

Some Reflections on the Poetry of Skye

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APART from a couple of not altogether successful attempts at writing novels in the early twentieth century by Angus Robertson and the Rev. Neil Ross, and the writings, in both fiction and non-fiction of the Rev Kenneth MacLeod, Skye has not really been explored in prose by Gaelic writers. Exceptions are the fictions of Eilidh Watt and Maoilios Caimbeul (the latter more readily identified as a poet), and the journalism of Martin MacDonald. The one native Skye prose writer of international repute, Martin Martin, left nothing, as far as we know, in the language which must surely have been his first.

Alternatively, writers like Seton Gordon, who settled on the island, Derek Cooper, who was of Skye descent, Alan Campbell MacLean, and Margaret MacPherson, and poets like Richard Hugo and Hugh MacDairmid, have all contributed to placing the island firmly on the literary map, but in English.

To get a Gaelic literary perspective on Skye, therefore, we have to look to the poets. Of these there is no shortage and this is true of the world of Gaelic generally. While there is an ancient tradition of storytelling, the stories, being of anonymous authorship, often taking on local details and characteristics, may be said to belong to the entire community, and will frequently have international provenance. The poetry is where we are most likely to find the individual creative voice articulating a specific perception of its environment — actual, historical or imagined.

In Skye, as elsewhere in Gaeldom, poetry may be seen to divide into two basic strands. From early times, there has been a formal domain of professionally trained bards who spoke for their designated clans. Even when the bardic caste had been dissolved, a number of formally untrained poets chose to perpetuate the panegyric tradition. Among these was Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, one of several seventeenth and eighteenth century Gaelic poets who adopted, or were adopted into, the role of clan bard. Domhnall nan Oran, father

of Niall MacLeoid and Iain Dubh Dhomhnaill nan Oran, maintained the custom into the nineteenth century, but was one of the last to do so.

The other poetic order to which Skye has made a distinguished contribution is that which may be called the song tradition. Examples can be found that are clearly of considerable pedigree, and which continued to thrive into the late twentieth century. They still thrive, if we include the works of Uist-born but partly Skye-raised brothers, Calum and Rory MacDonald, the Runrig songsters.

Skye had its representatives of the old Bardic caste. The O' Muirigheasains have been identified in the service of the MacLeods in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while Cathal MacMhuirich, a member of the noted Clanranald bardic family, appears to have transferred his allegiance from Clan Ranald to MacDonald of Sleat sometime in the mid seventeenth century. Cathal's poems include an elegy to John MacLeod of Dunvegan and one commemorating the daughter of Donald Gorm of Sleat. There were, no doubt, many more in a tradition shared by Scotland and Ireland, and with recorded examples traceable back to the thirteenth century. Clan Neacail and MacKinnon, among others, may have been of lesser power and influence than the 'big two', but their chiefs presumably aspired to employ the most essential retainers associated with their status. Whether such lesser figures could provide full-time employment for a bard is debatable, but there is also evidence of a caste of itinerant bards, whose services could presumably be hired for fixed or flexible periods of time.

In Skye, as elsewhere, the profession of Clan bard came under pressure from central authority. In 1609 the Statutes of Iona committed chiefs to "the banishment of vagrant bards" which would lead to the eventual dissolution of the professional caste of trained bards. This did not, however, cause an immediate separation between the clan aristocracies and the practice of poetry.

In an essentially oral culture, it was not unusual for tradition-bearers, including poets, to retain tens of thousands of lines of poetry, from which they could recite squibs or epics at the drop of a hat. Aspiring bards did not have to go far to gain access to the works of past masters. Not having completed years of study like professional poets, these youngsters were unlikely to be skilled in the classical language of their predecessors. However, having heard the material, or versions of it, they would have known its shape and content, and been able to articulate those conventions through their own vernacular.

And once they had begun to master the craft themselves, those bards by inclination could still rely on a cultural continuity that ensured a welcome for their panegyrics from a Gaelic aristocracy (as well as a relatively homogenous community) still aware of their heritage.

One of the most notable of those “unofficial clan bards” who came to prominence in the seventeenth century, was a member of that aristocracy. She was Mary MacLeod, known to the Gaelic world as Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh. Although born in Harris, not Skye, she was closely associated with the MacLeods of Dunvegan, and spent a considerable part of her life on the island.

