Lament for the Harp Tree

There are settings of this tune in the following manuscript sources:

– **Colin Campbell**'s "Nether Lorn Canntaireachd," ii, 112-116 (with the title "McLeod's Lament");
– **Donald MacDonald**'s Manuscript, ff.207-215 (with the title "Lament for the Tree of Hundreds");
– **Peter Reid**'s manuscript, ff.3-4;
– **Donald MacDonald jr.**'s manuscript, f.30;
– **C. S. Thomason**'s manuscript, f.24;
– **D. S. MacDonald**'s manuscript, ii, 42ff;

and in the following published sources:

– **Angus MacKay**'s *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*, pp.85-8;
– **David Glen**'s *Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd*, 140-3;
– **C. S. Thomason**'s *Ceol Mor*, pp.181-4;
– **William Stewart, et.al., eds., The Piobaireachd Society Collection*, (first series) iii, 14-17;

**Colin Campbell** sets the tune as follows:
Lost Pibroch

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Colin Campbell develops the tune in a slightly different way to the other scores, having a siubhal singling not replicated elsewhere. The first variation in the other scores then appears as a doubling to this, and Campbell omits the second variation singling and doubling which appears in the other scores, moving straight to the taorluath and crunluath variations singling and doubling. In the Nether Lorn the tune usually called "Kinlochmoidart's Lament" is called "Cumbh craoibh na Teid" while this one, as noted above, bears the title "McLeods Lament."

Donald MacDonald treats the tune as follows:
The reader will note the little run downs from B to low G, *hioenem*, in the ground:. There are numerous other little idiomatic touches likely to interest the thoughtful player.

**Donald MacDonald jnr.**'s setting departs interestingly from his father's in timing the ground in an implied 6/8. This is a pleasing way to handle a ground that can sound laborious if played too squarely in 4/4 time. The transcript of the original MS shows the tune developed only as far as the *siubhal* and only very lightly graced:
and so on.

**Peter Reid**, although his overall style is very similar to Donald MacDonald snr.'s, has a number of different stylistic nuances. He does not double the ground as MacDonald does, and his score is notated only as far as the taorluath breabach singling, ending "Then follows the
doubling of the above & a Cruinluidh Breabich & D C." The following gives an idea of his approach:
and so on.

D. S. MacDonald's score adds little to the expressive possibilities of the tune and is not reproduced here.
The published settings of "The Lament for the Harp Tree" show great stability in organisation, timing and ornamentation. Angus MacKay, David Glen, C. S. Thomason, William Stewart and G. F. Ross all take similar routes through this tune. David Glen's approach may stand as typical:
THE LAMENT FOR THE HARP TREE.

GUMHA CRAOBH NAN TEUD.

Uirlar. Andante grazioso.

Doubling of Uirlar.
Var. 1st. In the style of a march.

Doubling of Var. 1st.

Var. 2nd (Téar-luath.)
Commentary:

Little is know with any certainty about this tune. The earliest written commentary upon it occurs in the printed notes compiled by an unknown hand for Donald MacDonald snr.'s unpublished second volume as follows:
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Cumhadh Chraobh na'n Cheud, OR A LAMENT FOR THE TREE OF HUNDREDS.
This long and grand piece is thought to be the oldest of all the Piobaireachd in the possession of any person, at the present time. A tradition concerning it runs thus: When the Fingallians lived in the Highlands of Scotland, there was an oak near their house, in the Isle of Skye, under which they feasted; and, after having enjoyed the visit of the shell once or twice, they danced to the harp. Each man's dog was bound by his owner, and Fingall's dog, whose name was Bran, was tied to a long narrow stone, which was stick into the ground, at a little distance from the tree. The Fingallians had a tree and a stone of this kind in many parts of the Highlands. They had also, in all these places, what is called, in Gaelic, Sornach, Chorre, Fhinn, or the Three Stones; on which stood the cauldron for boiling their venison. They always remained in one place, till the deer of the surrounding hills were consumed, or, until they were surprised by the Danes, or other enemies. In the course of time, the Fingallians all died,--their house was burned, and nothing left that belonged to them in the country, except the old celebrated oak, the three stones, and Bran's stake, which all remained, without visits, or respect being paid to them. A considerable time after, when sheep were brought, in place of deer, two thieves stole some sheep; and having killed them, they hung them up, on the branches of this noble oak. An old huntsman happening to pass this way, and perceiving the remains of the sheep, and their entrails, hanging upon the branches of the tree, (where he used to witness, when a boy,) the most sumptuous feasts, accompanied with music and dancing, he was very sorrowful, and wept much, on his way from the place. It appears, that, previous to that period, he, and some others, were in possession of something similar to the bagpipe chanter, on which they used to play; and he began (being much affected,) to compose the above melancholy air. There is no mention made, of the bagpipe as being a national instrument, in Great Britain, previous to that period. Ossian does not make mention of it in any of his poems; neither did any other writer for a long time after him. The term Pipe, was used prior to the Egyptians. (Donald MacDonald MS, "A Select Collection of the Ancient Music of Caledonia, called Piobaireachd," f.5 (NLS, MS 1680).

