Irish *caithne* ‘Arbutus’ and the place-name *Derrynacahney*

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IRISH *CAITHNE* 'ARBUTUS' AND THE PLACE-NAME *DERRYNACAHNEY*

Abstract

There has been recent discussion as to whether the arbutus (Latin *Arbutus unedo*, Irish *caithne*) is native to Ireland or an early introduction from Iberia. In this article, I summarise the linguistic and literary evidence. I suggest that the existence of the place-name Derrynacahney – which I take to be an anglicisation of *Doire na caithne* 'the oak-wood of the arbutus' – on the slopes of Slieve Aughty, Co. Clare, can be viewed as evidence in favour of the native status of this tree.[1]

In recent times there has been a growth of interest in the planting of native Irish trees for the sake of their beauty, their uses and their contribution to the health of the environment. This has helped to focus attention on references to trees in Irish-language sources. In the early language the most important source is the OIr law-text *Bretha Comaithcheso* 'judgements on neighbourhood', recently edited by Thomas Charles-Edwards.[2] It contains a list of twenty-eight species of tree and shrub, arranged in four groups in accordance with their economic importance: the seven 'nobles of the wood' (*airig fedo*), the seven 'commoners of the wood' (*aithig fedo*), the seven 'lower classes of the wood' (*fodlai fedo*) and the seven 'shrubs of the wood' (*losae fedo*). The text provides information on the fines which are imposed for the total or partial destruction of these trees or shrubs.[3]

In the earlier versions of the text, the *caithne* 'arbutus, strawberry tree' (botanical name *Arbutus unedo*) is included among the 'lower classes of the wood'.[4] The other trees in this category are blackthorn (*draigen*), elder (*trom*), spindle (*féorus*), whitebeam (*findcholl*), aspen (*crithach*), and juniper(?) (*crann*

[1]I wish to thank Daniel L. Kelly (Botany, Trinity College Dublin), and Michael O'Connell (Department of Botany, National University of Ireland Galway) for providing me with crucial botanical advice during the preparation of this article. I am indebted to Pádraig Ó Macháin (Department of Modern Irish, University College Cork) for help in elucidating the manuscript tradition of the EModIr poem *Sgéul ar dhiamhair na suirghe* 'a tale about the mystery of courtship'. I am also grateful to an external reader, and to the editors of *Celtica* for their valuable input. I am alone responsible for any errors or misjudgements.

[2]Thomas Charles-Edwards (ed. and trans.), *Bretha Comaithcheso: An Old-Irish Law Tract on Neighbouring Farms*, Early Irish Law Series 9 (Dublin, 2022).

[3]Charles-Edwards, *Bretha Comaithcheso*, 154–7 §§34–37; cf. Fergus Kelly, 'The Old Irish tree-list', *Celtica* 11 (1976), 107–24.

[4]The arbutus is included in the versions at *CIH* i 79.6 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS B 487, fol. 67r), *CIH* i 203.9 (Dublin, TCD MS E 3.5, p. 5b), *CIH* v 1857.38 (Dublin, TCD MS H 3. 17, col. 309).

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fir).[5] The appearance of the arbutus in this tree-list is of interest for many reasons. The available evidence suggests that *Bretha Comaithcheso* was composed in the late seventh century in the Armagh area as part of the ambitious legal compilation known as the *Senchas Már* 'great tradition'.[6] Botanical studies have indicated that the arbutus is unlikely ever to have grown naturally in central or eastern Ireland. In their account of this tree, J. R. Sealy and D. A. Webb note that 'the northern limit of the Mediterranean and the eastern limit of its Atlantic distribution are determined apparently by winter temperature: the regions in which it can flourish and regenerate are almost entirely those in which the mean January temperature is above 40°F (4.5°C)'.[7] It is consequently remarkable that the author of *Bretha Comaithcheso* – most likely based in the north-east of the country – was aware of a tree which the pollen evidence shows to have been largely confined to the south-west. The inclusion of the arbutus in this text can be regarded as evidence for the country-wide application of Irish law in the Early Christian period.[8]