John Macinnes referred to her as “one of the most important mediators between classical and vernacular Gaelic”, whose “essentially formal court poetry, almost wholly confined to the affairs and personages of Clan MacLeod” was “distinguished by its rhetorical assurance, the clarity of its imagery and its declamatory eloquence.”

Although the clan society she lived in may have seemed outwardly stable it was, in reality, a society in transition. First, one of the key elements in the Statutes of Iona had committed Highland chiefs to providing their heirs with a southern education, thus introducing succeeding generations of the Gaelic aristocracy to the metropolitan fleshpots. Second, the so-called “Union of the Crowns” had shifted the seat of political power Edinburgh to London. Together, these developments began the process of alienating the clan aristocracy from their own communities and the culture that defined them.

Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh’s subtle observations about the effects of those trends on the equilibrium of her society earned her the displeasure of her sponsors. In fact, she was exiled from Dunvegan on at least one occasion — though for the most part, her poetry resounds with praise of her kinsmen, their qualities and attributes. A number of her poems have retained their popularity in the Gaelic song tradition, “*An Talla bu Ghnath le MacLeoid*” (The Hall where MacLeod was at ease) being one of the best known. Said to have been written as a premature elegy for Sir Norman MacLeod, who was apparently still alive at the time of its composition, it carries a strong sense of a broader change of circumstance than would have been effected by the passing of a single individual.

Iain MacCodrum was a contemporary of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, and would have been barely into his teens when Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh died in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Iain also became a clan bard and was still attached to MacDonald of Sleat in his seventieth year in a similar arrangement as Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh had

with MacLeod of Dunvegan. Iain seems to have spent most of his life in his native North Uist, from which he wryly observed the activities of his neighbours as well as demonstrating a remarkable awareness of the activities of the wider world, national and international. A noted seanchaidh, he was said to be able to recite the poems of Ossian for hours on end.

A dialogue between a friend and enemy of whisky, as well as a song in dispraise of Domhnall Ban's bagpipes are characteristic examples of his poetry, which also includes a number of praise poems and elegies to MacDonald dignitaries. While we cannot truly claim Iain as a domiciled Skye bard in the same sense as Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, he no doubt visited Sleat on more than one occasion since he was bard to Clan Donald.

An Ciaran Mabach, otherwise Archibald MacDonald, was an illegitimate son of Sir Alexander MacDonald, 16th Baron of Sleat and chief of Clan Donald. There are only a very few surviving poems by this seventeenth century contemporary of Iain Lom, the Lochaber poet. A couple are elegies to his brother Sir James, but the work that lends him distinction is a poem known by its second line, "*B' Annsa Cadal air Fraoch*". This piece of work demonstrates that the poet was a precursor to Duncan Ban MacIntyre as a celebrant of nature, and in particular of the deer.

The imaginative intensity may not be sustained for as long as it is in MacIntyre's great pibroch poem, "*Moladh Beinn Dorain*", yet MacDonald's treatment of his subject is both novel and effective. He addresses the deer, individually and collectively, as his beloved (neatly punning on the similarity between the words "*graidh*" for herd and "*gradh*" for love), while at the same time perceiving stag and hind as lovers making their evening tryst.

Another noted Skye poet of the seventeenth century (and who lived into the eighteenth) was a native of Strath, and a member of the MacKinnon gentry, Lachlann Mac Thearlaich Oig. Like *An Ciaran Mabach* Lachlann had a distinctive relationship with "the blanket" though his was as producer of, rather than produced, illegitimate children. He is best known for his indictment of the aristocracy of his native island. On one occasion, while he was down on his luck, he was refused hospitality at Dunvegan and composed a poem about the experience. In this poem, variously known as "*Latha Siubhal Sleibh*" (One Day, Travelling the Moor) and "*Oran do Dhaoine Uaisle Araidh*" (A Song to Certain Gentry), he imagines meeting the three qualities of Generosity, Love and Liberality who were outcasts like himself from the great houses of the Highlands.

In a note on the poem in his anthology of eighteenth century verse, Ronald Black referred to such a personification of abstractions as non-Gaelic. He suggested its derivation came from contemporary English Augustan verse since MacKinnon spent three years at school in Nairn, where he is said to have learned to write both poetry and prose in English. Like Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, Lachlann was an unwitting observer of, and commentator on, social and political shifts which were gnawing at the underbelly of the old Gaelic world and which would eventually destroy that world forever.

