

## A Raasay Childhood

Sorley MacLean was born on the 26 October 1911 in Osgaig on Raasay, a small island lying off the east coast of the Isle of Skye. His father, Malcolm MacLean, was from Raasay, though his father's family originally came from North Uist in the Western Isles, and his mother, Christina, belonged to the Nicolsons of Skye. There were gifted scholars and poets as well as noted tradition bearers on both sides of his family. 'Both sides had produced their share of individuals of talent and ability, some of whom attained distinction beyond the island via formal education, others by being outstanding tradition-bearers and bards', as William Gillies has commented.<sup>1</sup> Malcolm MacLean had a tailoring business on the island of Raasay, and he and his wife Christina had seven children: five sons (of which Sorley was the second oldest) and two daughters, and this new generation would not disappoint in contributing to the learned and talented legacy of their forebears.

Sorley MacLean was educated in Raasay Primary School (1918-1924), and as would be expected, his early education and upbringing in Raasay had an effect on his poetry, as did many other events and periods of his life. In Raasay and in his home, he was immersed in Highland and Gaelic history and culture – the Highland clans, the Jacobites, the Clearances, emigration, literature, tradition and the teachings of Calvin. His family was Free Presbyterian, and he and his brothers and sisters were brought up in the tradition of the Free Presbyterian Church, which had seceded from the Free Church of Scotland in 1893, and of which Raasay became a stronghold. Although brought up in this tradition, Sorley MacLean said that he relinquished Calvinism for Socialism when he was about the age of 12 years old, while he was still at primary school on Raasay, and for a while he saw his future as a politician 'helping to change the world'. He nevertheless recognized, at least in later life, the influence of the Gaelic preaching that he had heard on Raasay on his poetry. 'I think, you see, that the long preachings and prayers in Gaelic at the Free Presbyterian Church and the Free Church, combined with our family's richness in oral tradition on more than one side, had a very considerable effect on me', he commented in an interview in 1982.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most important influences on the poet in his formative years was that of his grandmother, Mary Matheson (Màiri 'ain 'ic Sheumais 'ic Dhòmhnail Ruaidh). Her ancestors had moved to Skye from mainland Lochalsh in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after having been deprived of their lands in Glas-na-Muclach by the then Earl of Seaforth. They had brought with them a wealth of traditional song from Lochalsh and Kintail, and she, in turn, had learnt many songs common to those areas of Skye where they had lived. Sorley MacLean's grandmother lived with the family until her death in 1923 when the poet was 12 years old. Speaking of her influence on him, he said: 'I think that the first great artistic impact on me was my father's mother singing some of the very greatest of Gaelic songs, and all in her own traditional versions.'<sup>3</sup> He recalled in an interview with Donald Archie MacDonald in 1982 how she sang Kintail songs like 'Crò Chinn t-Sàile', and those from Lower Tròndarnais which had come from her own mother's side of the family. Another important figure in the poet's early years was his father's eldest sister Peggy, who lived in Glasgow but came to Raasay for a month every year. She was also 'full of old songs', and her repertoire was, according to the poet, almost as extensive as his grandmother's. His father, Malcolm MacLean, was also a fine singer of whom the poet commented that 'in some songs his timing and weight were such that I now find it difficult to listen to those songs from anyone else. He was especially striking with the Crò of Kintail, the lament for William Chisholm, and with William Ross'. Through one of his uncles on his mother's side, Calum Nicholson, he was introduced to the songs of Mary MacPherson (Màiri Mhór nan Oran), the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Skye bardess, whose songs and poems were written on Skye in the 1880s at the height of the agitation over land law reform, and of whose work Sorley MacLean was a lifelong admirer. Another significant influence was the Radical tradition of Braes in Skye, and its importance in the Land League movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the history of the clearances that had taken place on the island of Raasay between 1852 and 1854. To the young poet the land and the people were deeply entwined: 'When I was up on the top of the Cuillins or on Dùn Cana I mean, it wasn't just a case of scenery, but it was always very much intermingled with the people'.<sup>4</sup>