Whether the arbutus is indigenous or introduced has long been a subject of debate. In her study of the woodlands of Ireland, Eileen McCracken expressed the opinion that 'the arbutus or strawberry tree is probably a medieval importation by monks'.[9] In his *Irish Names of Places* Patrick Joyce took an opposing view: 'Some think that it was brought to Ireland from the continent by monks in the early stages of Christianity; but it is more generally believed to be indigenous; and it appears to me to be a strong argument in favour of this opinion, that we have a native name for it'.[10] It is certainly true that the OIr fem. *iā*-stem *caithne* is a native word with no known etymology,[11] and that it bears no relation to the words for 'arbutus' in other European languages.[12] The native status of arbutus has been accepted by many botanists. Pauline Van Rign carried out a study of arbutus charcoal at Ross Island, Killarney, and concluded that this charcoal can be dated broadly to between 2400 and 1900 BC. She notes that 'this provides the earliest secure evidence for the native character of the species'.[13] In their survey, 'Vegetation history in the Killarney

[5]For a discussion of the identification of *crann fir* as 'juniper', see Kelly, 'The Old Irish tree-list', 119–20.

[6]Liam Breatnach, *The Early Irish Law Text* Senchas Már *and the Question of its Date*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lecture 13 (Cambridge, 2011).

[7]J. R. Sealy and David Webb, 'Arbutus Unedo L.', *Journal of Ecology* 38 (1950) 223–36, at 226.

[8]Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series 3 (Dublin, 1988; repr. with revised bibliography 2009), 242–3.

[9]Eileen McCracken, 'The woodlands of Ireland circa 1600', *Irish Historical Studies* 11/44 (September 1959), 271–96, at 280.

[10]Patrick W. Joyce, *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places*, 3 vols (Dublin and London, 1869, 1875, 1913), ii, 358–9.

[11]There is no entry for this word in Joseph Vendryes's OIr etymological dictionary (*LEIA*) nor in Julius Pokorny's *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (*IEW*).

[12]Greek *ἀνδράχνη*, Latin *arbutus*, Ital. *corbezzolo*, Fr. *arbousier*, Breton *gwez*(*enn*) *sivi*, Span. *alborto, madroño*, Port. *medronho*, Basque *gurbitza*, Arabic *quṭlub*.

[13]P. Van Rijn, 'Analysis of charcoal from Ross Island', in W. O'Brien (ed.), *Mining, Metal and Society in Early Ireland*, Bronze Age Studies 6 (Galway, 2004), 386–401, at 398.

valley', Fraser Mitchell and Tom Cooney accept Van Rijn's findings, which they state 'would appear to confirm the native status of this tree in Killarney'.[14]

However, botanists Micheline Sheehy Skeffington and Nick Scott have recently suggested that the arbutus in fact *was* introduced from the continent – but at a much earlier period than the coming of Christianity to this island. Before discussing their views, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the present distribution of the arbutus in continental Europe and in Ireland. Its main range is in the Mediterranean area – particularly Spain, Portugal, and north-west Africa. It is present in Brittany, but is thought by some botanists to have been introduced to that region.[15] In Ireland, the arbutus is quite common in the area around the Killarney Lakes, Co. Kerry, and occurs sporadically in the Beara and Mizen peninsulas in West Cork. It is also to be found at a few locations by Lough Gill, Co. Sligo.[16] The general view among botanists has been that the arbutus belongs to the 'Lusitanian' flora of Ireland, i.e. a group of plants whose main habitat is in the Iberian peninsula, but which are also native to the west of Ireland.[17]

The theory put forward by Sheehy Skeffington and Scott is that copper miners from Spain introduced the arbutus to the Killarney area of Co. Kerry *c.* 2000 BC, and that it subsequently spread – or was brought – to other parts of the south-west.[18] They suggest that 'it could have been brought as a food source or even because the tree or fruit were important to their mining culture and/or tradition'.[19] The tree may have been coppiced for use in supplying charcoal for smelting copper ore. As the berries are eaten by a wide variety of birds, bird-distribution of the seeds of the arbutus could also have been a factor in its spread.[20] Sheehy Skeffington and Scott further note that fermentation naturally occurs in mature arbutus berries and that they are used as a source of alcohol in Mediterranean countries.[21] Writing in twelfth-century Seville,

[14]F. J. G. Mitchell and T. Cooney, 'Vegetation history in the Killarney valley', in W. O'Brien (ed.), *Mining, Metal and Society in Early Ireland*, Bronze Age Studies 6 (Galway, 2004), 481–93, at 490.