There were also better times for Lachlann. He is recorded as having been a member of an informal literary group known as the ‘Talisker Circle’, who met at the home of John MacLeod of Talisker. Other members included Roderick Morrison, known as *An Clarsair Dall* (The Blind Harper), *Am Piobaire Dall* (The Blind Piper), otherwise known as John MacKay, and *Iain Mac Ailein* (John MacLean).

Of all the members of this group only MacLean, from Mull and descended from an Ardgour chief, was recorded as bearing the title “Aos-Dana”, giving him status as a senior poet, if not formally the clan bard. Other than being an occasional visitor, his connections to Skye seem unclear. Both his fellow visitors had more obvious links. Morrison, a poet as well as harpist, was born in Bragar, Isle of Lewis, received his musical training in Ireland, and became Dunvegan’s unofficial clarsair in 1681. Seven years later, political differences caused him to remove from Dunvegan, but he seems to have returned to Dunvegan later in life and was buried there. MacKay, also a poet, blind only from the age of seven, learned his piping skills from Pdraig Og Mac Cruimein, of the legendary Boreraig family.

For the purposes of our theme, though, MacKay’s most significant Skye connection derives from his daughter’s marriage to a man from Strath, which gave him a grandson called Uilleam Ros. Every culture has its troughs and peaks; periods when there is a sense of marking time. During such periods verse and prose is often craftmanlike, pleasing to the audience, but with no sense of edge, of taking risks, of making something new. Then, there comes a time when the energy starts to flow, where there is a new focus and things begin to happen. The eighteenth century was one such period for Gaelic poetry, to which Uilleam Ros was central.

While Neil Mac Mhuirich, who may be counted the last of the great Mac Mhuirich bardic family, was still writing poetry in the classical language (as well as the vernacular) during the eighteenth century, this period is perhaps best

characterised by its “new wave” of poets. While these poets were deeply aware of the bardic tradition, they also brought something else to the craft. Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) son of a Moidart clergyman, was the unquestioned driving force in this tide of innovation. He was first poet to marry the framework of ceol mor, or piobaireachd, as it’s more generally known, to the making of poetry. He composed poems on the seasons and he wrote the epic account of a galley’s voyage, “*Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*.” which remains one of the greatest single achievements in Gaelic literature. With praise poems for whisky, plaid and language, and lament for a pet pigeon, he could be said to have brought vernacular material as well as language into the mainstream of Gaelic verse.

As Hugh MacDiarmid provided a lodestone for lowland Scottish poets in the twentieth century, and Sorley MacLean did likewise for the Gael, Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was the model for his younger contemporaries. Duncan Ban MacIntyre used the piobaireachd form to praise a mountain in his “*Moladh Beinn Dorain*”. Like the literate Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Rob Donn, who could neither read nor write, used the access he was given to the English satirical poetry of Alexander Pope (read to him by the local minister) to give a new resonance to his poetry. There were others, like the aforementioned MacCodrum and Sileas na Ceapaich, whose work included hymns, praise poems and laments, including the noted song “*Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh*.”

Finally, there was also Uilleam Ros. Educated in Forres, he spent most of his short life in his mother’s native Gairloch, where he worked as a schoolmaster, although he first had the opportunity to travel throughout the Highland and Islands with his father who had obtained work as a peddler. Those travels were to provide Ros with the encounter that would provide him with the central theme of his work, the object of the poems on which his reputation essentially stands. When he was in Stornoway he met and fell in love with his kinswoman, Marion Ross.

But he was equally eloquent on other themes. I would doubt whether any Gael, of a certain age, who studied Gaelic at school, does not recognise the words that form the opening couplet to his “*Oran an t-Samhraidh*” (Song of Summer).

*O mosglamaid gu suilbhir ait,
le sunndachd ghasd, is eireamaid [...]
(O let’s awake with merry joy,
with ardent speed, and get up [...])*

The language is heightened, dense and rich, the poetic craft intricate: the whole effect is to convey a tremendous sense of exhilaration.

Another of his songs, this time in praise of Gairloch, is presented in the form of a sequence of reflections during a journey through the Southern Highlands where, as an asthmatic and consumptive, he had been sent for the sake of his health. In contrast, a poem in praise of whisky reveals the lighter side of Uilleam Ros. His refrain for the poem quotes Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, “*Ho ro, gur toigh leinn drama*” (Ho ro, we like our dram), while the verses variously offer the drink as a cure for stammering, send an old man to flirting, and make the miser a warm host, among other attributes. He also had his own “Holy Willie” to deal with, a moralistic schoolmaster who blotted his copybook by impregnating his own maidservant.