In 1924 Sorley MacLean left Raasay to continue his education at Portree Secondary School (now Portree High School). As was the custom for pupils from Raasay, he stayed in Portree during the week, going home to Raasay on Saturdays. The most detailed account of his own impressions of his schooling in Raasay and Portree appears in his introduction to his *Collected Poems: From Wood to Ridge (O Choille gu Bearradh)* written in April 1989.<sup>5</sup> In primary school, he added a knowledge of English poetry to his existing love of Gaelic poetry, and at secondary school in Portree, he was taught Shakespeare and 19<sup>th</sup>-century poetry by an English teacher he admired, who left in 1928 when he was entering his last year at school. Latin led him to a love of Virgil and Horace, and he noted his liking for a book of French lyrics, ranging from Villon to Verlaine. In Gaelic the concentration was on the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, but he noted that ‘my favourites were the wonderful anonyms, such as the poetry of the MacGregor proscriptions and the Sheiling Bothy in Brae Rannoch: poems of unknown or obscure authorship owing much to the bardic school traditions, but orally transmitted, and sometimes spoiled but sometimes improved in translation’. On the field, Sorley MacLean had from his youth, as he himself expressed it, ‘an ardent devotion’ to the game of shinty. He was a keen player at school, and he would retain an interest in the sport all his life.

### University Days 1929-1933

In 1929 Sorley MacLean, aged 18, went to Edinburgh to sit the Bursary Competition of the University of Edinburgh, and thereafter began his studies at the University, after having been among the successful candidates. When he arrived in the autumn of 1929, he was still uncertain whether to study Celtic, or History or English. He opted for English, and graduated with First Class Honours in English in 1933, although later he was less convinced that he had made the correct choice. In the end it was the economic reality that shaped his decision, since degrees in Gaelic did not promise many job opportunities. He would later observe: ‘By the time I was in my second year I was greatly sorry I was taking a degree in English because I was interested only in poetry and only in some poetry at that. I wasn’t interested in prose and I was sorry I didn’t do Hons. Gaelic.’<sup>6</sup>

Sorley MacLean came under the influence of Professor Herbert Grierson (1866-1960), Regius Professor of English Literature from 1915 to 1935, in the Department of English, and at this time the young poet wrote both in English and Gaelic. The earlier literary influences of Blake, Shelley and the Classical Greek and Roman poets had been superseded by his interest in the poetry of John Donne, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He came to feel that his poems in English were ‘over-self-conscious’, and that what he wrote in Gaelic was better. In 1931, he wrote of one of his early Gaelic poems ‘A’ Chorra-Gridheach’: ‘I thought it better than any of my English stuff, and because of that – but also for patriotic reasons – I stopped writing verse in English and destroyed all the English stuff I could lay hands on’. Most of his English verse had been destroyed by the time he was twenty. One surviving early and rare example appeared in *Private Business*, a small pamphlet edited by David Daiches, and published by the English Literature Society of the University of Edinburgh in 1933.

During his time at the University, Sorley MacLean was a member of Edinburgh University Labour Club. His Highland background and the influence of the Highland Clearances on Skye and Raasay aroused in him strong political passions, which in the events of the 1930s conspired to strengthen his hatred of Fascism. In terms of friendships, he seems to have associated with the Highland set in Edinburgh at that time, which included the brothers Angus and William Matheson and James Carmichael Watson.

In 1933, in his last year at University, Sorley MacLean got to know George E Davie (later the author of *The Democratic Intellect* and teacher of philosophy at Edinburgh University) and James B. Caird (later an Inspector of Schools), who introduced him to the work of Hugh MacDiarmid. Both men had a complementary influence on him: ‘George Davie had a

tremendous knowledge of all kinds of things in Scotland, and he was fundamentally interested in ideas and his range was immense; Caird was, I think, outstanding, as I said, in his combination of literature and what I would call sensibility'.<sup>7</sup>His introduction through these two friends to the early lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid, and the influence of his own reading of Benedetto Croce's *The Defence of Poetry*, influenced him profoundly and 'confirmed my belief in the supremacy of the lyric and the lyrical nature of poetry'.

After graduating Sorley MacLean spent a year at Moray House Teachers' Training College, and it was while he was completing his studies there that he made the acquaintance of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, with whom he formed a friendship that continued until the latter's death in 1978. By 1934, when the two met, MacDiarmid was already interested in Gaelic poetry, and shortly after their first encounter, Sorley MacLean agreed to translate some of the Gaelic poems of Alexander MacDonald and Duncan Ban MacIntyre for MacDiarmid. In the autumn of 1934, his studies completed, the young Sorley MacLean returned to Skye.

