

Celebrating the culture in silviculture

By Mandy Haggith

Over the past two years, students at the Scottish School of Forestry (SSF) have been writing poetry, getting immersed in Gaelic tree tradition and perhaps even trying out the odd magic spell. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the University of the Highlands (UHI), of which SSF is a part, literature and creative writing students have been getting to grips with the distinguishing features of blackthorn and hawthorn, the spread of Chalara dieback and other issues in forest ecology. This all happened under the aegis of the 'A-B-Tree' project, which celebrates the ancient connection between trees and writing represented by the Gaelic tree alphabet (18 native woodland species, each linked to a letter of the alphabet) by introducing and researching interdisciplinary learning between literature and forestry. This report gives a flavour of what has been going on and what has been learned through this poetic inquiry into forestry.

B (Beithe – Birch) Background

For nearly a decade, the Gaelic tree alphabet has been used for learning and creativity linking forests and literature, in a project called A-B-Craobh (A-B-Tree in English). The project has at its heart an interdisciplinary knowledge base consisting of thousands of 'tidbits' of ecological knowledge, folklore, place names, practical and medicinal uses, plus an anthology of poems (Haggith, 2013). These poems and snippets of knowledge have been used in a wide variety of contexts, from woodland walks

to therapeutic workshops, to support creative writers to generate written content and to shape it into poems.

A-B-Tree began in 2011, with a series of creative writing events in woods and gardens around Scotland to celebrate the International Year of Forests. In 2013 a similar series was organised as part of a poetry residency in the Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh. In 2018 the project moved to UHI (partly funded by Forestry Commission Scotland, now Scottish Forestry) to explore more systematically the potential for the Gaelic tree alphabet to be used for creativity and learning. More than 300 people have since participated in events delving into tree folklore, ecology, practical uses and nomenclature including Gaelic, and were encouraged to respond creatively. The events led to insights about how to facilitate tree-related creativity and generated several collective poems. A community of practice is growing at UHI (and in partner organisations), linking forestry and literature/creative writing, with plans for further work including curriculum developments, work with artists and production of materials for use in schools.



Urban birch in autumn. © Carol Crawford

L (Luis – Rowan) Letters

The Gaelic tree alphabet links each letter of the Gaelic alphabet to a native woodland species, mostly, but not all, trees. It is uncertain how old this tradition is. It may be an early form of writing that predates the arrival of the Latin alphabet to Britain, with the Romans and then Christianity, or it may be a local variant of the Latin alphabet. It is based on an inscription script, called Ogham, which looks like (and may have evolved from) Norse runes, and takes a different sequence to the Latin alphabet, with all vowels at the end. The earliest form of the alphabet had 20 letters, although modern Gaelic uses only 18 (having ceased to use Q, Ng and St/Z, and added P).

There are several different versions of the alphabet, and some disagreement about which species should be associated with each letter. Some letters are uncontroversial: the first letter, B, is almost universally agreed to represent beithe, meaning birch; C is always hazel (coll or calltain); D is always oak (doir or darrach); S is always willow (sail or suilleán). However there is debate about whether A is elm or pine, whether M is vine or bramble, whether T or O is gorse, and which species should represent the late-arrival P.

Seventy years ago, HL Edlin dug into an old Irish source and produced a version of the alphabet, which was published in this journal (Edlin, 1950). Since then numerous neo-pagan, druidic and new-age mystical writers have developed a range of interpretations (Murray and Murray, 1988; Blamires, 1997; Kindred, 1999; Gifford, 2000), some inspired by and others resisting the Celtic revivalist elaborations of Robert Graves (1948). There have also been an interesting variety of uses of the alphabet as structures for community woodland planting schemes, notably the Millennium Forest project A' Craobh, at Borgie, Sutherland, and for educational displays such as the one at Inverness Museum (Sutherland and Beith, 2000). ➤➤➤



















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Table 1: The Gaelic tree alphabet as used in the A-B-Tree project.

