

SORLEY MACLEAN IN NON-GAELIC CONTEXTS

When contemplating the literary influences which shaped the development of Sorley MacLean as a writer, there are two areas of complication or confusion. First, although Gaelic was his first language and the language in which he wrote all the poems in *The Collected Poems*, it is not always clear that a poem derives from some Gaelic tradition or an English one or a mixture of the two or neither. Second, MacLean himself often refused to distinguish between literary and political considerations; indeed, at times, he stated that examples or exemplars of political action meant more to him than any poets or literary works.

Although the communities on the islands of Raasay and Skye were largely Gaelic-speaking, his instruction in Primary School and Secondary School was, according to the educational legislation of the time, in English. He was allowed to take Gaelic as a subject because he was considered to be a fluent speaker of the language; if he had not been so considered he would have been unable to study Gaelic. There would have been very few books available to him in Primary School or at home but we know that he had read several histories of Scotland and England and the three volumes of Thomas Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* before he was twelve. An interest in history remained with him all his life. He was introduced to narrative poems of famous battles and heroic figures (mainly English) and to longer, but again heroic, poems by Scott, Aytoun and Macaulay.

At Secondary School in Portree, he felt that he was very well taught by the teacher of Latin; many years later when he was a Headmaster, he found that he could teach Latin and he remembered long sections of Horace and Virgil's *Aeneid*, learnt by heart when he was a boy. Greek was not taught in Portree while he was there but he read for his own pleasure all the Greek literature he could find in translation, including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In French, he read Racine and Corneille, and a range of poems from Villon to Baudelaire and Verlaine. After more of Scott's long poems, the English class moved on to Shakespeare's plays. MacLean enjoyed some of the tragedies but always considered that Shakespeare's best work was the Sonnets. Poetry, mainly nineteenth century, was taught but stopped in the early years of the twentieth century. The work which made the deepest impression on him was Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and, he said, 'for years Shelley was almost everything to me'. The mixture in Shelley of lyric intensity and visionary or political fervour appealed to MacLean and continued to interest him even when he later

found the Romantic rather vapid. There is no mention of fiction (and, indeed, I can hardly remember any discussion of novels with him in later years).

What is apparent is that, even at school age, his reading did not just widen his range of literary or cultural reference but called into question some of the notions of his Highland community, particularly religious beliefs, and fostered other ideas, particularly regarding social injustice and the moral claims of socialism. Between 1929 and 1933 he was a student at the University of Edinburgh, studying English rather than History or Gaelic because he knew that a degree in that subject would ensure employment as a teacher and allow him to support his family. Herbert Grierson, the famous scholar of Donne and the English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, was the Professor, and MacLean felt strongly that the Department, staff and students, were expected to give their accord to the Professor's tastes, the revered figures being Donne and, for the modern period, Eliot, at the expense of, say, Milton, Blake and Yeats. The young student was resentful of this situation but not cussed or bold enough to oppose it. He was awarded a very good Degree. His reading for his studies was extensive but his description of it sounds dutiful rather than excited, and he showed little interest in fiction or in any American poetry apart from the expatriates Eliot and Pound.

A major change took place at the very end of his time as a student. He met two fellow students, James Caird and George Davie, both well read in contemporary poetry and strong admirers of Yeats and MacDiarmid. They encouraged him to read more of the later phase of Yeats's poetry and they introduced him to the poetry of MacDiarmid, and, shortly after, to Christopher M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) himself. MacDiarmid had published his collections of lyrics in Scots, *Sangshaw* and *Penny Wheep*, in 1925 and 1926 respectively, and his long sequence poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* also in 1926. These volumes caused an upheaval in MacLean's thinking about poetry. While he was a student he had been writing some poems in Gaelic but more in English; he destroyed nearly all of them. His poem 'A' Chorra-Ghrìdheach' ('The Heron') was written in 1932 and his retention of it seemed to mark a decision to write only in Gaelic; he did translate it into English and Edwin Muir praised it highly. In a letter to Douglas Young in 1941 he wrote: 'I immediately recognised the lyrics of *Sangshaw* and *Penny Wheep* as supreme. I regarded them in much the same way as I regarded the greatest things of Blake's, things completely new and unbelievable. I still do that. There is nothing on earth like the greatest of these lyrics... [they] are always a miracle and mystery to me.' In the mid-thirties, after graduating and becoming a teacher, MacLean hammered out his political and literary