### **'Out of Skye to the World' 1934-43**

On his return to Skye in the autumn of 1934, Sorley MacLean went to Portree High School to teach English. He remarked that by the time he started teaching in Portree, he had an interest in old songs and new poetry, especially in the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid. He lodged first of all in Carndarach in Wentworth Street, but by the end of the school session 1934-35, he had moved into the Elgin Hostel (a residential house for boys from the islands) to assist with supervision. In 1934, he composed the poem 'An Soitheach', which was published under the pseudonym 'Ruari Mac-Ailein', but the poet increasingly found the pressures of supervision in Elgin Hostel every second night made it difficult for him to get the necessary concentration for his poetry. During July and early August of 1935, Sorley MacLean paid a visit to the island of Whalsay at the invitation of Hugh MacDiarmid.

During the period 1936 to 1939, a number of events combined to put the poet under great tension, which found expression in his poetry, and he himself stated that from 1936 to 1939 he became, if a poet, a very different one from what his pre-1936 writings indicated. In the essay 'My Relationship with the Muse', he listed the circumstances as his mother's long illness in 1936, its recurrence in 1938, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the progressive decline of his father's business in the Thirties, his meeting with an Irish girl in 1937, his rash leaving of Skye for Mull late in 1937, and Munich in 1938, and always the steady unbearable decline of Gaelic, made those years for him years of difficult choice, and he affirmed that the tensions of these years confirmed his self-expression in poetry not in action. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 was an important and dramatic turning point in Sorley MacLean's life. From 1933 onwards, he had been much affected by what he considered the likely victory of the forces of Fascism in Europe. With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, he became convinced that the most immediate and essential action was the defeat of Fascism in Spain. His colleague at Portree Secondary School, Jack Stuart, whom he much admired, asked Sorley MacLean to accompany him to Spain to fight with the International Brigade, but although he longed to do so, his own family circumstances made it impossible for him.

Sorley MacLean remained in Portree until 1937, and in that year Hugh MacDiarmid made a reciprocal visit to him while on a visit to the Western Isles in the company of W. D. MacColl, the Gaelic enthusiast and nationalist. They spent a night on Raasay with the MacLean family, and then they came to Portree to spend the weekend with Sorley MacLean before going on to Barra. Later that year, Sorley MacLean took a teaching post at Tobermory Secondary School on the island of Mull, where he taught from January to December 1938. He spent a year there but it was not a particularly happy time for him, and he himself described it as a 'traumatic experience'. Mull he found to be beautiful but the historical associations of the clearances that had been widespread on the island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century made it a 'heart-breaking place' for a man who bore the name of MacLean (the best known of all Mull names). Yet for all the island's melancholy

associations, Sorley MacLean's stay on Mull was fruitful for his poetry, and a number of poems were written during his time on Mull, among them 'Ban-Ghàidheal'. The poet later explained: 'I believe Mull had much to do with my poetry: its physical beauty, so different from Skye's, with the terrible imprint of the clearances on it, made it almost intolerable for a Gael.'<sup>8</sup> His teaching circumstances on Mull were less onerous than they had been in Portree, and he was able to write more and to carry on an active correspondence with Hugh MacDiarmid. Christopher Whyte has pointed to the similarities between the two poets' modernist sense of dissatisfaction with what they considered the decadent and unambitious traditions of poetry.<sup>9</sup>

In January 1939, Sorley MacLean moved from Mull to Edinburgh, where he took up a post teaching English at Boroughmuir High School. He lived in lodgings in Polwarth in close proximity to the school, and while in Edinburgh he renewed his friendship with Robert Garioch, who invited him along to the weekly gathering of poets in the Abbotsford Bar in Rose Street. Robert Garioch had his own hand press and from it there appeared a slim pamphlet by Sorley MacLean and Robert Garioch, *17 Poems for 6d*, with the imprint date 1940. *Seventeen Poems for Sixpence*, a second issue, with corrections, was published a few weeks later. It was also in 1939 that Sorley MacLean began work on a major poem 'An Cuilithionn'. The idea of the poem had been conceived earlier in Mull in 1938 when, as he described it, he had begun to think of writing a very long poem, 10,000 words or so, on the human condition, radiating from the history of Skye to the West Highlands to Europe and what he knew of the rest of the world. Although begun in Edinburgh in 1939, when about 3,000 lines were composed, the writing of the poem ceased abruptly in December 1939.

