A Poet's Response to Sorley Maclean

In this essay I would simply like to say something about what the poetry of Sorley MacLean has meant to me, and what as Gaelic poets we can learn from it.

Let me begin with a biographical note. The first time I ever came across *Dàin Do Eimhir*, was when I was given the Gaelic prize in Fifth Year in the Nicolson Institute, Stornoway, in 1945, by an unusually enlightened Gaelic teacher. I think it would be fair to say that though the poems were new to me (the ambience, however, was familiar to me, at least from the angle of the Spanish Civil War, since I had by then read some Spender and Auden in *Penguin New Writing*) I was overwhelmed by the combination of music and imagery that I found in the book, and indeed it is the volume of poems to which I have returned most often, long after I sensed in Auden and Spender flaws which I did not find in MacLean.

I think it would be worth mentioning that I had been studying Gaelic literature in school and though I admired the love poetry of William Ross, there was little else at that time that seemed to me to be alive with the resonance that a young poet looks for. Later, of course, I have come to admire the masculine, executive power of Iain Lom, the harmonious observation of Duncan Bàn Macintyre, the surrealistic strangeness of, for instance, the storm scene in the 'Birlinn' of Alexander MacDonald. But in the fresh youthfulness of seventeen when the world appears new each day it was not such qualities that I was particularly looking for. I was searching for the throb of the contemporary that I found in a poet like Auden, with his marvellous ability to make the quotidian appear magical.

It was not this exactly that I found in MacLean's work, for MacLean's poetry is not intellectual in the way that Auden's is. However it has the same authority, that confidence which cannot be faked, which is present in all major poetry. This is presumably what is meant by that phrase in the Bible, "for he spoke with authority": someone who knows exactly what he is talking about and does so in unforgettable language. It was an authority which I had not heard often in the Gaelic poetry that I was reading at school and certainly not in the Gaelic poetry of the nineteenth century which avoided facing real issues and withdrew into sentimentalism. Whichever poem one looked at in *Dàin Do Eimhir* one had no sense of hedging, or of hesitation, but rather one felt the thing as it was, the voice of a whole man. On the whole, the poetry I had read until then was occasional, as this was too, but in a different way. I suppose one could say that the Spanish Civil War and a love-affair brought it into being, and in that sense it was occasional, but not as, say, William Ross's poetry was occasional, for side by side with great poems in his work one would find the frivolous and the plain bad. There was something undeviating about MacLean's whole book, *Dàin do Eimhir*: the volume seemed to compose a single poem, the record of a mind and heart engaged in work that was essential to

them, and written too in varying forms which seemed suitable to the twentieth century. I had never before seen in Gaelic poetry a verse like the following:

Choisich mi cuide ri mo thuigse	I walked beside my reason
a-muigh ri taobh a' chuain;	out beside the sea:
bha sinn còmhla ach bha ise	we were together but it was
a' fuireach tiotan bhuam.	keeping a little distance from me.

Nor again had I read in Gaelic anything like the surrealistic 'Coin is Madaidhean - allaidh' or for that matter anything like the image of his loved one putting on a helmet. Gaelic poetry in my experience simply was not like that. And I think also that the strange and eerie drawings in the book by William Crosbie had a great deal to do with my response. They seemed to speak of a new consciousness, and even now as I look at them they remind me of the discoveries of Picasso which I did not then know about, and to suggest something of the sensation of being on a new frontier which is found in the poems themselves.

Now it cannot be said that I could rationalise in this way at that time, but my response was capable of sensing in advance of total understanding a new and extraordinary poetry. I can see now, however, that MacLean was in fact more traditional than I had thought: for instance in his use of a litany of adjectives as in 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa': "Girl of the yellow, heavy yellow, gold yellow hair", a technique widely used in earlier Gaelic poetry.

Nor is it the case that MacLean has ever been, as I have already said, an omnivorous autodidact, as Auden and MacDiarmid were (although he is the most scrupulous of scholars). That is to say, he did not seem particularly interested in the wide range of European thought and ideas, and when he does philosophise or refer to Freud, for example, he does not seem to me to have quite the same power as he has when he is writing the passionate, obsessive lyric. Thus, I did not find in his poetry the perhaps extraneous scholarship of Auden, nor indeed what one might call intellectual fodder.