[15]Simone De Santis, Francesco Spada and Donatella Magri, 'Geographic range vs. occurrence records in plant distribution mapping: the case of *Arbutus* in the Old World', *Forests* 14/5 (2023), article no. 1010, pp. 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3390/f14051010 (accessed 22 April 2026).

[16]J. Parnell and T. Curtis, *Webb's Irish Flora*, 8th ed. (Cork, 2012) has the entry (p. 309): 'Wood margins and rocky lake-shores and islands; frequent near Killarney; very locally in a few other places in the south-west and, perhaps not native, by Lough Gill (County Sligo)'.

[17]Other examples include: Saint Patrick's Cabbage (*Saxifraga spathularis*) which grows in hilly regions of the west of Ireland, as well as in the mountains of northern Spain and Portugal; the Kerry Lily (*Simethis mattiazzii*), which grows in south-west Ireland, as well as in western France, Spain and Portugal, and in north-west Africa; Saint Dabeoc's Heath (*Daboecia cantabrica*) which grows in western Galway and western Mayo, as well as in western France, northern Spain and north-west Portugal.

[18]Micheline Sheehy Skeffington and Nick Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unedo* (Ericaceae), native to Ireland, or was it brought by the first copper miners?', *British and Irish Botany* 3/4 (2021), 385–418; Micheline Sheehy Skeffington and Nick Scott, 'The strawberry tree in Ireland: could botanical research help explain how Bronze Age culture came to Ireland?', *Archaeology Ireland* 36 (Summer 2022), 24–9.

[19]Sheehy Skeffington and Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree native to Ireland?', 406.

[20]Sheehy Skeffington and Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree native to Ireland?', 390.

[21]A spirit called 'Aguardente de Medronho' is distilled from arbutus berries in Portugal.

the Arab agronomist Ibn Al-'Awwâm provides evidence of the importance of the arbutus by devoting a chapter in his *Book of Agriculture* to the methods of its cultivation.[22]

Other botanists have expressed reservations about Sheehy Skeffington and Scott's explanation for the presence of the arbutus in Ireland. For example, Michael O'Connell and Anette Overland concede that 'phylogeographic studies of *Arbutus* and other Lusitanian species indicate close genetic relationships between the Iberian and Irish populations', but they hold that 'these fall far short of providing evidence for introductions by people at specific times and locations'. In spite of the long time-gap, the Irish place-name evidence is of some relevance to this debate. In his *Irish Names of Places*, Joyce records *caithne* 'arbutus' as an element in a number of place-names in southwestern Ireland, e.g. *Eisc na gCaithne* (angl. Iskanagahiny) 'the lake of the arbutuses' (Co. Kerry), *Abhainn na Caithne* (angl. Owenacahina), 'the river of the arbutus' (Co. Cork). With the diminutive suffix *-án*, it is to be found in *Caithneachán* (angl. *Cahnicaun*), lit. 'the little place of arbutuses', the name of a wood near Killarney, Co. Kerry. He remarks that in the neighbourhood of the Killarney lakes, 'even the English-speaking people call the berries of the arbutus *cain*-apples, though few or none of them suspect how this name took its rise'.[23]

Joyce also notes the place-name *Ard na Caithne* at Smerwick, Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry. This is in an area where the arbutus is not to be found at the present time. The earliest record of this name – in the spelling *Ardnecanny* – is in the Desmond Survey of 1584. In the Ordnance Survey Name Books (section 14, Dunurlin, Kerry, 1841) John O'Donovan takes the meaning to be 'the height of arbutus'. This explanation has been accepted by An Seabhac (Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha)[24] and by the editors of the *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames*.[25] A recent discovery by Michael O'Connell and Steffen Wolters is also of relevance: they have identified evidence for the presence of this tree at another location in the Dingle Peninsula. This is a fossil pollen record dated to 540 AD from Lough Adoon bog approximately 3 km south of Brandon Bay.[26]

However, in a contribution to the journal *Feasta* in 1983, Seán Ó Cinnéide challenged this interpretation of *Ard na Caithne* on a number of grounds.[27] He drew attention to the exposed nature of this place, and expressed doubt

[22]J.-J. Clément-Mullet (trans.), *Ibn al-'Awwâm, Le Livre de l'Agriculture: Kitâb al-Filâha* (Arles, France, 2000), 214–15 (chapter 7, §8).

[23]Joyce, *Irish Names of Places* (1875 ed.), ii, 358–9.