In October 1939, Sorley MacLean went to Hawick to teach evacuees, and he remained there until at least June 1940. It was during this period that the majority of the renowned 'Dàin do Eimhir'<sup>10</sup> poems were written. During the period from December 1939 and August 1941, Sorley MacLean was affected by a deep emotional experience, which he described as one that nearly drove him mad. His enraged feelings about Fascism, and a love affair of passionate intensity, combined to produce the 'Dàin do Eimhir', a series of love poems of great beauty. In the poems, the poet's own intense personal experience is juxtaposed with his feelings about the struggles in Spain and the wider struggle of humanity and the fate of the world. The most detailed account of the history of the composition of the 'Dàin do Eimhir' cycle can be found in Christopher Whyte's edition of the Gaelic poems, with English translations, published in 2002.<sup>11</sup>

In September 1940, Sorley MacLean entered the Signal Corps, and from May 1941 until December 1941, he was based at Catterick Camp in Yorkshire awaiting embarkation orders. In December 1941, he was sent to Egypt, and he spent the period from December 1941 to March 1943 on active service with the Royal Horse Artillery. Before he was sent abroad, he had left his poems with Douglas Young (later lecturer in Greek at St Andrews University), who had volunteered to find a publisher for them, and John Macdonald of the Department of Celtic in the University of Aberdeen. When Douglas Young went to prison in 1942 rather than recognize the authority of the British state to conscript, the task of overseeing the publication fell to the Rev. John Mackechnie.

Sorley MacLean's regard and deep feelings for humanity can be seen, as elsewhere, in his war poetry, which includes his finest war poem 'Glaic a' Bhàis'. Despite this, he seems to have turned against his own poetry at this time, and in February 1942, he wrote to Hugh MacDiarmid that 'if I am ever to write any more verse, it will be very different from what I have written, that it must be less subjective, more thoughtful, less content with its own music'.<sup>12</sup> He was wounded three times while on active service in North Africa: at one point it was even rumoured that he was missing in action. He had, in fact, been badly wounded at the Battle of El Alamein on 2 November 1942 when a land mine exploded near him, and he had been taken to hospital. He spent the next nine months hospitalised in BURGEL Arab, Cantara, Suez, Baragwanath, Netley in England and Raigmore, Inverness. He was finally discharged from Raigmore Hospital in Inverness, and invalided out of the army in August 1943.

In March 1943 when Sorley MacLean arrived back in England to complete his convalescence, his poems were already in proof, and he was able to read them in hospital in Southampton and return them to the publisher in Glasgow, William MacLellan. In early November that year, *Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile*, appeared with an introductory note by Douglas Young and illustrations by the Scottish artist William Crosbie. In his introduction to *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig, Dàin do Eimhir*'s importance is summed up succinctly by Professor Donald MacAulay when he states: 'After the publication of this book Gaelic poetry could never be the same again'.<sup>13</sup> The same year saw the publication of Douglas Young's *Auntran Blads*, a volume of poetry dedicated to Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay, with his translations of the work of both poets.

### **Edinburgh (1943-1956)**

After recovering from his war injuries, Sorley MacLean returned to Edinburgh to resume teaching at Boroughmuir High School in Edinburgh in 1943. The following year, 1944, he met Renee Cameron from Inverness, who was to become his life's companion. They were married in Inverness on 24 July 1946, and began their life together in Edinburgh. Sorley MacLean's friend, James B. Caird, described his choice as the best decision he had ever made. Teaching in Peebles at the time, he saw how they complemented one another, and he commented that with her sense of humour, sound practical sense and sunny disposition, combined with an appreciation of the finer things of life, Renee Cameron was the perfect wife for him. During this time Sorley MacLean entered actively into the literary life of Edinburgh, and he and his wife became close friends with the poet Sydney Goodsir Smith, both families sharing a house in Craigmillar Park for about eighteen months, before the MacLeans moved to Atholl Place, where they stayed for a short period of about three months. They then took up residence in Queen Street in 1948, where they remained for about four years until they moved to St Ninian's Terrace. This was also the time when he wrote some of his finest poems, perhaps most notably 'Hallaig', the poem with which he is perhaps most closely associated at the present day. It was composed during the period 1952 to 1953, and it was first published in the periodical *Gairm* in 1954. Other poems appeared in literary periodicals: 'Feasgar Samhraidh: Linne Ratharsair' in *Poetry Scotland* (1949); 'An Ceann Thall' in the first issue of *Gairm* (1952); and 'Chunna mi long sa' Chaol Chanach' in *Gairm* (1954). In addition, he gave radio broadcasts and was a frequent reviewer.

