’, appears in the witness lists in *Liber Landavensis*. We are indebted to the *Studia Celtica Fennica* reviewer for the Welsh reference.

32 British forms in *-en(n)* are singularives; the contrast is between e.g., ‘oak-woods’ and ‘oak tree’.

33 Mac Cuill is familiar as one of the trio (along with Mac Cécht and Mac Gréne) in *Lebor Gabála* (Macalister 1939, iv: §vii, 130). O’Rahilly (1946: 66, 471, 473 n. 2) noted the variant Mac Guill and connected him with Goll mac Morna. In Muirchú’s Life of Patrick, Mac Cuill is ‘the champion of paganism’ (Bieler 1978, i 23: 102), and O’Rahilly drew attention to the description of him in the Tripartite Life as *homo ualde impius, saeuus tyrannus, ut Cyclops nominaretur* ‘a most wicked person, a savage tyrant, so that he might be called a Cyclops’ (Mulchrone 1939: 286). ‘Cyclops’ of course reinforced the connection with Goll. After he lost the magical duel with St. Patrick, Mac Cuill converted to Christianity and became a missionary to the Manx. On the Cyclops in Celtic, Germanic and Indo-European, see McCone (1996).

- O *onn* ‘ash; pine; furze’ Celt. *\*osno-/ā* (McManus 1988: 162; EDPC: 300–301; IEW: 782) = OW. *onnen*, OCorn., Bret. *onn* ‘ash’ (Schrijver 1995: 455); L. *ornus* < *\*osenos*.<sup>34</sup>

McManus (1988) has discussed the late letter names E *edad* and I *idad*, both of which are problematic. The obvious candidate for I would be *ibar* < *\*eburo-* (W. *efwr* ‘cow-parsnip, hogweed’, Bret. *evor* ‘buckthorn’, Romano-Brit. *Eboracum* ‘York’, Gaul. EBURO-MAG[OS], *Eburones*, *Eburovices* ‘those who fight with weapons made of *eburos* wood’; Evans 1967: 346–347; Schrijver 2015), but only if the letter names had been assigned after vowel affection (which was already happening during the Primitive Irish period). Before vowel affection, the obvious match would have been *\*iwo-* (Ogam 259 IVA-GENI = gen. *Éogain*; OIr. *éo*, gen. *i*). These two words would appear to have referred to two different plants in Old Irish (Kelly 1976: 110; McManus 1988: 164). After a detailed analysis of Celtic *\*eburos*, Schrijver (2015: 74) concluded that *\*iwo-* ‘can... stand as the only Proto-Celtic word for ‘yew’’. His identification of *\*eburos* as originally meaning ‘rowan’ (replaced in Insular Celtic by OIr. *cáerthann*, etc.) is persuasive but not certain.

All of the Ogam tree names except for *cert* (which had become opaque) and the rare word *ailm* correspond to the *airig fedo* and the *aithig fedo* from the Old Irish tree list.<sup>35</sup> If we include the later glosses from the *Auraicept*, we can add *quert .i. quilenn* and *ailm .i. aball*, both from aß 26 (the specimen Ogam alphabet in the Book of Ballymote (Dublin, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 P 12), f. 312, and Meroney’s Ib); in that same alphabet we find *onn .i. uin(n)ius*. This gives us no fewer than five of the *airig fedo* as Ogam tree names or their glosses; cf. the preponderance of *airig fedo* in the Suibne poem discussed above. Given that the Ogam letter names are probably even older than the Old Irish tree list, they can hardly be drawn from it. However, it is striking that the Ogam tree names are always the first in order (or the only) trees in the Old Irish tree list that begin with the appropriate letter: thus *beithe* is the only B, *fern* comes before *féorus*, *sail* before *scéith*, *dair* before *draigen*, and *coll* before *cuilend* or *caithne*. The same ordering principle would appear to be at work.

34 Latin thus differs slightly from Celtic, as it does in the word for ‘elm’: L. *ulmus* < *\*lmos* beside Celt. *\*limo-* in OIr. *lem*. W. *llwyf(en)* continues the full grade *\*leimo-* (IEW: 309). Friedrich (1970: 90) resolved this by suggesting that *llwyfen* originally meant ‘linden’ and contained an entirely different root (so also Quental 2018: 40). On Gaul. *Lemovices* ‘those who fight with weapons made of elm wood’, see most recently Delamarre (2003: 199). See also James (2010: 77–80) and Sims-Williams (2006: 83–84). Thanks to the anonymous *Studia Celtica Fennica* reviewer for these last two references.

35 Similarly, all five of the ‘venerated trees’ from the *Dindshenchas* listed by Kelly (1999: 49) are *airig fedo*.

While many questions of detail remain, our examination of the lists of trees in early Irish has shown that when Middle Irish poet-scholars needed trees, they drew upon a taxonomy that was rooted in at least five centuries of learned tradition.

## Abbreviations

Bret.	Breton
Cat.	Catalan
Celt.	Celtic
CIH	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i> (Binchy 1978, 6 vols.)
EDPC	<i>Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic</i> (Matasović 2009)
Gaul.	Gaulish
Gen.	genitive
Gk.	Greek
gl.	glossing
GOI	<i>A Grammar of Old Irish</i> (Thurneysen 1946)
IEW	<i>Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch</i> (Pokorny 1959)
Ir.	Irish
L.	Latin
LEIA	<i>Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien</i> (Vendryes et al. 1959–1996)
LHEB	<i>Language and History in Early Britain</i> (Jackson 1953)
NIL	<i>Nomina in indogermanischen Lexikon</i> (Wodtko, Irslinger & Schneider 2008)
OBret.	Old Breton
OCorn.	Old Cornish
OHG.	Old High German
OW.	Old Welsh
Romano-Brit.	Romano-British
Sp.	Spanish
W.	Welsh

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