"The Lament for the Tree of Hundreds" is also the title for this tune in Peter Reid's MS of 1826 (NLS Acc 22118, ff.3-4).

It is in the earliest published source for this tune, Angus MacKay and James Logan's Ancient Piobaireachd, that the title "Cumha Chraobh na'n Teud. The Lament for the Harp Tree" first appears. Logan's note to the tune says:

This piobaireachd, so unlike all others, is evidently from its style, of very high antiquity. We have not been able to procure any satisfactory account of Cumhadh Craobh nan teud, which is usually translated, "Lament for the Harp Tree," i.e. the tree of strings. It strikes us that this is a bardic expression for the instrument itself, as we should say "the Bag of Pipes." There appears, however, some superstitious opinions connected with it. In the North it is called Bean Sith (Literally the woman of peace, "the good folk." Bean, a woman. Bein, a hill), either from being "the fairy tune," or so named from a noted hill in Sutherland, distinguished as the fairy mountain. The notion that it is a lamentation for the destruction of a tree on which the bards were wont to hang their harps, is too like the practice of the Jews, who, as related in Scripture, when in captivity, hung "their harps on willow trees," to permit of its being received as the just explanation of so singular an appellation." ("Historical and Traditional Notes on the Piobaireachds," p.10).

In his "Historic, Biographic and Legendary Notes to the Tunes" in David Glen's Collection of Ancient Piobaireachd, "Fionn" notes
The name indicates that this tune is reminiscent of the time when the Harp or Clarsach was the popular musical instrument in the Scottish Highlands. There is a tradition in Skye that the famous pipers of the island were in the habit of meeting and having musical competitions at a place called "Rudha Craobh nan teud," the headland of the harp tree, or tree of chords. p.15

Presumably the different titles relate to the similarity in sound between "ceud," meaning a hundred; and "teud" which, according to Dwelly can mean the string of a musical instrument, music in general, the harp, or, indeed, any musical instrument. Linguists dispute, however, that "crann nan teud" actually does mean a harp (Prof. Colm O'Boyle to the writer, private correspondence, October 2004) William Matheson, editor of *The Blind Harper (An Clarsair Dall) The Songs of Roderick Morison and his Music* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, Edinburgh, 1970) thought that the "Harp Tree" tune was the one intended by Rory Dall for his satirical song "Feill nan Crann" in which he laments the decline of his sexual potency (here symbolised by the harp key) and sets sail amidst much ribald mirth and humour to the Uists to find a new one in a birlinn crewed by the lustiest dames in Dunvegan. Matheson surmises that at some stage the word "chraobh" must have been substituted for "crann" giving "chraobh nan teud" rather than "crann nan teud" hence leading to the substitution of Harp Tree for Harp Key, and such formations as "The Tree of Strings" which he considers fanciful. (pp.12-19; 154-7). The following lines give a flavour of the song:

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Chan fhasa leam na 'm bàs
a bhith fo thàir nam ban;
chan fhaod mi dhol 'nan dàil
on dh'fhàthnilch air mo ghean;
's their iad, "Ciod am feum
a dh'fhéudas a bhith ann?
Chaidh ionnstramaid o ghleus
on chaill e fhéin a chrann."
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(trs: I find it no easier than death to suffer the scorn of women; I may not go near them since my ability to please has failed me. "Of what use can he be?" is what they say. "His instrument has gone out of tune since he lost his harp-key.")

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