The poetry is in the passion for, unlike Auden, MacLean does not have the gift of making poetry out of intellectual disquisition. His poetry needs the resonance of passionate commitment to become memorable and this I think can be seen clearly in 'An Tathaich', where he wrestles with the idea of the mortality of his loved one in a rather pedestrian fashion:

Ciod e an ceathramh seòl-tomhais	What is the fourth dimension
a bheir an àilleachd so fa chomhair	that will bring this beauty to the keen perception
sùla, reusain no aon chàileachd	of eye, reason, or any sense
thar fàsaichean glomhair?	over the wastes of the abyss?
Is dé a' chàil thar chàiltean	And what sense beyond senses
a mhothaicheas an àilleachd	will perceive their beauty when neither eye
nuair nach nochd sùil no cluas i,	nor ear will show it,
blas, suathadh no fàileadh...	not taste nor touch nor smell...

The whole poem has an unrelenting, almost plodding, quality which is wholly untypical of MacLean and this is also true of the later poem, 'Eádh is Féin is Sàr-Fhéin'. He is much happier when philosophising if he can find a central image which will generate the poem as in 'A' Chorra-Ghridheach':

Thàinig corra-ghridheach ghiùigeach,	A demure heron came
sheas i air uachdar tiùrra,	and stood on top of sea wrack:

phaisg i a sgiathan dlùth rith'	she folded her wings about her side
a' beachdachadh air gach taobh dhith.	and took stock of all around her.
'Na h-aonar ri taobh na tuinne	Alone beside the sea
mar thuigse leatha fhéin 's a' chruinne,	like a mind alone in the universe,
a ciall-se mar chéill an duine,	her reason like man's —
cothachadh lòin meud a suime.	the sum of it how to get a meal.

MacLean's mind, in other words, does not have the intellectual play of Auden's, but it has a deeper, more obsessive seriousness: one always feels that he is involved and not playing on the surface of things like the Northern Lights.

MacLean is always obsessively concerned with a particular loved person and this brings him much closer to a Donne or a Catullus than to an Auden. Whereas one feels that Auden is not concerned with making an existential choice, one always knows from the agony of MacLean's poetry that this is exactly what he is doing. For instance in 'An Roghainn' he writes:

Cha do lean mi ach an t-slighe chrìon	I followed only a way
bheag iosal thioram thlàth,	that was small, mean, low, dry, lukewarm,
is ciamar sin a choinnichinn	and how then should I meet
ri beithir-theine ghràidh?	the thunderbolt of love?

MacLean is never merely abstract. He is always writing about a specific person, to whom he has committed his whole personality; MacLean makes a 'life choice' in a way that Auden does not.

So, what I did find in MacLean was an intense and strongly focussed power, combined with what was extremely attractive to a youth of seventeen, iconoclasm. I remember that at about that time I had been quite rightly ticked-off for writing a series of spoof 'In Memoriam's' for the school magazine, based on ones which I had seen in the local newspaper. I suppose that I must have been rebellious to a certain extent, especially with regard to the narrow religion in which I had been brought up. This religion composed the funereal and eternal sabbaths of my youth, when a single day lasted as long as a week. The clean, unapologetic lines of a poem like the following spoke to me immediately. Here was a man who said what he thought without prevarication:

> My eye is not on Calvary nor on Bethlehem the Blessed, but on a foul smelling backland in Glasgow where life rots as it grows, and on a room in Edinburgh, a room of poverty and pain: where the diseased infant writhes and wallows till death.

I heard the same note at the beginning of 'Ban-Ghàidheal':

> Hast thou seen her, great Jew, who art called the one Son of God?

It was liberating and astonishing that a Gaelic poet should write: "Christ's cross of crucifixion has been nailing Europe's heart for two thousand years, tearing the wounded spirit."

For myself I did not have the courage to say such things from the heart of a Presbyterian island. The words did not seem to be attacking religion so much as passing it by, assuming its irrelevance. There was a casual mastery in the negligence of the saying.

It seems to me that MacLean's attitude towards religion is one of contempt since it does not deal with the real problems of poverty and the paradoxes on which the human mind is impaled. The movement, which seems to me to be almost wholly

intellectual, of Auden from Freud and Marx to Christianity is not a course that MacLean has taken. The abstractionism of Auden, his hunger for ideas, his attempt to erect Love into a sort of metaphysical God, is much more superficial than MacLean's inward Highland knowledge of what Christ has meant to the woman with the creel.