values with or against the attitudes and knowledge of MacDiarmid, Caird (who was eventually to become an Inspector of Schools) and Davie (who became Professor of Philosophy and wrote a seminal study of Scotland's intellectual and educational history, *The Democratic Intellect*). He was not, in any obvious way, involved in the so-called 'Scottish Renaissance' movement of the 1920s and 1930s, although he provided MacDiarmid with translations of Gaelic poems which the latter worked up for inclusion in his *Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*, published in 1940, with scant acknowledgement to MacLean.

He later declared that, between 1936 and 1939, he became a radically different poet from what he had been before. Various external factors affected him: illness in his parents, the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain, and the rapid development of Fascism, particularly in Germany and Italy. Intellectually, he was stimulated by his wider reading in contemporary poets, especially those with Symbolist tendencies and he lists Yeats, Eliot, MacDiarmid, the Russian Alexander Blok and the French poet Paul Valéry. Actually, there are two senses of Symbolism. The first, perhaps better called by its French term, 'Symbolisme', has a spiritual, esoteric sense in which symbols are keys to access a dimension of meaning beyond the physical. MacLean was not specially interested in this quasi-religious belief. He was more moved by the use of external objects or happenings to stand for and evoke the inner world of the artist (and the reader) and the struggles and strivings of a community. So, for example, the mountain range in Skye, the Cuillins, could represent in his poetry 'difficulty, hardship and heroic qualities as against, as it were, the softness and relative luxury of the woods of Raasay with all their own contradictions'. Although he greatly admired the handling of symbolist schemes in MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and considered it the finest long poem of the century, it was the middle and later Yeats who provided him, despite serious reservations about what MacLean saw as his snobbery and his right-wing political views, with a more useful model for his own efforts. Yeats's Irish nationalism, the struggle in his poetry between a frustrating infatuation with a woman (based on Maud Gonne) and what the poet saw as his public duty, his political involvement, the mesmeric rhetoric and musicality of his verse, and his total commitment to the seriousness of his art – all these elements thrilled MacLean.

In January 1939 he moved from teaching in Skye and later Mull to a school in Edinburgh. The period between this move and his departure to fight in North Africa at the

end of 1941 was the most productive of his life in terms of poetry. Eight of his poems (alongside eight by Robert Garioch) were published in *17 Poems for 6d* in 1940 and most of the poems in *Dàin do Eimhir* (published 1943), 'Coilltean Ratharsair', and the long sequence poem *An Cuilithionn* were written in these three years. It was a time, also, in which he developed friendships with Robert Garioch, Sidney Goodsir Smith, W. Dugald MacColl, Douglas Young and George Campbell Hay, who all contributed in different ways to his encouragement as a poet and challenged aspects of his thinking. The poetry burst out of, and tried to make sense of, an emotional sexual turbulence that took him to the very edge of sanity and a conviction of Europe's helplessness in the face of the growing power of Fascism. For the fashionable, 'socialist' English poets – Auden, Day-Lewis, Spender – he had nothing but contempt. Sometimes, he saw poetry itself, any poetry, as irrelevant to the world situation, a mere aesthetic hobby. In a letter to Douglas Young some months before he went into action in the North African campaign, he wrote: 'Lenin, Stalin and Dimitroff [leading Communist fighter in Bulgaria] now mean more to me than Prometheus and Shelley did in my teens'. He could have added the names of James Connolly, a leader of the Irish Rising executed in 1916, John Maclean, the pacifist Scottish Communist and Nationalist who died in 1923, and the trio of John Cornford, Julian Bell and Lorca who died for their socialist beliefs in the Spanish Civil War. Although he never joined the Communist Party and later became disillusioned with the Russian/Soviet leaders, his commitment to socialist democracy and against injustice remained solid. After the moving war poems, his political intensity is manifest in poems such as 'Hallaig', 'Am Botal Briste', 'Palach', 'A Bheinn air Chall' and 'Screapadal' which face the violence and injustice in his contemporary world. The range of reference, of location, political figures and fellow poets across time and languages, is significant in expressing a global vision of human problems, braveries and pleasures, and, as he said about *An Cuilithionn*, a poetry 'radiating from Skye and the West Highlands to the whole of Europe'.