Letter	Modern Name	Old Gaelic	Modern Gaelic	Ogham Script
B	Birch	Beith	Beith	
L	Rowan	Luis	Caorann	
F	Alder	Fearn	Feàrna	
S	Willow	Seallach	Seileach	
N	Ash	Nuin	Uinnseann	
H	Hawthorn	Huath	Sgitheach	
D	Oak	Duir	Darach	
T	Holly	Tinne	Cuileann	
C	Hazel	Coll	Calltainn	
M	Bramble	Muin	Dreas	
G	Ivy	Gort	Eidhann-mu-chrann	
P	Blackthorn	Straiph	Droigheann	
R	Elder	Ruis	Droman	
A	Pine	Ailm	Giuthas	
O	Gorse	Onn	Conasg	
U	Heather	Ur	Fraoch	
E	Aspen	Eadhadh	Critheann	
I	Yew	Iadh	Iubhar	

➤ The A-B-Tree project adopted a pragmatic approach to the alphabet, treating it as an organisational principle for knowledge and celebrating its potential for stimulating creativity in response to woods and trees. The version of the alphabet that the project uses is shown in **Table 1**. It differs from Edlin's in four letters: T is holly (tinne), A is pine (ailm), O is whin/gorse/furze (onn) and P is blackthorn (straiph). In addition, the traditional sequence of letters is adhered to, with vowels at the end, so the alphabet begins with birch (matching all its folklore connotations of birth, conception and inspiration; its ecological role as a pioneer species; and practical value as a firelighter) and ends with yew (with all its connotations of death and toxicity). The traditional sequence of letters is a key justification for the association of T with holly, as it therefore stands in the centre of the alphabet next to oak, in their joint roles as the traditional Lord of the Woods, often depicted by 'Green Man' images with half of his hair and beard made of holly leaves and the other half made of oak leaves. The common association of A with elm rather than pine may be due to a false Anglicisation of the traditional name 'ailm'. The choice of blackthorn for P is more arbitrary as the letter is a relatively modern interjection into the Gaelic alphabet and therefore does not have a traditional tree association. Some versions repeat birch, linking silver birch with B and downy birch with P, while Edlin links it with dwarf elder or danewort ('peith-bhog'), an odd, non-native choice. We preferred to retain blackthorn, originally 'straiph', linked to the letter St or Z, partly because of its fascinating ecology, folklore and practical uses (not least sloe gin!) and the pleasing, if inconsequential, fact of it being a *Prunus* species.

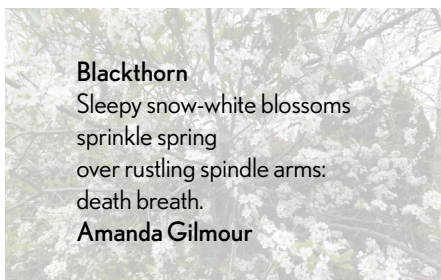
F (Fearn – Alder) Forestry education

Over the past two years, the A-B-Tree project has explored whether students of forestry benefit from creative-writing and Gaelic-related activities, whether arts students benefit from an injection of forestry knowledge, and whether the Gaelic tree alphabet is a useful structure for such inter-disciplinary activity. This research involved engaging with

I never thought of before; interesting to consider when looking at woodlands.'

P (Straiph/Prunus – Blackthorn) Poetry

Here is one of many lovely and powerful poems about blackthorn resulting from a creative writing student workshop.



Blackthorn
Sleepy snow-white blossoms
sprinkle spring
over rustling spindle arms:
death breath.
Amanda Gilmour

R (Ruis – Elder) Results

Poetic inquiry methods were used for analysing written and spoken responses by participants at events so, unusually for a research project, most results take the form of poems or 'poemish' compilations of words (Leavy, 2015; Lahman, Richard and Teman, 2019). The overt purpose of this analysis was to uncover indications of learning and changes of attitudes as a result of creative engagement. One of the interesting surprises was that two members of staff, whose students were involved in the process, were impressed, indeed 'amazed', by what the writing revealed about the depth and sensitivity of the students' feelings about trees, who were at the start 'very cynical' about the session. Here is the poem constructed from words given by some forestry students in answer to the question 'What do trees mean to you?'

Healthy life

Sit with peace,
peace, peace, peace,
freedom, happiness, wellbeing,
adventure, life, nature and biodiversity.

Good forestry forms wood, jobs, money,
timber, firewood, oxygen and clean air.