Thus, this iconoclasm attracted me, but above all the passion and power of the love-poems appealed to me, as love poems of this order must appeal to a seventeen-year-old who is at all interested in poetry and who at that age sways between idealism and desire. The poems had the bitter-sweetness of love and melancholy, and perhaps if the story had had a happy ending they would not have been so interesting. There was, too, an *hauteur*, a Byronic touchiness and pride, which I admired. Sometimes they showed sunny happiness as in the lines:

Air dara tobhta 'n fhuaraidh	On the second thwart to windward,
shuidh thu, luaidh, 'nam chòir	darling, you sat near me,
agus do ròp laist' cuailein	and your lit rope of hair
mu m' chridh 'na shuaineadh òir.	about my heart, a winding of gold.

Sometimes they showed a cutting terseness:

Sgatham le faobhar-roinn gach àilleachd	Let me lop off with a sharp blade every grace
a chuir do bhòidhche 'nam bhàrdachd.	that your beauty put in my verse.

And sometimes too they showed conscious arrogance as in "I gave you immortality, but what did you give me?" *(Dàin do Eimhir*, no. XIX).

Altogether they appealed to the adolescent because of their iconoclasm, their emotional odyssey, their mastery and cleanness of form, and above all, of course, because of the fact that they had been written in Gaelic and were Gaelic in essence.

Shortly after Maclean writes

Choisich mi cuide ri mo thuigse	I walked with my reason
a-muigh ri taobh a' chuain	out beside the sea

he also writes

An sin thionndaidh i ag ràdha:	Then it turned saying:
a bheil e fìor gun cual	is it true you heard
thu gu bheil do ghaol geal àlainn	that your beautiful white love
a' pòsadh tràth Di-luain?	is getting married early on Monday?

In that verse there is the simplicity and directness of Gaelic song, and the specificity of "early on Monday", shows that he is talking about a real event.

For in this sense MacLean's poetry is simple ("Simple, sensuous, and passionate"); it has no real ambiguities. Once one knows the background, the references to Spain, to the political figures of the time and to Gaelic history, there are no problems such as are created by Eliot. It is true, for instance, that a poem may be built up on the ambiguity of a word like 'ciall' (which can mean both 'love' and 'wisdom' in Gaelic), or that there may be paradoxes as in

Mar riutsa tha m' irisleachd	With you my humility
co-ionann ri m' uaill	is equal to my pride,
agus tha m' ùmhlachd is m' àrdan	and my submission and pride
'nan ceòl-gàire buan.	are a permanent laughter of music.

But in no real sense is MacLean difficult. This is quite simply poetry which has been

beaten out on the anvil of circumstance. There do not appear to be any strategies or artifices. The perplexities of life speak through it.

And its great advantage is that it speaks from the heart of a living language, as MacDiarmid's poetry does not. It is the collision of that which had been done before with that which had not which gave the poetry its special resonance. Likewise a special resonance arises from the collision of the Presbyterian mind with the apparent liberation of communism. In only one poem, however, have I found the silliness of a 'poster' communism, when he writes:

> I will put a handle on the sickle of the moon and a steel-headed hammer
> over the feeble gold and through it; and let God call it blasphemy.

This silliness is quite untypical of MacLean who hardly ever writes a poem unless the thought has been deeply felt. And whereas Yeats, whom MacLean greatly admires, has at times a theatricality, this is never the case with MacLean: for MacLean it is what he says that is important, not how he says it. MacLean's output over the years has not been large simply because he will not allow himself to develop within aesthetic categories alone.

With regard to MacLean's influence on other Gaelic poets I had better say at this point that I do not consider my own Gaelic poetry, except perhaps for a few pieces, to inhabit the same air as MacLean's. I admit that many of them have been intellectual in precisely the way that MacLean's poetry is not: and that some of them have been conscious attempts to do something new, again in a way that MacLean's poetry is not. The best of MacLean's work, and especially 'Hallaig', is to me comparable to a somnambulant power, telling the deepest and barest truths about the Highlands, as if their desolations spoke through him.

In the Thirties, MacLean set himself at the centre of his time in a way that Highland poets have not succeeded in doing. That is to say he was aware of a historical process which lay beyond Highland frontiers, though it might also have been considered as a variation on the violence of Highland history itself. I am speaking, of course, of the Spanish Civil War. And, as I have written elsewhere, there is a sense in which the Spanish Civil War does not form the background to these poems, but is the protagonist. The test of whether or not to go to Spain was a deep test of who he was, and therefore a test of the quality of his love. The two things seem to me to be inextricably entwined:

Cha d' ghabh mise bàs croinn-ceusaidh ann an éiginn chruaidh na Spàinn is ciamar sin bhiodh dùil agam ri aon duais ùir an dàin?	I did not take a cross's death in the sore extremity of Spain, and how then should I expect the one new prize of fate?
Cha do lean mi ach an t-slighe chrìon bheag ìosal thioram thlàth, is ciamar sin a choinnichinn ri beithir-theine ghràidh?	I followed only a way that was small, mean, low, dry, lukewarm, and how then should I meet the thunderbolt of love?