In November 1942 he was seriously wounded at the Battle of Alamein. After nine months in hospitals in Egypt and Britain, he was discharged and he returned to teaching in Edinburgh. His friendship with MacDiarmid was resumed, but without the earlier ardour, and he enjoyed the company of what has been called the second wave of the Scottish Renaissance in poetry: Garioch, Goodsir Smith, Norman MacCaig, Hamish Henderson, George Campbell Hay, all much the same age as himself, and some of the younger poets such as Iain Crichton Smith and George Mackay Brown. If his ideas on society, religion

and poetry remained much the same, his attitude mellowed, his self-deprecation stopped, and he was happily married with a family of three daughters. When he became Headmaster of Plockton School he had to work hard at administration and there was not much time for writing poetry.

1970 saw a selection of his poetry made available in translation in *Four Points of a Saltire* and in 1971 Iain Crichton Smith's translations appeared as *Poems to Eimhir*; in 1973 Claddagh Records of Dublin brought out *Barran agus Ashhuain*, a record of MacLean reading his own poems with his own translations. He retired from teaching in 1972 and, with the impetus of the newly available translations of his work, he came to be in great demand as a public reader of his poetry. For the remainder of his life he travelled widely and the uniqueness of his writing and his performance came to be recognised around the world. Translations have been made of his poems in many languages and he was honoured with Doctorates in many countries. In Ireland he has been specially acclaimed; it is as if his poetry speaks not just for Gaelic Scotland but also for Irish history and culture. Seamus Heaney, Ireland's foremost poet, has always recognised Sorley MacLean as occupying a special place: his particular act of homage is his translation of 'Hallaig'. Similarly, in Australia, its finest poet Les Murray has acknowledged the voice of MacLean.

This essay has tried to show how the bilingual poet, from his early days on Raasay to the later stages of his poetic career, explored and borrowed from, a variety of non-Gaelic examples, particularly in English. He experienced many ambivalent feelings in his reading of poets writing at different times and in different dialects and registers of English. His mature judgement was that, for him, the three greatest poets in English were Shakespeare, Blake and Yeats but it could be argued that he was more influenced than he thought by Donne, Wordsworth and MacDiarmid. When we read back through his actual poetry, what is apparent is that, out of whatever reading, whatever experiences of life, whatever pressures of beliefs, Sorley MacLean created something nobody else could have done, and that, in doing so, he contributed something unique to the treasure-house of world literature.

SOME RELATED WRITINGS

BY SORLEY MACLEAN:

'Autobiographical Sketch', letters to Douglas Young, 1941. An edited version is included in Whyte (see below)

'My relationship with the Muse', *Chapman*, 17, 1976. Reprinted in '*Ris a' Bhruthaich*', 1985

'Some Gaelic and Non-Gaelic Influences on Myself' in *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll, 1982

Preface to *O Choille gu Bearadh: Collected Poems*, 1989

BOOKS:

Somhairle MacGill-eain / Sorley MacLean: Dàin do Eimhir, ed. Christopher Whyte, 2002 (Contains much useful material including passages from letters by and to MacLean, for example, MacLean's 'Autobiographical Sketch')

Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays, ed. Raymond Ross and Joy Hendry, 1986.

(Contains some excellent essays and includes an Introduction by Seamus Heaney; 'Sorley MacLean: The Man and his Work' by Joy Hendry; and 'Some Aspects of Family and Local Background: An Interview with Sorley MacLean' by Donald Archie Macdonald)

ARTICLES ON MACLEAN:

Henri Gibault, 'Sorley MacLean', *Etudes ecossaises* 4, 1997

Alasdair Macrae, 'Sorley MacLean in a context beyond Gaeldom', *Etudes ecossaises* 4, 1997

Seamus Heaney, 'The voice of a bard', *Antaeus* 60, 1988

Carla Sassi, 'Sorley MacLean: l'incanto della parola', *Diverse Lingue* 10, 1991

In the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, there is a catalogued archive devoted to Sorley MacLean.