In 1947, Sorley MacLean was promoted to be Principal Teacher of English at Boroughmuir High School. While he liked the school and the pupils he had at Boroughmuir, he increasingly felt a desire to return to the West Highlands and so he sought teaching appointments that would enable him to return. In 1956, he was promoted to be Headmaster of Plockton Secondary School, and he moved there in February 1956, his wife joining him about a month later.

### **Plockton (1956-1969)**

In 1956, when he became Headmaster of Plockton Secondary School in Wester Ross, Sorley MacLean found himself in Lochalsh not many miles from where his Matheson grandmother's family had lived at Glas-na-Muclach near Braeintra, before they moved to Skye. He and his wife and three daughters, Ishbel, Caitriona and Mairead, made their home in Plockton, and he remained as Headmaster there until his retirement in 1972. He worked in both schools there, the older one in the village and the new one on the outskirts. His responsibilities in running a school of this size, in what was then considered a fairly isolated locality, were quite taxing in terms of finding teachers, and he often had to teach himself when there were staff vacancies. The children who were taught English by Sorley MacLean in Plockton, many of them now in late adulthood and scattered across the world, will testify to the love of the sound and the words of poetry that he instilled in them, even if they did not always realize it at the time. Although he was kept busy by his teaching and other administrative duties at school (the demands of which by his own admission did from time to time prove a burden), he was still writing poetry. For his younger brother Calum, the renowned folklore collector in Scotland and Ireland, who had died in 1960 at the untimely age of forty-five, he composed the beautiful and intensely moving elegy 'Cumha

Chaluim Iain MhicGill-Eain', considered by Hugh MacDiarmid to be 'one of the noblest elegies I have ever been privileged to read.'<sup>14</sup> The poem 'Curaidhean' was written in 1965, and 'Palach', 'Eadh is Féin is Sàr-Fhéin', 'Dà Dhòmhnaillach' and 'Am Botal Briste' in the late 1960s.

During his time in Plockton, Sorley MacLean worked tirelessly to improve the situation of the Gaelic language, the inexorable decline of which was a source of deep anxiety to him. He had observed its decline on Skye, and then most markedly on Mull during the time he spent there in the late 1930s. The most detailed account of Sorley MacLean's part in the campaign to achieve a Higher Leaving Certificate examination paper specifically designed for Gaelic learners, the 'Learner's Paper, is given in an essay by Aonghas MacNeacail. In 1966, Sorley MacLean gave a paper to the Gaelic Society of Inverness on 'Problems in Gaelic Education', in which he offered a serious analysis of the position of Gaelic in educational provision in Scotland. He drew comparisons with countries in mainland Europe where children could learn up to three or four languages including their own. He argued that children in Scotland could surely take three languages besides English, adding 'surely it is not expecting too much of Gaelic patriotism to demand that Gaelic should be one of the three?'<sup>15</sup>

Sorley MacLean did much to promote shinty, a lifetime's interest of his own, throughout his time as Headmaster in Plockton. In 1965 the School shinty team won the Harrow Cup (for the Ross-shire under-19s), and much of the credit for the team's successes (1964-66 and 1970-72) are due to Sorley MacLean's enthusiastic encouragement of the game.