There has always hovered in front of MacLean the mirage of the man of action, in the light of whose courage poetry does not seem to be a sufficient activity. But he was aware of the politicisation of love itself, in exactly the same way as Auden was when he wrote:

> Be Lubbe, be Hitler, but be my good daily, nightly.

(Except, of course, that MacLean would not sell his soul in this way since, as he himself says, his loved one would not accept such a soul, once sold.)

Nor is it just the Spanish Civil War that MacLean writes about, for some of his best poems are those set in Africa where he served during the Second World War. In doing this he was not alone, for some of Campbell Hay's best poems were also written about Africa, especially the very fine 'Bizerta'. Derick Thomson was to write about Budapest (and translate poems by Solzhenitsyn) and Donald Macaulay wrote about Turkey and NATO. But MacLean was, I believe, the first Gaelic poet to be centred in the events of his own time, precisely as Auden and Spender were, but I think with greater authenticity. Therefore, perhaps the most important thing that these Gaelic writers and myself learned from MacLean was not concerned so much with subject-matter, for his poetry is highly experiential, but rather was the confidence that one can write about themes of major concern in Gaelic.

But, and this is very important, in being at the centre of events MacLean never lost the sense of his own heritage, nor the tang of his own tongue. There is a sense in which Auden became a lesser poet when he went to America; there is a sense in which MacDiarmid became a lesser poet when he began to write in English and divorced his intellect from his feelings and succumbed to the Scottish disease of pedantry: this is not a charge that can be laid against MacLean, for he was always clear in his own mind what a poem was. Beyond these references to Lorca, Julian Bell, and the others there is the music of Gaelic, there is the example of the world from which he came. At a time when so many poets have styles but no resonance, voices but no depth, when in the end they seem strangely indistinguishable from each other; at a time when cleverness, which has nothing to do with poetry, flashes superficial resemblances of urban imagery, this is very important. In precisely the same way as MacDiarmid, MacLean became a great poet because he remained faithful to his roots, because he spoke from within his own culture. Anyone who reads his essays on Gaelic poetry will quickly realise that MacLean is a man who knows his poets, their limitations and their strengths, and has a true creative historical perspective. He is also proud of being a Gael. 'Hauteur' is a word that constantly recurs in his poetry. He has the values of the clansman, the emphasis on courage and prickliness, but also something that goes beyond that, and that is truthful speaking. He tells us about his own weaknesses, his own despairs, almost in spite of himself.

It is of course highly improbable that we will ever again see the precise conjunction that brought these poems into being: and therefore it is unlikely that we will have such a poet again in Gaelic. For the poems to have been produced one needed to have a sensitive, scholarly man aware of his own heritage, brought face to face with conflicts both political and personal which forced him to shed all sorts of protective devices and walk naked. It is as if a shift in consciousness occurred when these poems appeared: they moved Gaelic poetry on to a new plane, as MacDiarmid did with his lyrics. They should serve us as shields against parochialism and prove that by dealing with subjects outside the Gaelic world we do not have to abandon that which is specifically Gaelic in our work. While 'making it new' MacLean was operating from a traditional base. The confidence to absorb the material was, of course, a result of the pressure and may not be found often, but it is an ideal that one should not neglect.

I do not mean to lay down the laws for Gaelic poets nor to say that they must deal with contemporary issues outside their own world; but merely to say that it can be

done and has been done by MacLean and other poets who followed him. A Gaelic poet *can* stand by a corpse in Africa and in writing about a dead German soldier, he can bring the weight and power of his own tradition to such a poem. One of the weaknesses of Gaelic poetry in the past was the narrowness of subject-matter but this need no longer be the case. *Dàin do Eimhir* proved once and for all that Gaelic poetry is capable of dealing with subject-matters which do not solely belong within its own geographic borders: a Gaelic poet can in fact be mentioned on the same level as the best poets of his time. This is enormously liberating, enormously bracing. And it is what *Dàin do Eimhir* did.

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