[24]An Seabhac (Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha), *Triocha-céad Chorca Dhuibhne: Log-ainmneacha agus an Seanchas* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1938), 100.

[25]Pádraig Ó Riain, Diarmuid Ó Murchadha and Kevin Murray (eds), *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames: Foclóir Stairiúil Áitainmneacha na Gaeilge* (ITS, London, 2003) fasc. 1, s.v. *Ard na Caithne.*

[26]Michael O'Connell and Steffen Wolters, 'Holocene flora, vegetation and land-use changes on Dingle Peninsula, Ireland, as reflected in pollen analytical, archaeological and historical records', *Diversity* 2025 17/7, 456.

[27]Seán Ó Cinnéide, 'Logainmneacha Duibhneacha', *Feasta* 38 (1983) 13–14. In a recent article in M. Ó Sé (ed.) *Séamus Ó Muircheartaigh: An Spailpín Fánach. Saol agus Saothar* (Baile an Fheirtéirigh 2025), 10–14, Breandán Ó Cíobháin has put forward the suggestion that the second element in the

that the arbutus could survive in such a location. He also noted that the local pronunciation is generally *Árd* (or *Árt*) *na Cainne*, and remarked that an epenthetic vowel /ə/ between the *-th-* and the *-n-* would be expected if the word were *caithne* 'arbutus'.[28] He refers to the entry in Dinneen's *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* s.v. *caithne* where it is stated that the word is 'pronounced as three syllables, *caithine*'. He further draws attention to the epenthetic vowel in the anglicised forms of place-names such as Iskanagahiny, mentioned above. He suggests that *cainne* in this place-name is gen. sg. of *cainneann*, a term for various cultivated species of *Allium* (the Onion family).[29] But there are counter-arguments to Ó Cinnéide's views. Sheehy Skeffington and Scott in fact regard the Smerwick location as favourable to the arbutus and comment that there are 'many suitable cliff ledges around the cove, particularly on the two headlands'. It is also open to question whether the headland at Smerwick would be a likely location for the cultivation of vegetables such as the garden onion or leek.

A similar place-name – not mentioned by Joyce – has been applied since medieval times to a religious site on the coast of Co. Limerick in the present parish of Kildimo. This is *Ard Caithne* 'the height of arbutus', variously rendered as Ardcatny, Ardcannie or Ardcathny in official records. For example, a 1464 account of the dues of the Diocese of Limerick refers to *prebende de Archanne*.[30] No arbutus has been found in this area. However, Sheehy Skeffington and Scott are of the opinion that soil conditions would be suitable for it to grow there.[31]

Joyce suggests that the name of the Co. Clare town of Quin (Ir. *Cuinche*) derives from *caithne.* In this I believe him to be mistaken, as the spelling *Cuinche* is well-attested in the early language, and is not liable to confusion with *caithne.*[32] In the *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames* two separate locations for *Cuinche* are identified.[33] Fourteen instances of the Co. Clare *Cuinche* are listed, going back to the thirteenth century. There is also an early instance of a place named *Cuinche* in the Cooley peninsula, Co. Louth. It occurs in a passage in the eighth-century *Táin Bó Cúailnge* 'the cattle-raid of Cooley', which describes Cú Chulainn's attempts to kill Queen Medb by hitting her with a stone. He throws the stone from *Cuinche*, which is described in a

place name Ard na Caithne may be a personal name, represented also in the form CATTINI on an Ogham stone in nearby Baile an Reannaigh.

[28]Thomas F. O'Rahilly, notes that 'in the groups *thl*, *thn*, *thr*, an epenthetic vowel is developed in some words in Munster Irish' (*Irish Dialects Past and Present, with Chapters on Scottish Gaelic and Manx* (Dublin, 1932; repr. 1972, 1988), 202).

[29]On these vegetables, see discussion at Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-texts of the Seventh and Eighth Centuries AD*, Early Irish Law Series 4 (Dublin, 1997), 251–3.

[30]Michael Moloney, 'Obligationes pro Annatis Diocesis Limiricensis 1421–1519', *Archivium Hibernicum* 10 (1943) 104–62, at 121 §49.

[31]Sheehy Skeffington and Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree native to Ireland?', 403.

[32]I also believe Joyce to be mistaken in his view that the island of Quinsheen in Clew Bay, Co. Mayo, means 'little arbutus island' (*Irish Names of Places*, ii, 360).

