

A-B-Tree: using tree lore and literature to support creative writing learners

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Introduction

The Gaelic Tree Alphabet is an ancient connection between native woodland species and the letters of the alphabet. For nearly a decade, I have been using it as a structure 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 about the 18 native woodland species linked to letters of the Gaelic alphabet, consisting of thousands of tidbits of ecological knowledge, folklore, place names, practical and medicinal uses, plus poems. I use these poems and snippets of knowledge to support creative writers to generate written content and ideas and to shape that content into poems. This often happens during events focusing on one letter of the alphabet and its associated tree. This article explores some lessons I have learned about facilitating writing about trees through these events, including with children, in therapeutic contexts and with more experienced writers such as university students.

A-B-Tree began in 2011, when I led a series of creative writing events in woods and gardens around Scotland to celebrate International Year of Forests. In 2013 I ran a similar series as poet in residence in the Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh. Over the past year, I have been running another series (under the aegis of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), partly funded by Scottish Forestry) exploring in a more systematic manner the potential for the Gaelic Tree Alphabet to be used for creativity and learning. Participants at these events (more than 300 people this year) have delved into tree folklore, ecology, practical uses and nomenclature including Gaelic, and have been encouraged to respond creatively. The events have led me to insights about how to facilitate tree-related creativity and have 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 in residence and production of materials for use in schools.

The Gaelic Tree Alphabet links each of the 18 letters used in Gaelic with a native woodland species, mostly trees. It is an ancient connection, probably predating the introduction of the Latin alphabet, and usually associated with the Ogham, an inscription script. There are several different versions of this alphabet, the details of which can be hotly contested in historical and Druidic circles (Sutherland and Beith 2000). The version I use is in Table 1. I take a pragmatic view of the alphabet, which I see as offering a structure and organising principle for knowledge about trees, based on a fascinating link between trees and writing.

I have spent two decades splitting my working life between forest activism and creative writing, living in the Scottish Highlands in a landscape where every place name is Gaelic; the tree alphabet merges these abiding interests. It has also given me an excellent excuse to encourage many people to engage closely with trees, getting up close and intimate and engaging in a kind of dialogue with them, akin to the “conversation” that Katherine

McMahon posits in Issue 78 inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer’s approach to botany and sustainable harvesting (Kimmerer 2013, McMahon 2019:32).



















Letter	Modern Name	Old Gaelic	Modern Gaelic	Ogham Script
B	Birch	Beith	Beith	
L	Rowan	Luis	Caorrann	
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	Eidheann-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	Iadhadh	Iubhar	

Table 1: The Gaelic Tree Alphabet

The A-B-Tree knowledge base

Since the A-B-Tree project began, I have been gathering tidbits and snippets of knowledge, including linguistic, ecological, practical, cultural (folklore) and literary (poetic) elements for each of the 18 species in the alphabet. Here, to give you a little flavour, are a handful of tidbits about aspen trees.

- Aspen's scientific name is *Populus tremula*, appropriately, as its leaves tremble in the slightest breeze.
- The largest organism on the planet is an aspen grove, nicknamed Pando, in Utah, USA. It covers 106 acres and weighs 6000 tonnes.
- A poultice of aspen root heals cuts and bruises.
- Christ was reputed to have been crucified on aspen, so it trembles in shame.
- It is a Highland tradition to “dress down” (i.e. tell off) an aspen on Good Friday.
- Norse Odin stabbed and hung himself from an aspen for 9 days – sacrificing his body to achieve spiritual rebirth.
- To become eloquent, sleep with an aspen leaf under your tongue.

The entire knowledge base of more than 3000 tidbits is a rich resource on the socio-cultural dimension of Scottish woodlands and it has been well field-tested in forests and public gardens around Scotland, with a range of partner organisations (see <http://www.mandyhaggith.net/a-b-tree.asp>), as a tool for educating people about trees and as a stimulant for creativity, particularly for poetry (McEwen and Statman 2000). It helps to heighten awareness of the Gaelic language and the wealth of Gaelic heritage around trees and shrubs that is remembered in place names and stories around Scotland. I also collect and write poems about trees: I used the alphabet as the structuring principles for the poetry anthology *Into the Forest* (Haggith 2013) and my poetry collection, *A-B-Tree*, came second in the Overton Prize in 2015. Over the years I have developed ways of using all these resources to encourage all kinds of people to have a go at writing a tree poem.

