

Gaelic Place-Names: ‘Craobh’ and ‘Crann’

By Alison Grant

Gaelic *craobh* (pronounced *kroov*) means ‘tree’, and derives from Old Irish *cráeb*, *cróeb*. It is found in names including *Eilean nan Craobh* ‘tree island’ (Inverness-shire), *Cnoc nan Craobh* ‘tree hill’ (Kintyre), *Leac nan Craobh* ‘tree ledge’ (on the Isle of Skye), *Aird na Craoibhe* ‘promontory of the tree’ (on North Uist), *Torr na Craoibhe* ‘hill of the tree’ (Sutherland) and *Airigh na Craoibhe* ‘shieling of the tree’ (on the Isle of Lewis).

This element is also found in the form *crieff*, as in *Crieff* ‘tree place’ (Perthshire), *Ballencrieff* ‘farm of the tree’ (East Lothian and West Lothian), *Auchencrieff* ‘field of the tree’ (Dumfriesshire) and *Pittencrieff* ‘landholding of the tree’ (Fife). In some cases, the names commemorate an isolated or distinctive tree, as is the case with the solitary Scotch pine tree in the Mar Forest in Aberdeenshire known as *Craobh an Òir* ‘the tree of gold’, under which Mackenzie of Dalmore is locally reputed to have buried his stolen gold in the days of the Lochaber Raids.

There is also a related adjective *craobhach* meaning ‘woody, wooded, covered with trees’, which occurs in names such as *Creag Craobhach*, ‘wooded crag’ (Sutherland), *Braigh Craobhach* ‘wooded upland’ (Isle of Mull), *Cnoc Craobhach* ‘wooded hill’ (Arran) and *Eilean Craobhach* ‘wooded island’ (off the coast of Islay).

In addition to ‘tree’, *craobh* can also mean ‘a branch, a bough’, and this is the sense which is found in the ancient Irish legend of the *Cráeb Rúad* ‘the Red Branch’. The twelfth-century *Book of Leinster* records that the *Cráeb Rúad* was originally one of the royal halls of *Conchobar mac Nessa*, King of Ulster, which in turn gave its name to the king’s legendary order of loyal warriors. The name survives in the Irish place-name *Creeveroe*, which is reputedly close to the site of *Conchobar mac Nessa*’s royal seat in County Armagh.

Another Gaelic word meaning ‘tree’ is *crann*, from the Old Irish root of the same

spelling. This term can also mean 'a mast, a beam, a wooden pole', but in place-names it usually refers specifically to a living tree. Examples include *Druim nan Crann* 'ridge of the tree' (Islay), *Rubha nan Crann* 'point of the tree' (Isle of Jura), *Bealach nan Crann* 'pass of the tree' (Islay), *Camas nan Crann* 'bay of the tree' (Isle of Mull), *Sloc a' Chroinn* 'hollow of the tree' (Colonsay) and *Àird a' Chrainn* 'promontory of the tree' (Isle of Mull).

Crann is the root of the Gaelic word *crannag*, which is used to refer to a variety of wooden structures. It passed into English as *crannog*, where it specifically refers to an artificial island, often containing a fortified wooden dwelling. These circular structures were located across Scotland and Ireland, and were often built in lochs or river estuaries, with the earliest examples dating back to the late Bronze Age, although many Scottish *crannogs* appear to date from the Iron Age or even later. The term is occasionally found in place-names, such as *A' Chrannag* 'the crannog' (Wester Ross), *Eas a' Chrannaig* 'waterfall of the crannog' (Isle of Arran) and *Allt a' Chrannaig* 'stream of the crannog' (Inverness-shire).

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