

Trees, Woods and Literature – 29

*My love's an arbutus
B the borders of the Lene,
So slender and shapely
In her girdle of green;
And I measure the pleasure
Of her eye's sapphire sheen
By the blue skies that sparkle
Through that branching screen.*

*But though ruddy the berry
And snowy the flower
That brighten together
The arbutus bower;
Perfuming and blooming
Through sunshine and shower,
Give me her bright lips
And her laugh's pearly dower.*

*Alas! fruit and blossom
Shall scatter the lea,
And Time's jealous fingers
Dim your young charms, machree.
But unchanging, unchanging,
You'll still cling to me,
Like an evergreen leaf
To the arbutus tree.*

Alfred Perceval Graves

Alfred Perceval Graves (1846-1931), best known today as the father of the writer Robert Graves, was well-known in his own day as a poet, and as an author of popular ballads, including *A Jug of Punch* and *Father O'Flynn* (*Of priests we can offer a charmin' variety/Far renown'd for learnin' and piety/Still, I'd advance ye widout impropriety/Father O'Flynn as the flow'r of them all*).

Graves was born in Dublin in 1846, the son of Dr James Perceval Graves, Bishop of Limerick. He graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1869, and entered the Civil Service in London as a clerk in Home Office, where he remained until 1874, when he became an inspector of schools. A prolific contributor of prose and verse to publications such as the *Spectator*, *The Athenaeum*, *John Bull*, and *Punch*, he was also the author, with Charles Stanford, of *Songs of Old Ireland*. Although based in London, he maintained a close interest in Irish affairs, and was a leading figure the

Irish literary renaissance at the turn of the nineteenth century, being twice a president of the Irish Literary Society.

The arbutus of the title is, of course, *Arbutus unedo*, the strawberry tree – in Irish *caithne*. A native species, it grows upwards of 10 m in height, with one record of 14 m. An evergreen (*Like an evergreen leaf/To the arbutus tree*), the name strawberry tree comes from the prominent red berries (*But though ruddy the berry*), which ripen in November/December. The fruit is edible but, according to most accounts, not very appetising, hence the species name - *unedo* – eat one or once.

A member of the heather family, the species is mostly native to the Mediterranean region. The Irish population is confined to West Cork, Co Kerry (in the native woodlands of Killarney - hence *By borders of the Lene* – a reference to Lough Lene), and a small area around Lough Gill in Co Sligo. Its status as a native is based on its presence in the pollen record as far back as 3000 BP. The pathway it took in reaching Ireland in the postglacial period is not known, nor is why it has such a restricted present-day distribution on the island.

(Selection by Mick O'Donovan with notes by *Lia coille*)