I am always looking for new ways to share the knowledge base. As well as being freely available on my website, where it gets lots of use, I have experimented with other ways of keeping the tidbits circulating. They are tweet-sized, so I have put them out as a “forest of tweets” on Twitter with the hashtag #ABTree, one tree per day, at dusk each day, generating some wonderful interaction at the cyber-fireside. During the academic year 2018-19 I shared the knowledge base with staff and students at the Scottish School of Forestry and Inverness College UHI, showcasing it, tree by tree, in alphabetical order, in an interactive display using chalk pens on a blackboard-paint tree on the canteen wall (Figure 1). It has turned out to be what Wenger calls a “boundary object” for linking communities in a landscape of practice (2014).

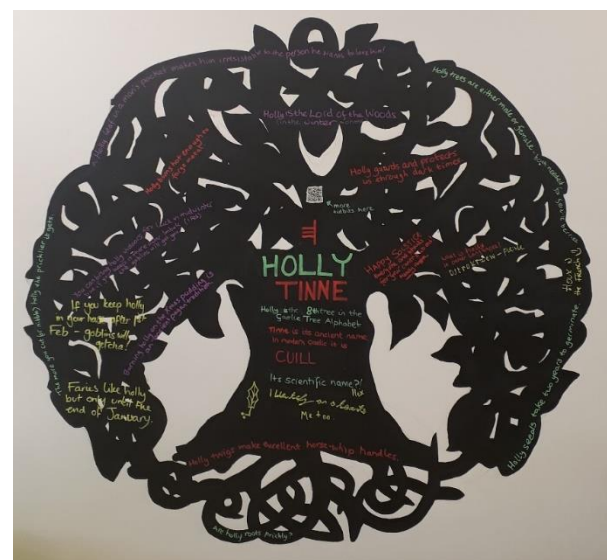


Figure 1: The Tree on the Canteen Wall

Helping people to write tree poems

Throughout the project, one of my main research questions has been how to facilitate interaction with the interdisciplinary knowledge base and use it to stimulate creative writing about trees. Over the past year I have led a series of encounter events in a wide range of locations, from Shetland to Plymouth, from remote Hebridean islands to urban Glasgow, involving very different participant groups, from literary academic conference-goers to primary school children, in situations ranging from formal study workshops to outdoor events like walks or just catching passers-by in a public garden. Yet despite their differences, all these events have five vital ingredients, which I now consider essential for successful tree poetry writing.

1. A focus on a single species.
2. Sharing of knowledge about that tree.
3. Use of all five senses.
4. Reading at least one poem.
5. Writing a response.

Lots of people find writing poetry really scary, so taking the stress out of the situation is a priority. The five steps each do this in their own way.

Focusing on a single species keeps the event's scope limited, and creativity thrives on limitation. Trees in general are far too diverse and widespread to work with in a meaningful way. Taking a single species as a focus, picking just one out of all the myriad of species out there, helps people to feel that there is something manageable going on. And surprisingly many people don't know all our native tree species. I often ask "who can tell an elder from an alder?" and have discovered that most people can't. Spending half an hour or more with one tree species ensures that it will be remembered, and participants will have the joy of spotting the tree all over the place from then on.

On a practical level, my knowledge base contains thousands of snippets, so I need to focus on one species to keep the knowledge sharing manageable. I generally hand round the tidbits printed onto slips of paper and invite the participants to read them out. Everyone gets three or four, and we read out around the circle. This is simple, can be done outside, encourages everyone to participate in a non-threatening way, gives people something tangible to "hold onto" and lets people hear a range of different kinds of knowledge rapidly. Its disadvantages are that the bits of paper can get wet and blow away (they're not very robust) and no-one gets their own complete picture of the knowledge for a particular tree. But I've tried other approaches, like laminated cards, and they are much less efficient and more intimidating. Also, I think the fact that we're dealing with "just a little slip of a thing" right from the start helps to create a sense of ease. Very often people have things they know about the tree and can add to the mix, or memories and ideas are triggered by the tidbits. There is plenty of opportunity for humour ("A pine cone in a man's pocket will make him irresistible to women", for example) and you would not believe how often the apparently random sequence of tidbits throws up fascinating resonances between old folklore wisdoms and ecological facts.

word. I might highlight some technical points in the poems, like sound patterning, or metaphor.

