

Aspects of Gaelic poetry

When I think of ancient and modern Gaelic poetry, there are few qualities which I fail to find in its varied manifestations except those ascribed to it by Ossianists and Twilightists and some later 'Celtologists'. We have heard of 'Celtic romance', 'Celtic sentiment', 'Celtic love of words', and so on, as if Gaelic poetry were all of a piece, as if there were any reason in the world why one Gaelic poet might not be as different from another as Shelley is from Chaucer. I am inclined to think Gaelic poetry is as varied in mood as English poetry, and in technique it is more varied. Hence it is no easier to talk about Gaelic poetry in general than it is to talk about any other poetry in general.

The only generalisation I would commit myself to is that, whatever else it may have, Gaelic poetry has style and is *de la musique avant toute chose*, and that is true whether it is at its 'simplest' or at its most self-conscious. The old song 'Mo Nighean Donn á Còrnaig' has music and style, just as 'Oran Mór Mhic Leòid' has them. This music and style is as surely heard in 'Uamh an Oir' as in Sinclair's 'Slighe nan Sean Seun'! The music may be the heady intoxicating music of MacDonald's 'Moladh Móraig' or 'Pìob Mhór Mhic Cruimein'; the 'echoing detonations' of William Ross's 'Suaithneas Bàn'; the great rises and falls and sweeps, the subtly varied and haunting cadences of 'Oran Mór Mhic Leòid'; the poignant simplicity of 'Na féidh am Bràigh Uige'; the hiss and clang of consonants that express Iain Lom's wrath, or the stately sweeps and swells of rhythm that express the line of Ben Dorain and the smaller eddies that express the welling of water on its side. There is no need to make any bones about it: Scottish Gaelic is, at any rate where auditory sensuousness is concerned, a superb language for poetry.

I see that Mr Bowra attributes much of the quality of Russian poetry to the intrinsic quality of the Russian language and not least to its beauty of sound, though he denies it the strength of ancient Greek. I am quite sure that Scottish Gaelic has as much beauty, variety, strength and magnificence of sound as ancient Greek or any Western European language. Metrically Gaelic can do anything English has done, but the metric of the great bulk of Gaelic poetry is impossible in

English. Hence Gaelic verse can never be even approximately rendered in English. Even in syntax the translator is faced with a hopeless task because Gaelic has a unique capacity for expressing varieties and shades and changes of emphasis, which English can never approximate. English translations from Gaelic which try to be accurate, will always have clumsy inversions to indicate changes of word order which in Gaelic are perfectly natural and very brief and neat.

I know that my preference for the musical overtones of Gaelic poetry to the musical overtones of any other poetry I know may be due to Gaelic's being my first language, but then I prefer the sound of Greek poetry to the sound of English, Lowland Scots, Latin or French poetry, and I certainly knew English and some Lowland Scots from the age of six onwards. A very learned professor whose learning is primarily in the Classical and Celtic languages once said to me: 'I know no poetry as musical as the old Bardic poetry.' He was referring to the pre-17th century court poetry of Ireland and Scotland. Another professor, of Classics this time, talked to me about the 'wonderful music' of some modern Gaelic poetry. Even in the 19th century, when in most cases the music and style of Gaelic poetry became relatively shoddy, there is a nobleness of both in the best poetry of Livingston and John MacLachlan, a grace, delicacy and polish in Neil MacLeod, and amid all her ramblings Mary MacPherson has a strong and poignant music. In the 20th century, Donald Sinclair has music which is at once ornate, unusual and evocative. But up to the end of the 18th century music and *loinn* or 'grace' are *omnipresent* in Gaelic poetry.

I often wonder whether any one making poetry in the Germanic dialects spoken in the British Isles has equalled in real poetic greatness the old Lowland Scots Ballads, and similarly I wonder whether any one making poetry in the Celtic dialects has equalled those anonymous or obscurely authored Gaelic songs of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Whereas the Scots Ballads are primarily narrative with what Croce would call great 'lyric' peaks, the Gaelic songs are primarily lyrical with the story sometimes told fairly fully, sometimes only implied. All those poems are direct and immediate. Technically they are simple but adequate, their metrical basis being the old syllabic structure modified by speech stress (I think that is the most permanently satisfying basis for Gaelic metrics). They have their own astonishing music, apart from the glorious melodies to which most of them are sung, or were sung — melodies which seem to grow out of the words themselves. Generally they are passionate, but the emotional range is considerable; sometimes there is a mingling of emotions and frequently a detached comment on emotion. They have an

visual as well as auditory sensuousness, for the sharp and expression of delight in nature is a very old thing in Gaelic (compare, for example, Deirdre's Farewell to Scotland, or the poem on Arran), and the images are from man's handiwork as well as of nature: 'gold candlesticks on white tables' as well as of the sea: 'bluer than on a calm morning the blaeberry behind its leaves'. The vivid precise touches of description in those songs are absent from the bogus compound words which in the English version of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser or Rev. Kenneth MacLeod have as their sole part the word 'dream'. Sometimes, however, there is a variation in which the imagery takes short-cuts, as in this verse from the matchless Lament for Gregor of Glenstrae, executed at Inverness in 1571:

h I am without apples,
 all the rest have apples,
 grant round apple has
 lack of his head to the ground.