His lament for Charles Edward Stuart — “*Soraidh Bhuan do’n t-Suaineas Bhan*” (Last Farewell to the White Cockade) — reads as the personal statement of a Jacobite sympathiser, not the conventional “*cumha*” we might have expected from one who deferred to tradition, adopted traditional modes. Like his contemporaries, Ros was immersed in those traditions, but he was also a man of his times.

But if those poems are coloured by aspects of his personality, social or political, the love poetry, which, for succeeding generations, has defined him, is infused with a sense of the man’s deepest being. Rejected by Marion Ross and further stricken by news of her marriage to a Mersey sea-captain, the joy he expressed on first meeting her turned to the most melodic despair.

Some of his poems also demonstrate his literary sophistication. In “*Cuachag nan Craobh*”, he addresses his complaint to a cuckoo that strikes up its call in a tree beneath which he happens to be lying. His song “*Oran Cumhaidh*” (Song of Lament) incorporates the traditional tale of an Irish harper who threatened murder in the name of love as well as well as a couple of classical Greek references.

But the poem that has become known simply as “*Oran Eile*” (Another Song), plays no such games: in the third line, “*tha durrag air ghur ann am chail*” (a worm is broody in my being) he establishes the metaphor for his condition, dying of love and tuberculosis. An utterly moving poem, its effect on Sorley MacLean was potent, attracting his attention through poetry:

*Uilleam Ros, de chanamaid
ag coinneachadh taobh thall a bhais?
Dheanainn luaidh air d’Oran Eile.*

(William Ross, what would we say
meeting on the other side of death?
I would mention your Oran Eile.)

And in prose, Maclean observed, “The strange thing about it to me is that such a perfection of self-conscious technique should accompany such poignancy of emotion [...]” MacLean himself would achieve a similar marriage in many poems, of which “*Coin is Madaidhean-allaidh*” (Dogs and Wolves) is a supreme example. The poet himself said it came to him in the middle of the night, as if from a dream.

If the poets discussed so far belong to the canon of Gaelic literature, as defined by John MacKenzie, author of “*Sar-obair nam Bard Gaelach*”, and William J Watson author of “*Bardachd Ghaidhlig*” there were others, some anonymous, some identifiable, who made important contributions to the literature of Skye.

The recent collection of songs from Skye, “*Orain an Eilein*”, edited by Christine Martin, has done a great service in bringing together a wide range of material, some of which I have already referred to. These include Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruadh, Lachlann Mac Thearlaich Oig and Uilleam Ros, all of whom composed poetry that was intended to be sung. In that context, it is appropriate to reflect that songs we have taken for granted, as songs, should also be counted as poetry.

Among the many striking songs in “*Orain an Eilein*” “*Na Feidh am Braigh Uige*” (The Deer in the Braes of Uig) is undated, and anonymous. With its hunter lying on the moor, without coming home, this haunting song seems to me to carry a distinct echo of the Border Ballad, “Twa Corbies”. Many of the other anonymous songs seem accidentally so: the subject matter is so specific, a dignitary mourned or a lover celebrated or a lover betrayed.

Although we know that Beathag Mhor composed “*B’e siud an cul bachallach*” (That was the curly head of hair) not much is known about her personal life, other than the fact that she was from Duntulm and had a relationship with Martainn a Bhealaich, with whom she had a child. She is thought to have lived during the latter seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and was a dairymaid to the Martin family. However, she was not deemed good enough for their son to marry. Her own child was taken into the custody of his father’s family, and she was obliged to observe her beloved bringing a bride home from across the Minch. Out of the resultant anguish came the small corpus

of songs that survive. Beyond the vibrant directness of her language, and her craft, the quality that comes across most is an unusual generosity of spirit.

Tormod MacNeacail, (Norman Nicolson) son of the Clann Neacail of Sgoirebreac, was born at the end of the eighteenth century so his work really belongs to the nineteenth century. He is particularly remembered for one song, “*S gann gun dirich mi chaoidh*”, lamenting the fact that he had been banned from the deer-forest on the instructions of his uncle, who happened to be a factor for Lord MacDonald. Tormod was to eventually die in Australia, having migrated there via Canada.