#### **'The Harvest of his Genius' (1970-1981)**

The decade 1970 to 1980 saw a significant extension in public awareness of the poetry of Sorley MacLean. The publication in 1970 of *Four Points of a Saltire*, containing poetry by Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay, William Neill and Stuart MacGregor, was an important milestone, since it made available in book form (for the first time since 1943) a substantial part of his work. On its publication, Tom Scott, the writer and critic, wrote: "That Sorley MacLean is a great poet in the Gaelic tradition, a man not merely for time, but for eternity, I have no doubt whatever ..."<sup>16</sup> In the same year, a special issue of *Lines Review* was devoted to the poet's work. The following year, another influential publication appeared, Iain Crichton Smith's English translations of 'Dàin do Eimhir' as *Poems to Eimhir*, which made the poems widely available to non-Gaelic speaking audiences. At the start of this decade, as retirement approached in 1972, Sorley MacLean had more time for himself. In 1970, he recorded (on 22 February) the first formal discussion of his work in conversation in Aberdeen with Iain Crichton Smith, John MacInnes, Hamish Henderson and Donald MacAulay. In the same year, an article on his work following a lecture he had given in Thurso in May 1970 on 'Some of my own Work' was published in *Scotia*. The year 1973 brought the first published recording of Sorley MacLean reading his own work by Claddagh Records, followed two years later by 'An Evening with the Heretics' issued by Heritage Records. When Seamus Heaney heard him reading his poetry for the first time, he was struck by the 'sense of bardic dignity that was entirely without self parade, but was instead the effect of a proud self-abnegation, as much a submission as a claim to heritage'.<sup>17</sup>

On retirement in August 1972, Sorley MacLean and his wife left Plockton after sixteen years to move to his great grandmother's house at Peinnachorrain in Braes on Skye. He continued to write poetry throughout this decade, the most significant of which are the long poems 'Uamha 'n Òir' and 'Screapadal'. From the early 1970s, the volume of critical assessment of Sorley MacLean's work increased, and the number of articles about his work were published by Iain Crichton Smith and John MacInnes. In an article in 1973 Iain Crichton Smith describes his poetry as the 'work of an imagination, which is both revolutionary and scholarly, avant garde and traditional, local and universal'.<sup>18</sup>

The major publication of the decade was *Reothairt is Contraigh*, the poet's own selection of his work over the period 1932 to 1972, published in 1977 by Canongate, the Edinburgh publisher. The volume contained two new poems 'Dol an Iar' and 'Soluis', and included the poet's own

line-by-line English translations. *Reothairt is Contraigh* received enthusiastic reviews on publication, and in his review in *The Scotsman*, Dr John MacInnes referred to ‘the harvest of his genius’.<sup>19</sup> As his work received more national and international acclaim, Sorley MacLean was in ever-increasing demand to read his poetry at poetry festivals and conferences both at home and abroad, and in this decade he travelled extensively, among many others, to Rotterdam, Baddeck Cape Breton and Berlin. Between 1973 and 1975 the poet spent two fruitful years as Creative Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University, and from 1975 to 1976 he was Filidh at the fledgling Gaelic College on Skye, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

In a letter written on 23 January 1977, the year before he died, Hugh MacDiarmid had written to Sorley MacLean: ‘There is, I think, no doubt about you and I being the two best poets in Scotland... By definition, every good poet has something that is *sui generis* – something that is his alone and couldn’t be done by anyone else’.<sup>20</sup> In February 1977, Sorley MacLean visited his friend, Hugh MacDiarmid, by then in failing health, at his home at Brownsback, near Biggar. After MacDiarmid’s death, on 9 September 1978, he wrote a moving obituary for him, ‘Lament for the Makar’.

This decade also saw increasing recognition of Sorley MacLean’s achievements. He was awarded honorary degrees (University of Dundee 1972), National University of Ireland (1979) and University of Edinburgh (1980).

### **The Later Years (1981-1996)**

Sorley MacLean’s reputation continued to grow nationally and internationally in this period: his poetry was translated into other languages, and he won renown as a poet not only in Scotland and Ireland, but in Europe, North America and Australia. As Professor William Gillies commented: ‘This achievement is all the more remarkable given that he chose to write in a language that is spoken by fewer than one hundred thousand people.’<sup>21</sup> Universities bestowed honorary degrees on Sorley in recognition of his talents and contribution to literature, and invitations came from all corners of the globe for him to read his poetry and give lectures. Many non-Gaelic speakers came to listen to his poetry just to hear his mesmeric voice – it was as if the feelings that had inspired the poem came to life once more as he recited.