This, which purports to be by the Campbell wife of Gregor, and which the Campbell kinsmen executed, is surely one of the greatest poems made in Britain. In it there is almost everything that there is in such a poem: pride, remembrance of past happiness, revenge but realisation of what that revenge would mean to the poet, tenderness and anxiety for the infant son, fear that he would avenge his father, and piercing lonely sorrow.

other men's wives are at home
 and quietly sleeping,
 be at the edge of your flag-stone
 with my two hands. . .

my father were in a sickness
 may Colin in a plague
 with Ruthven's daughter would be
 holding her palms and hands. . .

re in the lark's shape,
 's strength in my hand,
 ghest stone of the castle (would be)
 one nearest the ground.

This single verse is almost equally breath-taking; musically it is superb.

: Lament for Gregor Roy is only one of the very many great laments by obscure and unknown poets. In the expression of pride and sorrow those poems are unequalled. Just as the death in Garve MacLeod of Raasay in 1671 occasioned one of the best of all the MacCrimmon pibrochs, it also occasioned a series of powerful elegies by his sister, elegies in which pride and sorrow are tender:

you without silk on your pillow
on the cold flat stones of the sea,
in an ebbless clachan
your love is on his couch.

again:

There was a time when I did not think,
though it is vain to protest it,
that you would ever be drowned
in a wide sea,
while the rudder remained,
and you behind her rigging,
in spite of the violence of the elements
and the uproar of the sea;
while her planks and tackle
held fast
and she could respond
to your strong hand on the sea.

And again the notes of love, pride and desolation are heard, times in an enumeration of 'prosaic' details very different from conventional Twilight ideas. Take for instance the Lament for John Chisholm who was killed at Culloden:

young Charles Stewart,
is your cause that desolated me.
You took from me all I had,
in war for your sake.
Not cows and not sheep
I mourn, but my first love,
though I am left alone
with nothing in the world but a shirt.

This matter-of-factness adds poignancy to many of those old poems, as in the far older poem 'Ailein Duinn, a nà 's a nàire':

Brown haired Allan, my treasure and shame,
Sore and dear I paid my rent to you:
Not cows in calf nor white sheep,
Not boll nor peck nor heap of grain,
Not goods nor gear nor furniture,
But the cargo that the boat spilt.
My father was on her and my three brothers
And the son of my body whom I reared;
But it is not they who pained and tortured me,
But he who had taken my hand . . .

Sometimes, as in the other 'Ailein Duinn' poem, there is the expression of complete love and sorrow:

My prayer, God on the throne,
That I go not in earth or linen,
In hole in the ground or hiding-place,
But in the spot where you went, Allan.

Such piercing grief is different from the equally complete expression of quiet heart-break of 'Na féidh am Bràigh Uige'.

It is true that some of the very greatest of the obscure Gaelic poems are tragedies purely of circumstances, poems of bereavement, but there is also the expression of a different passion:

You took the east from me and you took the west from me,
You took the moon and you took the sun from me,
And almost, white love, you took my God from me.

Or again:

You killed my father and my husband,
I love you, Black Allan of Lochy;
You killed my three young brothers,
I love you, Black Allan of Lochy;
Allan, Allan, I rejoice that you are alive.

I have harped only on one or two notes of this Gaelic poetry but not all of the greatest of them are laments or poems of terrible passion. There is the pain and love and uncertainty of 'Mas ann 'gam mheal-ladh', rhythmically and sensuously delicate and lovely:

I was late last night with you in a dream
Over in Jura of the cold mountains,

Your kisses were like green water-cress,
But the dream is gone and the pain has stayed.

And in Beathag Mhór's song to Martin Martin there are all in one poem gaiety, bitterness, pride, generosity, and bravery. In the song to the 'daughter of the heir of Strath Swordale' there is morning freshness, and joy and wistful memories as well, while in the charming expression of gentle wisdom and quiet joy 'Mac Og an Iarla Ruaidh' is perfect. Indeed the subtle emotional blend of many of those songs is very often even more wonderful than the unfailing beauty of style and music, the immediate, the unaffected grace and the evocative phrases. If Gaelic poetry consisted only of those anonymous song poems, I should say that the Gaels were a people who had many rare poets, and before the end of the 18th century a great tradition of folk-poetry in which it is quite impossible to distinguish between the work of an aristocrat and a peasant, between Beathag Mhór and the daughter of Red Duncan of Glen Lyon, whose fame as a patron of poets was as great in Ireland as in Scotland. In the 18th century the humble Duncan MacIntyre is capable of a delicacy and virtuosity unexcelled by the learned Ewen MacLachlan or the very 'well-educated' Alexander MacDonald ('Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair') and William Ross.