[33]Pádraig Ó Riain, Kevin Murray and Emma Nic Cárthaigh (eds), *Historical Dictionary of Gaelic Placenames*, fasc. 6, 180–1, s.vv. *Cuinche* (1), *Cuinche* (2).

gloss as 'a hill' (*.i. slíab*). He misses his target and kills the queen's handmaid instead.[34] As noted at the beginning of this article, botanists do not believe that the arbutus is ever likely to have grown naturally in east or central Ireland, and it would not be expected to occur in the Cooley peninsula. I should add that no satisfactory etymology of the place-name *Cuinche* has yet been put forward.

There is another place-name which strongly suggests that the arbutus was to be encountered in Co. Clare in former times. This is Derrynacahney, which is included among the place-names referring to locations on the lower slopes of Slieve Aughty (ModIr *Eachtgha*, OIr *Echtge*), near Inchicronan Lough, Co. Clare. To my knowledge, no written Irish form of this name has been recorded, but it seems to be from *Doire na Caithne* 'the oak-wood of the arbutus'.[35] I know of no Irish word other than *caithne* 'arbutus' which is likely to be anglicized as *cahney* in the name of a wood. In an article entitled 'The forests of the counties of the Lower Shannon Valley', T. J. Westropp made a study of the evidence provided in the written records for the existence of extensive woodland in this part of Co. Clare. He refers to 'an enormous oak forest that, even in the fourteenth century and certainly down to Tudor times, ran round the flanks of Aughty, and covered the lower slopes of its hills from Crusheen and Inchicronan lake eastward. The districts in which the "Derry" names are crowded are as a rule devoid of forts, dolmens, castles, and churches, and so were probably from the earliest times to the fifteenth century uninhabited woodland'.[36] He records the existence of some fifty such Derry names – including Derrynacahney – and provides a map showing their locations.[37] The Irish word *doire* is well-attested at all periods of the Irish language. The earliest spelling is *daire*, a derivative of *dair* (*daur*) 'oak', with *io*-suffix.[38] In the seventh-century Life of Columba by Adamnán the place-name *Daire Calgaich* 'the oak-wood of Calgach' – the original name for the site of the monastery of Derry – is latinised as *Roboretum*

[34]Cecile O'Rahilly (ed. and trans.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin, 1976; repr. 2006), 30.969.

[35]I should record that Sheehy Skeffington and Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree native to Ireland?', 403, regard it as extremely unlikely that this wood ever contained *Arbutus unedo*. I should also add that neither Westropp nor Joyce identified Derrynacahney as containing the tree-name *caithne*, so neither should be held accountable if my suggested identification proves to be untenable!

[36]Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'The forests of the counties of the Lower Shannon Valley', *PRIA* 27 C (1908–09), 270–300, at 278.

[37]On his map, he gives the spelling *Derrynacahney*, whereas in the text of his article he has *Derrynacaheny* with the epenthetic vowel /ə/. See discussion above in relation to the place-name *Ard na Caithne* in the Dingle Peninsula.

[38]*LEIA* D-12 s.v. *dair, daur*. At *DIL* s.v. *daire*, it is taken to be a probable neuter *io*-stem, but the place-names listed by Edmund Hogan (*Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin, 1910), 326–9) contain no case of nasalisation after this word. It seems better therefore to treat it as masc. In place-names it occasionally shows fem. inflection. This is indicated by forms such as fem. Derrywee (*Doire bhuidhe* 'yellow wood') beside masc. Derryboy (*Doire buidhe*) (P. W. Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, iii, 293, 305). In the later language, *doire* is sometimes used in the general sense of 'grove, thicket', rather than specifically 'oak-wood', e.g. *doire āluinn d'ablaib cubra* 'a beautiful grove of sweet apples', *doireadha neannta* 'clumps of nettles' (*DIL* s.v. *daire* II).