Very often metaphors will have come up already. For example, holly is only prickly if it's bitten, cut or injured – aren't we all? Half a tree is underground, hidden from view, just like us. Trees sleep for half the year, don't produce big harvests every time, setting us a good example. Trees communicate with and are hospitable to other species. They breathe out what we breathe in, breathing in what we breathe out. They literally, and metaphorically, inspire us.

Poetree

Now is the moment for writing! Nourished by knowledge, sensory input and poems, I invite participants to respond to the tree in creative ways, either indoors through simple writing exercises, or more often by writing words onto paper leaves.

For drop-in events, short sessions or with little children, it is fun to create a "poetree", organising leaves into a tree-shape with branches on similar themes, for example, creating a visually appealing collective poem. One of these (Figure 2) I turned into a performance poem, called 'Trees Make Us Feel Happy' (available on Youtube, see <https://youtu.be/9g9CUVUek0E>). It was created on a picnic bench under a birch tree at the Scottish School of Forestry in Balloch, on the day of the annual family open day. More than 150 people participated by browsing tidbits of knowledge about birch trees, plus other materials about the Gaelic Tree Alphabet, and contributing a word or phrase to the poetree responding to the prompt "How do trees make you feel"? As well as being a fun event, there was serious intent behind the process, as part of an ongoing poetic inquiry (Leavy 2015) into people's attitudes towards trees.

A poetree can be very simple (Figure 3), or can involve into complex artworks, like the multi-layer poem, "Listen Feel Wonder Under" which I made as poet in residence at Inverewe Garden, which contains three collective poems, with each of the words "Listen", "Feel" and "Wonder" being made from leaves written on by garden visitors, all integrated with my own poem "Under". It was displayed on the floor of the Sawyer Gallery as part of an art exhibition (Figure 4).

Sometimes poetree is a pre-cursor to a more substantial poetry writing session. I find many people at this stage are willing to write a poem and find it easy to let the words flow. If people are shy or don't know how to begin, an acrostic can be a useful starting point: put the letters of the name of the tree in a vertical line and get them to find a word beginning with each letter (ash becomes Absolutely Stupendous Herb, for example). After people have had a while to write, then I always encourage (but never demand) they share what they have written. I am frequently astounded by the results.

This five-step process seems highly effective as a way to help people to get started with writing poetry. The mix of facts and folklore, sensory engagement with a tree and model poems seems to open up the potential for expression. The tree alphabet knowledge base roots us back into an ancient tradition of tree wisdom, sacred and profane, linking us to the past and the knowledge of our forebears; people often tell me that they are so glad to have made this connection and to discover that all this wisdom has not been forgotten. This depth, coupled with taking time to really perceive the gentle steadfastness of a tree, can make for

rich and heady poetry, as people find a way to make the transition from a bald statement of ecological fact via a precise sensory perception to a poetic turn of phrase. It is delightful to experience someone finding the perfect word to pass on their sense of wonder. It is always fun to facilitate these events. People like trees and I love watching them discover that they like poetree too!



Figure 3: Example of a simple poetree made with Sgoil nan Loch pupils, Isle of Lewis.



Figure 4: Listen Feel Wonder Under - poem exhibited in the Sawyer Gallery

Conclusion

The A-B-Tree creative writing project, centred on the Gaelic Tree Alphabet, shows that this ancient link between woods and writing is still relevant today and is an important part of our woodland heritage. Facilitated interaction with tree knowledge, coupled with sensory engagement with a tree and model poems, can stimulate creative writing in even the most unconfident participants, and can be lots of fun! I encourage you to try it.

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