There is also a suggestion that Anna NicGilleathain from Sleat composed her song of unrequited love, “*Tha mi fo churam 's na ho ro eile*”, for Tormad MacNeacail. She addresses her beloved as “Tormod” and there is a reference to her willingness to follow him across the ocean. However, like the relationship between Beathag Mhor and Martainn a Bhealaich, class and parental hostility blighted the relationship between Anna and Tormod.

Donald MacLeod, who had connections with the MacLeods of Raasay, is known to modern Gaels as Domhnall nan Oran, father of the more acclaimed Iain Dubh. John MacKenzie’s book “*Sar-obair nam Bard Gaelach*” includes two poems by “*Am Bard Sgiathanach*” (The Skye Bard) who is identifiable as Domhnall nan Oran. Domhnall saw himself as occupying the role of Bard to the Clan MacLeod, and the two poems MacKenzie included had themes that reflected this aspiration. The poet’s reputation now tends to rest on his satire on the “Black Elders of Lonmore” (*Eildearan Dubh a Loin Mhoir*) who refused to baptise his children.

Given that one of his sons, *Iain Dubh Dhomhnaill nan Oran* (Black John, son of Donald of the Songs) is said to have had knowledge of the black arts, maybe the elders knew more than they let on! Of Donald’s two literary sons, Niall, who went to Edinburgh and was employed in the tea trade, was by far the more popular in his own time and for much of the twentieth century.

There is something of the florid about Niall’s poetry, a sense of “putting on the style”. There is no lack of technique or feeling for the language since his eloquence is undoubted and unforced. Unfortunately, the real spark that ignites the imagination of any reader is often missing. His praise poem for the island, while attractive, is essentially decorative rather than profound. There is also the question whether some of the songs attributed to him in his collection, like “*Clarsach an Doire*” should not actually belong in the Iain Dubh canon.

Iain Dubh, on the other hand, had no such pretensions. He was a merchant seaman, whose alleged knowledge of “the black arts” sounds suspiciously like the hypnosis and sleight of hand he may have acquired from a stage magician. Iain composed songs that addressed their themes with a refreshing directness. The pleasures and anguishes of the mariner’s life are dealt with both poignantly and with sharp wit as appropriate, in language that gives the impression of being built on conversational speech patterns, while the rhythms and rhyme schemes are evidence of his craftsmanship.

The Macleod brothers could be regarded as economic exiles since they were perhaps less touched than others by the great upheavals affecting their homeland. Niall, however, does address the Clearances in his composition “*Muinntir a Ghlinne Seo*” (People of this Glen).

It was another Skye poet who, though also living in exile, gave persuasive voice to the people under threat, and to their predicament. A reference in one of the songs of *Mairi Mhor nan Oran* (Great Mary of the Songs) indicates she was provoked into verse on being imprisoned after having been falsely accused of theft. Whatever the cause, it released a muse in Mary MacPherson (née MacDonald) that would speak, with passion and eloquence, for her native island and its suffering people.

Mairi Mhor was not an innovator, in language or technique. Her techniques were tried and tested, the language she had in abundance. Mairi Mhor was also not a political sophisticate. She blamed the “*Sasunnaich*” for rack-renting and clearing her people, though the guilty parties were to be found much closer to home among the land-owning classes.

What Mairi Mhor brought to her poetry was a passionate commitment to the island and its people, and an unquenchable *joie de vivre*. That her songs inspired those who heard them is clear from accounts of her presence on public platforms, including the first National Mod, where she won a standing ovation, but no prizes. She rubbed shoulders with, and addressed poems to, members of the Land Law Reform movement leadership, like Charles Fraser MacIntosh. She also celebrated New Year’s Day shinty matches between the Gaels of Glasgow. This may be why she composed songs like “*Nuair Bha Mi Og*” (When I was Young), which, for all that it could have become bogged down in nostalgia, comes across as a celebration of life, nature and survival. “*Eilean a’ Cheo*” (Island of Mist) could be read as Mairi Mhor’s Battle Hymn, and the “*Song of Beinn Li*” her victory song.

She may, with some justice, be regarded as the Laureate of the Highland Land League, but there was more to her than just that. Mairi Mhor's songs have become an essential part of the repertoire of Gaelic singers, not only because of their fine melodies but because her fine words still resonate with life and relevance. Her status as a poet, separate from the music also remains significant: her influence on the poets of the twentieth century is marked. More importantly, many of Mairi Mhor's songs remained in the memory of the Skye tradition-bearers, many of whom were themselves bards.