Calgachi.[39] Here *roboretum* is a derivative of Latin *robur* (*robor*) 'hard tree or wood, oak'.[40]

In natural conditions, oak-woods often contain an understorey of other trees, or there may be stands of other trees here and there within the oak-wood.[41] This situation is sometimes reflected in place-names. For example, Westropp's map of the oak-forest of Aughty includes Derrynagullion (*Doire na gcuilleann* 'the oak-wood of the hollies'), Derrybehagh (*Doire beitheach* 'the oak-wood of birches') and Derrynaskeagh (*Doire na sceach* 'the oak-wood of the whitethorns').[42] Elsewhere in Ireland there is a number of examples of *Doire* in combination with (*f*)*uinnseann* 'ash', e.g. Derryfunshion (*Doire fuinnseann* 'the oak-wood of ashes'), Derranafunchin (*Doire na fuinnseann* 'the oak-wood of the ash').[43] Other trees also feature, e.g. Derrylavan (*Doire leamháin* 'the oak-wood of elm'), Derrysillagh (*Doire saileach* 'the oak-wood of willow').[44]

I turn now to consider what evidence can be gleaned from Irish verse and prose texts which might cast light on the distribution of the arbutus in historical times. As we have seen, the seventh-century author of the tree-list in the law-text *Bretha Comaithcheso* was sufficiently well-informed to include the arbutus among the 'lower classes of the wood', even though he was probably based in the north-east of Ireland where this tree is unlikely ever to have grown in the wild. In some later versions of the tree-list, the arbutus has been omitted. Thus, legal commentary from around the twelfth century has *eidlenn* (*féithlenn*) instead of *caithne*.[45] This word refers to the honeysuckle or woodbine (*Lonicera periclymenum*), a common woody climber which sometimes reaches considerable dimensions, but is of little economic worth.[46] Presumably, the legal commentator was unacquainted with the arbutus, and substituted a less valuable woody plant with which he was familiar. The version of the tree-list in the OIr grammatical text *Auraicept na nÉces* likewise has the honeysuckle in place of the arbutus.[47]

Both the other attestations of *caithne* cited in *DIL* occur in material relating to the supernatural people known as *Tuatha Dé Danann*, whose home was in the Otherworld (*Tír Tairngire* 'the Promised Land').[48] The text entitled *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* 'The pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne' – most probably composed from earlier material in the fourteenth century – describes how the *Fianna* (a war-band led by the warrior Fionn Mac Cumhaill)

[39] *A Roboreto Calgachi* (*Thes.* ii 272.44; A. O. and M. O. Anderson (eds and trans.), *Vita Sancti Columbae: Adomnán's Life of Columba* (London, 1961; repr. Oxford, 1991) bk. 1, ch. 2, f. 6a).

[40] C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1933), s.v. *robur*.

[41] Daniel L. Kelly, 'The native forest vegetation of Killarney, south-west Ireland: an ecological account', *Journal of Ecology* 69/2, 437–72.

[42] Westropp, 'The forests of the Lower Shannon Valley', 278.

[43] Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, iii, 295, 300.

[44] Joyce, *Irish Names of Places*, iii, 298, 303.

[45] *CIH* i 202.29–30; ii 582.18.

[46] *DIL* s.v. *féithlenn*.

[47] George Calder (ed. and trans.), *Auraicept na nÉces: The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh, 1917), 90.1156; 232.4250.

[48] *DIL* s.v. *caithne*.

found themselves in the vicinity of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* at *Gleann Fleisge* (Glenflesk, Co. Kerry). The provisions which the latter brought from their home in the Otherworld consisted of *cnódha corcra agus ubhla caitne agus caora cubhartha* 'purple nuts and arbutus apples and fragrant berries'.[49] Later in this passage, we are told that *caora cubhartha* refer to the berries of the *caorthann* (mountain ash or rowan, *Sorbus aucuparia*), and that they had magical qualities. The text has nothing further to say about the 'purple nuts' or 'arbutus apples'. It is noteworthy that the encounter takes place in the Glenflesk area of Co. Kerry, now the main home of the arbutus. However – as Sheehy Skeffington and Scott point out – the author of the text regards these three fruits as having originated in another land.[50]

There is also an association between the *Tuatha Dé Danann* and the arbutus in a poem of the EModIr period which is included without translation in T. F. O'Rahilly's *Dánta Grádha* 'poems of love'.[51] In one manuscript it is attributed to Muiris mac Dáibhi Dhuibh mac Gearailt.[52] In this light-hearted composition the poet sets out various methods by which women were wooed in early Irish literature in what he terms the 'mystery of courtship' (*diamhair na suirghe*). In some cases, the poet's likely source can be identified. Thus, in quatrain 2 he refers to the love-affair of Diarmaid and Gráinne as recounted in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* cited above. In q. 4 he describes the kisses which Naoise bestowed on Deirdre on his return from hunting. This harks back to the OIr tale *Loinges mac nUislenn* 'the exile of the sons of Uisliu', which records the ill-fated elopement of this couple.[53] In q. 3 he refers to Cú Chulainn's courtship of a Greek woman through his ability to close up one eye to vanishing point (*is leis do rinneadh an sméideadh*).[54] This strange method of beguiling the opposite sex is also to be encountered in the ninth-century *Serglige Con Culainn* 'the