In 1985, Sorley MacLean’s prose and critical writings were collected in *Ris a’ Bhruthaich*, which was edited by Professor William Gillies and published by Acair in Stornoway. Four years later, in 1989, his collected poems in Gaelic and English, *O Choille gu Bearradh*, were published by Carcanet. The volume was dedicated to his wife, Renee, and it included an important preface in which he set out much of his poetic *credo*: ‘... the “full-time” professional poet is not for me and never has been. If I have time to do it, I brood over something until the rhythm comes, as a more or less tight rope to cross the abyss of silence. I go on with it, as far as I can see, unconsciously’.<sup>22</sup>

A source of great sadness was the death of his second daughter, Catriona, at an early age, and in the last years of his life he and his wife were a constant support for their son-in-law and their two grandchildren who at a young age had lost their mother.

On 24 November 1996, Sorley MacLean passed away in Raigmore Hospital in Inverness at the age of eighty-five after a very short illness. The sense of shock was profound since ‘his voice was the authentic voice of the Highlands, of Gaeldom’<sup>23</sup>, and the many obituaries were an eloquent testimony to the regard and affection in which he was held.

Perhaps the last word should be Iain Crichton Smith’s comment in 1973: ‘When confronted by this kind of poetry, one can only marvel that it exists... For this poetry is not simply verbalization: it is both words and music together, it is what one wants poetry to be’.<sup>24</sup>

NOTE: The information in this biography is based on the catalogue that was published in conjunction with the National Library of Scotland's exhibition on the poetry of Sorley MacLean arranged to mark his seventieth birthday in 1981, with the preparation of which he was closely involved. Warm thanks are due to Mrs Renee MacLean for assistance with dates for the Edinburgh and Plockton periods.

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- <sup>1</sup> 'Introduction' by William Gillies to *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1981, p.5.
  - <sup>2</sup> Donald Archie MacDonald, 'Some Aspects of Family and Local Background: an Interview with Sorley MacLean' in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986, p. 216.
  - <sup>3</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1981, p.7.
  - <sup>4</sup> Some Aspects of Family and Local Background: an Interview, p.219.
  - <sup>5</sup> Preface by Sorley MacLean, April 1989, in *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean. O Choille gu Bearradh/From Wood to Ridge*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1989.
  - <sup>6</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue, p.14.
  - <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
  - <sup>8</sup> 'On Poetry and the Muse', *Chapman*, 16 (summer 1976).
  - <sup>9</sup> *Dàin do Eimhir*, ed. Christopher Whyte: Glasgow: ASLS, 2002, p.8.
  - <sup>10</sup> Eimhir was the wife of Cu Chulainn, the legendary Fenian hero in the *Táin Bó Chuainnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), the central epic of the Ulster Cycle.
  - <sup>11</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean. Dàin do Eimhir*. Glasgow: ASLS, 2002.
  - <sup>12</sup> Letter from Sorley MacLean to Hugh MacDiarmid, 23 February 1942. Edinburgh University Library.
  - <sup>13</sup> *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, ed. Donald MacAulay. Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995, p.54. (Canongate Classics 55) (Originally published by Southside Publishers, Edinburgh, 1976)
  - <sup>14</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue, p.34.
  - <sup>15</sup> Aonghas MacNeacail, 'Questions of Prestige: Sorley MacLean and the Campaign for Gaelic' in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986, p. 208.
  - <sup>16</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1981, p.34.
  - <sup>17</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction' in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986, p. 2.
  - <sup>18</sup> Iain Crichton Smith, 'The Poetry of Sorley MacLean' in *The Glasgow Review*, Vol, IV, No. 3 (late summer 1973).
  - <sup>19</sup> John MacInnes, 'Sorley MacLean: the Harvest of his Genius' in *The Scotsman*, 23 April 1977.
  - <sup>20</sup> Letter from Hugh MacDiarmid to Sorley MacLean, dated 23 January 1977. Edinburgh University Library.
  - <sup>21</sup> 'Introduction' by William Gillies to *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean*. Exhibition catalogue. Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1981, p.6.
  - <sup>22</sup> *Somhairle MacGill-Eain. O Choille gu Bearradh*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1989, preface, xvi.
  - <sup>23</sup> Iain Crichton Smith, 'Obituary of Sorley MacLean'. [www.gaelicscottish.com/docs/sorley.htm](http://www.gaelicscottish.com/docs/sorley.htm)
  - <sup>24</sup> Iain Crichton Smith. Review of *Reothairt is Contraigh* in *Glasgow Herald*, 21 April 1977.