A comparison of the Gaelic anonyms of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries with the Lowland Ballads could be an important study though the far greater range of the Gaelic songs would make it difficult. In many of those Gaelic poems there is the same quality as Edwin Muir, in his 'Note on Scottish Ballads' in *Latitudes*, finds in the great Lowland Ballads 'pure passion seen through pure vision'. (Indeed a great deal of what Mr Muir says in his admirable chapter is startlingly true of those Gaelic songs as well as of the Lowland Ballads). In the Gaelic anonyms, however, there is far more of the variety of life realised on a high level, and though there is often in them the same bare concentration, there is also very often a rich texture of imagery, and always the Gaelic music and finish which prevents them from being so unequal as the Ballads. The Gaelic anonyms sometimes say great 'simple' things in an absolute and inevitable way but at other times they can admirably express a complexity of feeling and the compromises of life: they have 'Mac Og an Iarla Ruaidh' as well as 'Mo Nighean Donn á Còrnaig' and 'A Mhairead Og'.

The great pagan poetry has as its complement such religious poetry of the people as is contained in the four volumes of *Carmina Gadelica*.

To contrast their acceptance of human life and the promised beyond with the pagan passion of the old songs shows the folly of generalising about a people's poetry. The gracious union of the material and spiritual everywhere in evidence in *Carmina Gadelica* is a product of the same people as in a later age and under the influence of Calvin and the Evangelicals produced the terrible and sublime poetry of Dugald Buchanan, whose power and economy and concentration express the horrors of Calvinism, but also a profound sense of the unsatisfactory nature of human life which is as moving to the sceptic as to the Calvinist. Buchanan can never appear a sectarian.

Buchanan's sense of the vanity of human life, his obsession with sin and misery, is very different from the joyous acceptance of life by the other two of the greatest of the 18th century Gaelic poets, Alexander MacDonald and Duncan Bàn Macintyre. MacDonald's poetry gathers many of the strands of previous Gaelic poetry, develops and transforms them. The clan-and-chief poetry of Mary MacLeod, Ian Lom and the other 17th century Gaelic poets had, in spite of the unfailing freshness and beauty and evocative power of its rhythm and phrase, a narrowness and lack of wide human significance, except occasionally, as in those great but brief moments when Mary MacLeod forgets her Normans and Rodericks of Dunvegan and we see herself in her loneliness, her memories of a great MacCrimmon and perhaps her love for Norman of Bernera, who was something more to her than all the rest of the MacLeods were. MacDonald makes the clan poetry truly national, and if he has less of a haunting beauty of phrase, he has far more fullness, verve and heroism. He is always the unconquerable MacDonald, a heroic and reckless man compared with whom a Byron appears a 'pansy'. In the 'Birlinn' he combines Titanic struggle with the naturalist realism in which 18th century Gaelic poetry excels. He realises dynamic Nature with a vigour, immediacy and exactness which would appear to me unrivalled if I could forget the delicacy which Macintyre adds and which makes the latter's poetry the very greatest of 18th century Gaelic Nature poetry. But Donald MacDonald, the author of the 16th century poem 'Creag Ghuanach', has this quality of Macintyre's union of extreme delicacy and subtlety with a richness and immediacy almost unique; though Roderick Morrison too had it in the 17th century, and that to a remarkable degree. William Ross, Macintyre's much younger contemporary, has it also, but his chief greatness is in the passionate echoing lyric, and in temperament he is poles apart from MacDonald and Macintyre. The troubled passion of Ross's greatest lyrics, always expressed in highly wrought sonorous language, gives an effect which

is often curiously like Baudelaire though Ross's anguish is not of the Frenchman's morbid kind. His complete opposite in 18th century Gaelic poetry is Rob Donn, the most brilliant writer of *sermo pedestris* in Gaelic literature.

19th century Gaelic poetry is a poor aftermath to that of the 18th century, but the wrongs of the Clearances produced a widening of human sympathy on the social side, and the poetry of a century which saw William Livingston, John MacLachlan, Mary MacPherson and John Smith is not contemptible. They were all pre-occupied with the sufferings of the people, and Livingston at his best has a noble fire and eloquence, MacLachlan a great poignancy, and Smith a deep and wide humanity and thoughtfulness, while the Calvinist evangelical movement produced notable religious poetry by the saintly John Morrison and Patrick Grant, and the 20th century has seen the ornate and beautiful Catholic mystical poetry of Donald Sinclair. And, in spite of 'The Road to the Isles' and much of *Songs of the Hebrides*, everyone who knows Gaelic knows that, writing in his own language, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth MacLeod has expressed profoundly and delicately certain aspects of Hebridean life which are all but gone forever. Do not judge his Gaelic by 'The Road to the Isles'.