[49]Standish Hayes O'Grady (ed. and trans.), *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmuda agus Ghráinne, or, The Pursuit after Diarmuid O'Duibhne, and Gráinne, Transactions of the Ossianic Society for the year 1855*, vol. 3 (Dublin, 1857), 118.14–15; Nessa Ní Shéaghdha (ed. and trans.), *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne: The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne*, ITS 48 (Dublin, 1967) 52.898–9. For discussion of the date of the text, see Ní Shéaghdha, *Tóruigheacht*, Introduction, x–xiv.

[50]Sheehy Skeffington and Scott, 'Is the Strawberry Tree native to Ireland?', 406. Their suggestion that *cródha corcra* 'purple nuts' could refer to the Spanish chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) is certainly worth considering. *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* is a romantic tale where botanical accuracy is not to be expected. However, there may have been an awareness of the existence on the Continent of an edible nut, larger than the familiar hazelnut. The adj. *corcra* is applied to a wide variety of colours, ranging from deep purple to crimson: it could well have been employed to describe the reddish-brown hue of the Spanish chestnut.

[51]Tomás Ó Rathile, *Dánta Grádha*, 2nd ed. (Dublin and Cork, 1926), 8–9. His source is Maynooth MS M86 (a) (4 A 11), pp. 22–5. Versions of this poem are to be found in many other MSS. Eight versions are listed in Kathleen Mulchrone and Elizabeth FitzPatrick (assisted by A. I. Pearson), *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy: Index I* (Dublin, 1948), 505.36–8. Three versions are listed in the index of first lines in T. K. Abbott and E. J. Gwynn, *Catalogue of the Irish Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin* (Dublin, 1921), 398 s.v. *Sgéul ar dhiamhair na suirghe.*

[52]RIA MS 23 G 23 (256), p. 190.

[53]Vernam Hull (ed. and trans.), *Loinges mac n-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu* (New York, London, 1949); Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Death of the Sons of Uisnech', *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* (eds Wh. Stokes and E. Windisch), II.2 (Leipzig, 1887), 109–78.

[54]References to Greece and Greeks are quite common in the literature, especially in tales of

wasting sickness of Cú Chulainn', though in this case it is the women who make the advances: the Ulsterwomen who loved Cú Chulainn would close one eye in the manner of their hero.[55] The same tale may be the source of the account in q. 5 of Uaithne, son of Conall Cearnach, who twisted his neck (*claonadh an mhuiníl*) so as to attract female attention. This procedure is to be compared with the manner in which the Ulsterwomen who loved Conall Cernach adopted a crooked stance in imitation of the object of their affection.[56]

I have found no early source claiming a role for the fruit of the arbutus in courtship, as described in q. 6. Here the poet speaks of the liaisons of Ábhartach mac Ioldathaigh, a noble of the *Tuatha Dé Danann.* In his edition O'Rahilly renders the second couplet of this quatrain as: *le hubhlaibh na gcrann gcaithne / is leis do caitheadh an bhantracht* which might be translated 'with apples of the arbutus trees, it is by him that the women were seduced'. This doubtless refers to the supernatural associations of the fruit of the arbutus, as described in *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne.* Evidently, the tasting of these fruits assisted Ábhartach in his seduction of various unnamed women, and was regarded as having an aphrodisiac effect upon them. In another version of the poem the MS has *do mhealladh* '[the women] were beguiled' in place of *do caitheadh.*[57]

I should finally mention some negative documentary evidence which indicates that the arbutus was never an abundant tree on this island. The MIr tale *Aidedh Ferghusa* 'the death of Fergus' lists fifteen trees and shrubs which should not be burnt, but makes no mention of the arbutus.[58] Similarly, the tenth-century tale *Buile Ṡuibne* 'the madness of Sweeney' contains a poem extolling the characteristics of fourteen species of tree and shrub, but does not include the arbutus.[59] From approximately the twelfth century a legal commentator provides examples of two categories of wild fruit: those which are sweet (*cumra*) and those which are coarse (*fiadain*).[60] The fruit of the arbutus does not appear under either heading. Official English documents of the Elizabethan period likewise indicate the absence of the arbutus from

the Finn Cycle, see Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*, iii (Dublin, 1953), Index of Places and Populations, p. 402 s.v. *Gréig*.