Perhaps because of the development of recording facilities, we now have access to the works of a considerable number of song poets from the twentieth century, and even those of a few earlier nineteenth century practitioners like the soldier-poet Iain Mac Dhomhnaill Mhic Alasdair. His composition, "*Airigh Luachrach Uige*" (Uig's Rushy Sheiling) survives, though most of his songs have been lost.

My own recollections of the two traditional bards I knew, Angus Fletcher and the Skipper, is that they could as readily have performed a song of Mairi Mhor's as one of their own. In fact, there is every reason to assume that all their fellow bards would have been able to do likewise. Although Sorley MacLean was no singer (he described himself as a "singer manque") his enthusiasm for Mairi Mhor was such that I am sure he could have recited as much of her work as a singer might have sung.

We will return to Sorley presently, but the continuing strength of the song tradition through the century deserves attention, given that compulsory education since 1872 had guaranteed Gaels literacy in English, while placing their own culture firmly on the margin. Yet the tradition endured, It survived the demise of the ceilidh house, in which a community congregated for its cultural exchanges and in the works of writer/performers like Calum and Rory MacDonald, it may be said to survive still.

It is not so long since every community had its own bard. Some of them are still remembered, some are on record, many are lost. I remember an old neighbour recalling that, in Idrigil, the Uig township of less than 40 crofts to which I belong, three neighbouring houses were each home to a bard. While I have no idea whether Seonaidh Mor 'Ain Chaimbeul was one of these three bards, his brother, Uilleam 'Ain Chaimbeul, did compose verses. Unfortunately, Uilleam had become religious by the time I was old enough to have had any interest in his songs, so I never heard any of his work. Nevertheless, in later life, he would still chant a traditional and utterly local song like "*S fhad bhuan fhin bonn Beinn*

Eadarra” (Far from me the foot of Ben Edra). I did hear Angus Fletcher, who lived across the bay, perform his own songs on more than one occasion, and the Skipper — Iain MacNeacail, a distant relative — on many occasions.

Domhnall 'Ain Shomhairle is someone whose name often arose in family conversations, as he was my father's first cousin (and apparently a bit of a character), so it was intriguing to find two of his love songs in Christine Martin's anthology. However, she did not include the song most people remember him by, which recalls how he pawned his father's gramophone in order to buy drink. Domhnall 'Ain Shomhairle was a soldier, as was Seonaidh Mor 'Ain Chaimbeul, who saw action during the First World War. I also note a Niall MacNeacail, from Brogaig, who may also have been a relative of mine. He, like Seonaidh Mor 'Ain Chaimbeul, seems to have emigrated to Australia.

There are others, like Charles Matheson from Braes, known to most as Tearlach a Phost, and Staffin-born Neil Beaton, whose by-name was Neil Gow. Their works have tended to be known to, and highly regarded by, singers, but have remained, until the Martin book, firmly in the oral tradition. Perhaps the most interesting figure in that anthology is Catriona Douglas. She is responsible for one of the most popular (if also one of the least memorable) songs in the Gaelic repertoire, “Morag of Dunvegan”. Christine Martin also credits Catriona Douglas with authorship of songs like “*Nochd gun chadal*” (Tonight without sleep) and “*Chaill mi mo chridhe 's mi og*” (I lost my heart while still young), both of which have the timeless quality of a classic folk song.

Only three of the twentieth century Skye song poets have had their work published in collected form. Some years ago the School of Scottish Studies produced an album of the songs of Calum Ruadh MacNeacail, from Braes, with a book from Gairm Publications. Although his titles indicate a certain bardic ambition, with poems addressing the sinking of the “Hood”, the Battle of Arnhem, the Paris Peace Treaty and the Nuremberg Trials, among other public themes, the result is workmanlike rather than inspired. A song to Spring, on the other hand, offers no rhetorical flight of fancy, but stays rooted in the decidedly unsentimental reality of the dung heap, from which he must gather manure to fertilise his crops.

A small selection of Angus Fletcher's work was assembled in a shared publication with the Skipper and produced, with accompanying cassette, by Catriona Montgomery as a small pamphlet publication. Angus's reputation rests on his facility for humorous topical verse, although he also composed love poetry.