A scenic view changes life:
social life, life of gatherings,
place to air freedom,
key to life.

A (Ailm – Pine) Attitudes towards trees

A key research question in the project was whether creative writing can change attitudes towards trees; one session gave a compelling illustration that suggests it can. In a workshop about hawthorn, four young adults began the workshop with the following joint poem about what trees mean to them.

Trees are green,
protecting life,
strength, shelter, fuel,
they live so much longer than me.

By the end of the session, they produced the following.

Trees are vessels for emotional exploration,
a lot more than just big plants -
life-support machines
soaking up the past, pumping out the future,
lighthouses of nature, wardens of time.

Similar (longer) transformation and deepening of expression have happened with several other groups. Whether such change is lasting, and whether it has any effect on behaviour, will require further investigation.

O (Onn – Gorse) Outdoor and online learning

As lockdown happened towards the end of the project, some sessions planned for outdoors had to be held online instead, by video conference. There are some interesting advantages to online learning (a commonplace at UHI), in particular the ease of sharing textual material between facilitator and participants and among participants, e.g. using the chat facility. However, there is no doubt that outdoor experience is a vital part of a creative encounter with trees – no amount of pictures and discussion can provide the texture of bark, the percussion of twigs, the scent of crushed leaves or the taste of a hazelnut. So, one outcome of the project is a plan for a learning system that combines individual outdoor nature experience with online collective sharing and creative responses.

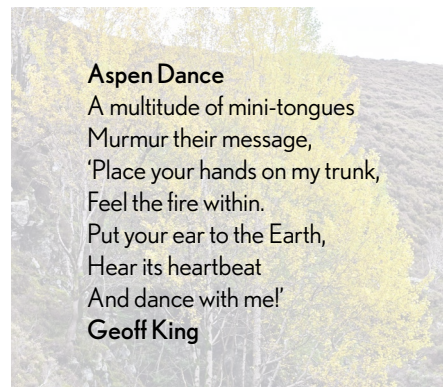
U (Ur – Heather) University constraints and possibilities

There are undeniable challenges in overcoming the disciplinary divides that exist within tertiary education.

The bigger an educational institution becomes, the more likely it seems to create hierarchical structures that drive learning and teaching into faculty and subject silos. Thus, it can appear increasingly difficult to propose ways for science students to use the arts or for humanities students to address environmental issues. Yet although institutional gaps are wide, universities are packed with people who genuinely believe in holistic learning. The two years of the A-B-Tree project showed clearly that staff and students at the SSF are proud of the cultural content of their field and delighted by the creativity that emerged at the boundary zone we created with literature. Similarly, literature and arts staff and students were stimulated and enjoyed the interdisciplinary interaction, and want it to continue.

E (Eadhadh – Aspen) Educational benefits

An aspen poem by a creative writing student gives a final flavour of some of the delightful work created in the project.



Aspen Dance
A multitude of mini-tongues
Murmur their message,
'Place your hands on my trunk,
Feel the fire within.
Put your ear to the Earth,
Hear its heartbeat
And dance with me!
Geoff King

I (Iadh – Yew) Ideas for the future

The A-B-Tree project demonstrated that the Gaelic tree alphabet is a good structure for learning and creativity. Gaelic matters in forestry, especially in the Highlands, and adding a cultural layer into forestry education leads to a sense of pride in the link to heritage and generates pleasure in creativity. Likewise, exposing arts students to trees gives them great pleasure and stimulates them with content to use in their work. We also have good evidence that students deepen their thinking about the significance of trees as a result of creative responses to them, and that trees make us feel happy.



➤ All staff participating in the project called for more, so we are making plans for future developments of the project. These include creating materials to support school teachers to use creative writing about trees, particularly in a blended learning environment, which we hope will be helpful in the ‘new normal’ of post-lockdown education. We’re also planning to deepen our understanding on how attitudes about forests and nature, more broadly, are improved by creativity and how this links to health and wellbeing. We’ll continue to grow our community of practice and welcome engagement with anyone who finds this project interesting. Above all we will continue blurring the boundaries between arts and sciences, between natural and virtual, and between old traditions of language and new futures of land use, ensuring we continue to nurture the culture in silviculture. 🌱

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