[55]Myles Dillon (ed.), *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 14 (Dublin, 1953; repr. 1975), 2.42–4

[56]Ibid. 2.40.

[57]RIA MS 23 N 12 (488), p. 206. This version has: *is gur le hubhallaibh na ccrann ccaithne do mhealladh*, with omission of *an bhantracht.*

[58]Standish Hayes O'Grady (ed.), *Silva Gadelica: A Collection of Tales in Irish* (London, 1892), 245 (British Library MS Egerton 1782, fol. 30v). The fifteen trees and shrubs are – in the order presented in *Aidedh Ferghusa* – wild apple (*aball*), blackthorn (*draigen*), willow (*sail*), rowan (*cáerthann*), hazel (*call* (*coll*)), ash (*uinnsenn*), bramble (*dris*), oak (*dair*), alder (*fern*), whitethorn (*scé*), holly (*cuilenn*), elder (*trom*), birch (*beithe*), poplar (*crithach*), yew (*ibar*).

[59]J. G. O'Keeffe (ed.), *Buile Ṡuibhne*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 1 (Dublin, 1931; repr. 1975), 35.972–36.1011. A series of fourteen trees and shrubs very similar to that of *Aidedh Ferghusa* is to be found in this poem in *Buile Ṡuibhne.* There is no mention of the willow or elder, but ivy (*eidhinn*) is included at l. 908.

[60]*CIH* v 1874.13–14. The sweet wild fruit are blackberries (*sméra*), bilberries (*fraochóga*), hazelnuts (*cna*) and strawberries (*suba*). The coarse wild fruit are acorns (*dercain*), haws (*scechóra*), hips (*mucóra*) and rowanberries (*caora*). See discussion at Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, 306–7.

most of the country. There is a record in the *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland* (1586–8) of a bundle of trees called the *wollaghan* being sent to England as a gift to the Lord of Leicester and Mr Secretary Walsingham.[61] The word *wollaghan* is an anglicisation of Irish *ubhla caithne* 'arbutus-apples'. The sender explains that these trees 'have blossoms and fruit green or ripe all the year long, and the same of a very pleasant taste and growing nowhere else but in one part of Munster'.

In conclusion, I do not claim that the identification of Derrynacahney as *Doire na Caithne* 'the oak-wood of the arbutus' constitutes a conclusive argument against Sheehy Skeffington and Scott's theory that this tree was introduced to Ireland by prehistoric miners. One has only to think of the rapid spread of alien species such as rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*), Japanese knotweed (*Reynoutria japonica*) and montbretia (*Crocosmia* × *crocosmiiflora*) in the recent past. Nonetheless, the existence of the place-name *Doire na Caithne* in an area far from prehistoric mining activity seems to me to bolster the case in favour of the native status of the arbutus. The remoteness of this area is emphasised with dramatic phraseology in the fourteenth-century *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* 'the battle-triumphs of Turlough': *do lenadar a dtromchrecha agus a dtimána agus a dtáinte … go críchaib coilltecha cumardoimne cnocárdmóra carraigbána cíchbennacha cabáinlethna conardaingne na cráibEchtge, agus do roinnetar a náirdchrecha agus a nédála ann sin* 'they (the forces of the king Turlough O'Brien) followed their weighty booty and their droves and their herds … into branched Echtge's wooded deep-valleyed lofty-hilled white-rocked pap-peaked wide-sloped firm-pathed territories, and divided their great spoils and their plunder there'.[62]

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[61]William A. Watts, 'Contemporary accounts of the Killarney woods, 1580–1870', *Irish Geography* 17 (1984), 1–13, at 3; Hans Claude Hamilton (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland 1586–88* (London, 1877), 240.

[62]Seán Mac Craith and Standish Hayes O'Grady (eds and trans.), *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh: The Triumphs of Turlough*, 2 vols, ITS 26 (London, 1924 (1929)), 139.31–4; trans. ITS 27 (London, 1925 (1929)), 123). [I have revised the editors' translation, as some of the descriptive adjectives were left untranslated in their edition].