Fletcher's stable-mate in that venture, would later be the subject of an academic thesis by Tom McKean, published under the title, "Hebridean Songmaker: Iain MacNeacail of the Isle of Skye". Universally known as the "Skipper", although never a mariner, he once told me, "If I had known when I was young that people would ever take my poetry seriously, I'd have taken it more seriously myself." McKean assembled thirty out of the hundred poems he reckoned to have composed, and revealed a man of many moods, deep knowledge of his own tradition, and the same eloquent directness that characterised the poems of Iain Dubh Dhomhnaill nan Orain. Humorous verse, social comment, gentle satire and love poetry feature, but he will be best remembered, perhaps, for his song composed in the Normandy trenches during World War Two, "*Nochd gur luaineach mo chadal*" (Restless my sleep tonight).

The other Skye-man to leave a memorable poetic record of the same conflict was a different kind of poet altogether. If the Skipper represented the survival of an unbroken song tradition, Sorley MacLean, while immersed in that tradition, brought influences and qualities to Gaelic poetry that projected it into an orbit where it now stands among the great literatures of the world.

Sorley was not the first Gaelic writer of the twentieth century to have had a university education, nor was he the first to essay poetry. The Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, although born on the Isle of Eigg, was of Skye parentage. He attended Glasgow University, though ill-health prevented him taking a degree. Similarly, the Rev. Neil Ross was an Edinburgh University graduate, as was the Rev. Angus MacKinnon, who followed the example of Dugald Buchanan, in destroying all his secular verse. This is a great pity because his religious poetry has considerable subtlety and character. MacLeod was Marjorie Kennedy Fraser's collaborator, while Ross's attempt at an epic account of the Second World War, "Armageddon" which was curtailed by his death, is essentially reportage, crafted into stately quatrains infused with elements of biblical imagery.

While steeped in his own history to the extent that the young Sorley was reported to have wept for the MacLeans killed at the Battle of Inverkeithing, centuries before — as if it were an event of the previous day — MacLean's was a restless mind. Having studied French, Gaelic and Latin at school in Portree, he went on to study English and French at Edinburgh University. While there he became familiar with, and in the early stages of his career emulated, the poetry of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, though he soon decided that the English language was not a suitable medium for his craft. He was also much taken with, and

influenced by, the seventeenth century English metaphysical poets, and with the poetry of French and Russian symbolists like Baudelaire and Aleksandr Blok, as well as the giant of Anglo-Irish literature, William Butler Yeats.

But Sorley was first and foremost a man of his time, and place. He grew up in the presence of people who had been physically cleared from their land, and who had campaigned for their rights to security of tenure on the land they still occupied. His own uncle was one of the first witnesses to appear in front of the Napier Commission. At a young age, Sorley rejected religion, though discreetly, since he had no wish to cause his parents offence. In later years he observed from more than one public platform that he had been “born into the Free Presbyterian Church; a small sect that consigns all the rest of humanity, and the great majority of its own adherents, to eternal hell-fire and damnation.” He also adopted socialism as a personal philosophy that underwrote his life and much of his work, without ever reducing the poetry to mere polemic, even in such overtly political poems as “*Bana Ghaidheal*” (A Highland Woman) and “*Calbharaidh*” (Calvary).

Given his own chronological proximity to her time, and sympathy with the cause she represented, it is hardly surprising that Sorley regarded Mairi Mhor nan Oran as a significant influence on his work. Using both his awareness of the crofter’s struggle, and Mairi Mhor’s place in it, to bear on the convoluted politics of the time as Fascism spread across Europe, for the urban poverty Sorley observed in “*Calbharaidh*”, and its rural equivalent in “*Bana Ghaidheal*”, Mairi Mhor was an appropriate model.

He had other Gaelic models, of course: he was particularly drawn to the old, usually anonymous, songs that seemed to speak from their creators’ being. Though no singer himself, Sorley sought to make his words sing for him. Indeed, the distinguished composer Ronald Stevenson who was a friend of Sorley’s, and who set a number of his poems to music, has remarked that Sorley’s work is difficult to set to music, because there is so much music in the words already.

