

Trees, Woods and Literature

Thereupon Suibhne heard a hunting-call of a multitude in the verge of the wood. 'This', said he, 'is the cry of a great host, and they are the Ui Faelain coming to kill me to avenge Oilill Cedach, King of the Ui Faelain, whom I slew in the battle of Magh Rath'. He heard the bellowing of a stag and he made a lay wherein he eulogized aloud the trees of Ireland, and, recalling some of his own hardships and sorrows, he said:

O little stag, thou little bleating one,
O melodious little clamourer,
sweet to us is the music
thou makest in the glen.

Longing for my little home
has come on my senses—
the flocks in the plain,
the deer on the mountain.

Thou oak, bushy, leafy,
thou art high beyond trees;
O hazlet, little branching one,
O fragrance of hazel-nuts.

O alder, thou art not hostile,
delightful is thy hue,
thou art not rending and prickling
in the gap wherein thou art.

O little blackthorn, little thorny one;
O little black sloe-tree;
O watercress, little green-topped one,
from the brink of the ousel spring.

O minen¹ of the pathway
thou art sweet beyond herbs,
O little green one, very green one,
O herb on which grows the strawberry.

O apple-tree, little apple-tree,
much art thou shaken;
O quicken, little berried one,
delightful is thy bloom.

¹Translated as *saxifrage* by K. Jackson (*Studies in early Celtic nature poetry*, Cambridge, 1935).

*O briar, little arched one,
thou grantest no fair terms,
thou ceasest not to tear me,
till thou hast thy fill of blood.*

*O yew-tree, little yew-tree,
in churchyards thou art conspicuous;
O ivy, little ivy,
thou art familiar in the dusky wood.*

*O holly, little sheltering one,
thou door against the wind;
O ash-tree, thou baleful one,
hand-weapon of a warrior.*

*O birch, smooth and blessed,
thou melodious proud one,
delightful each entwining branch
in the top of thy crown.*

*The aspen a-trembling;
by turns I hear
its leaves a-racing—
meseems 'tis the foray!*

*My aversion in woods—
I conceal it not from anyone—
is the leafy stirk of an oak
swaying evermore!*

From *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne) being The Adventures of Suibne Geilt*. Translated by J. G. O'Keeffe, Irish Texts Society, London, 1913 (still in print). Reprinted by kind permission of the Irish Texts Society, c/o. The National Bank, 15 Whitehall, London, S.W.1.

Although the battle of Magh Rath was fought in A.D. 637, O'Keeffe believes that this tale was composed between the years 1200 and 1500. It tells of the misfortunes which befell Suibhne (Sweeny), King of the Irish territory of Dal Araidhe, after he had been cursed by St. Ronan Finn, whom he had prevented from marking out the site of a new church in his territory, and one of whose palmists he had killed. Extensive tracts of the tale were incorporated by Flann O'Brien into his novel *At Swim-two-birds*. The influence of the passage quoted above can be clearly seen in the extract from George Moore printed in the last issue of this journal.