The unrequited love that Uilleam Ros had for Marion Ross (like that of Yeats for Maud Gonne) struck a particular chord with MacLean, whose own blighted love-life in the 1930s provided the core theme for “*Dain do Eimhir*”. Here, his troubled relationships with two women are interwoven with the politics of the Spanish Civil War, filial duties, elements of Celtic mythology, European history, and an extraordinary visionary quality. This latter element crystallises in poems like “*Coin is Madaidhean Allaidh*” (Dogs and Wolves)

which Sorley claimed came to him entire, in the middle of the night, as if he had dreamed it.

Once he had completed the set of poems centred on that Eimhir sequence (which included the long poem “*Coilltean Ratharsair*” (The Woods of Raasay), MacLean’s output was relatively slow. Five short poems set him, along with fellow Gael George Campbell Hay, among the major war poets of 1939-45. Sections from the long poem “*An Cuilthionn*”, parts of which he had reservations about, eventually appeared in print, as did his unfinished meditation on “The Cave of Gold”. Others which have appeared in print include the astonishing “*Hallaig*”, which populates the mind of the reader, as well as the eponymous deserted village, with slender birch trees become young women, striding out in the “dumb living twilight” of the evening.

There must have been times when the poet thought he was in the “dumb living twilight” of his culture. In one poem, he spoke of “*cur smuaintean an cainnt bhasmhor*” (putting thoughts in a dying tongue). But, whatever the statistics say, the reality, particularly in literary terms, has been very different. Sorley MacLean’s achievement has provoked a flowering of Gaelic poetry in the twentieth century that, arguably, at least equals the eighteenth. All the Scottish Gaelic poets who came after him have, at one time or another, acknowledged his influence, including those who were, relatively speaking, his contemporaries.

For the next generation, including myself, Maoilios Caimbeul and the Montgomery sisters, all of us from Skye, Sorley was our literary Cuillin, the peak of twentieth century poetry, taking his place in the ridge of excellence alongside Mairi Mhor, Uilleam Ros and Mairi Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh. Of course, his very greatness could have been an inhibiting factor, but our existence is a demonstration that he has had the opposite effect. Sorley’s openness to other influences, his references to Blok, and the English poet Cornford who was killed in Spain, among others, has encouraged us to follow our own curiosity into diverse alternative fields of influence.

For example, Maolios Caimbeul (a considerable poet, who should be much better known than he is) has pitted his Presbyterian background against a preoccupation with Confucianism. I have explored aspects of zen, as well as the European concision of poets like Miroslav Holub and the tumultuous Latin sensuousness of Pablo Neruda. Catriona Montgomery (who shares MacLean’s lyrical gift) has translated Gerald Manley Hopkins. Morag Montgomery (who, by the way, has not published nearly enough), studied art and shows distinct traces of surrealism. We have all been open to the ‘poetries’ of many cultures,

each without losing sight of the sound qualities and rhythmic currents of our own.

And now that time has placed us in a position of seniority, we can look to a further stream of writers making poetry in, and from, Skye, and in Gaelic. Among the youngest, Aonghas MacLeoid is a native of Skye. Angus Peter Campbell is a native speaker, originally from South Uist, and schooled under the influence of Iain Crichton Smith in Oban. Angus writes poetry and prose in both Gaelic and English. Iain Mac a Phearsain, of Skye and Islay descent, returned from Canada to reclaim his cultural heritage at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, where the present Writer in Residence is an Argyllshire-man, Rob Mac Illechiar, who also came to the college to improve his Gaelic.

In some ways the most improbable Gaelic poets in this most recent wave are already the best known. Meg Bateman (whose poetry is marked by subtle delicacy and candour), also began her journey to Gaelic fluency at Sabhal Mor, having been born and brought up in Edinburgh by English parents. Given her detailed study of the classical poets, it should perhaps be no cause for wonder that she has a facility for compositions that use classical techniques to great effect. Rody Gorman is a Dubliner by birth, and has lately come round to writing in the Irish Gaelic he grew up with, having gained a deserved reputation for his pithy poems in Scottish Gaelic.

All in all, the story of poetry in Skye is a continuing one. My list should not be regarded as inclusive. There are other poets (I suspect both older and younger) making poems according to both old and new rules. What is happening in Skye, and what I have sought to present a historical sketch of here, can be regarded as a microcosm. This ranges from classical bards and song poets, using tried and tested forms, to experimentalists and explorers. It ranges from original genius to the everyday practitioner. In every century, Skye has provided its share. Judging from the available evidence, the well is not about to run dry.

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