

Sorley MacLean:
Continuity and the transformation of Symbols

Of recent years, those who have written and spoken of the achievement of Sorley MacLean have been concerned less with the break with tradition in his work than they have been with tracing the continuity between his work and what went before. It could be argued, for instance, that his war poems are not far removed from the work of John Munro of Lewis. The elegy on his brother Calum is not wholly divorced in form or content from the tradition of *cumha* (lament) in Scottish Gaelic, of which the poet had learned so many excellent examples from his grandmother and his father's sister in his youth. In terms of form, an examination of his verse soon shows up the wide variety of traditional metres — in this respect not unlike the Skye poetess Màiri Mhór nan Òran whom he has so often praised, whose own memory was stocked with a rich repertoire of traditional song before she herself ever began to compose.

John MacInnes, in a characteristically perceptive article in *Cencrastus* (no. 7, Winter 1981-82), has begun to trace the abiding and formative influence of another literature on the mind and voice of MacLean — that of the pulpit, the prayer meeting and family worship. Writing of the Anglo-Welsh writers of Wales, John Ackerman had this to say:

Made sensitive, under its ever-present influence (i.e. the pulpit's) to the sound of words, such a writer as Thomas found rhythm, incantation, the music of the line (whether in verse or prose) basic aids to expression.¹

No one who has listened to Sorley MacLean read aloud or even engage in conversation under stress of emotion or deep conviction, could fail to catch an echo of that note of fervent declaration which is heard in the voice of those who preach in Gaelic or lead with freedom in extempore prayer. This characteristic MacLean has in common with a number of writers in Wales and, of course, with W. R. Rodgers in Ireland. Donald MacAulay has acknowledged the power and attraction of these opportunities for self-expression in his poem 'Soisgeul 1955'.²

And MacLean, the "giullan Saoir-Chléireach" (little Free Presbyterian boy) who, as he himself tells us, "relinquished Calvinism for socialism at about the age of twelve", listened to many sermons and prayers, and continued to live among, argue and discuss with people for whom the Gaelic Bible and translation of the Shorter Catechism both formed and restricted their intellectual horizon.

It is no surprise, therefore, to find that stretches of Sorley MacLean's poetry are richly furnished with the terminology of that Protestantism in which he was reared and by which he has been surrounded for a great part of his life. The highpoints of its practice appear, for instance, in his use of terms like "latha traisg" (fast-day),

“Sàbaid nam marbh” (Sabbath of the Dead), “ceann-teagaisg” (the text). The terms used to treat its most profound concerns also appear: for example, “sìorruidheachd” (Eternity), “Pàrras” (Paradise), “aithreachas” (remorse), “naomh” (holy), “an Taghadh” (Election), “a’ Ghairm Eifeachdach no’n Dùrachd” (effectual calling or sincerity). It is no surprise to find ‘Blind Munro’, one of the great figures of the early nineteenth-century revival in Skye, who organized the burning of a mountain of fiddles and bagpipes and who was credited with knowing the whole Bible by heart, bracketed with MacCruimein the piper as the twin symbolic figures round whom, in tension and identity, the recent poem ‘Uamha ‘n Òir’³ is centred.

These terms are used by the poet with an extended meaning. This does not mean that they are merely ornamental, or extrinsic to the form and texture of his thought, nor does it mean that they have lost their original meaning.

For example, in the poem ‘Urnuigh’:

Bha seo aig Cornford òg ‘na ghaisge.	Young Cornford had this in his heroism.
eagal smuain a ghaoil bhith faisg air	the fear of the thought of his love being near him
nuair a bha an Spàinn ‘na latha-traisg dha,	when Spain was a fast-day for him:
eagal a challa air an duine,	fear of his loss in the man.
eagal an eagail air a’ churaidh.	fear of the fear in the hero. ⁴

The “latha-traisg” is the Fast-Day which is normally held on a Thursday: it precedes and helps to prepare communicants for the sacramental celebration on the following Sunday. John MacInnes has already drawn attention to the provenance of the opening phrase, “Bha seo aig Cornford òg ‘na ghaisge...”. This formula introduces some memorable insight or saying of a godly person from the Evangelical past: “Bha seo aig té bhcannaichte a bha ann an Loch Carrann an toiseach...”. (A godly woman in Loch Carron had [i.e. used to say] this...) Such a godly person would, of course, belong to that small group of ‘Members’, or communicants, who would actually partake of the Sacrament. Young Cornford, together with Dimitrov and Connolly who appear later in the same poem, is among the secular Elect among whom the ‘unregenerate’ might pray eventually to be found.

Another poem of roughly the same period, ‘Cornford’, begins:

Cornford agus Julian Bell	Cornford and Julian Bell
agus Garcia Lorca,	and Garcia Lorca,
marbh ‘san Spàinn ‘san aobhar naomh.	dead in Spain in the sacred cause.

The word “aobhar” (cause) itself is one that has strong religious overtones (the ‘cause’ for which one may arouse scandal or in which one may assist). The cause for which these young men died is the fight against Fascism; here it is called “an t-aobhar naomh” (the holy cause) and in the next stanza “an t-aobhar cruaidh” (the hard cause). For MacLean the political cause is the ‘holy’ one: as it is in ‘Ard-mhusaeum na h-Eireann’, speaking of the execution of James Connolly in 1916:

... an léine bh’ air Ó Conghaile	...the shirt that was on Connolly
ann an Ard Phost-Oifis Eirinn	in the General Post-Office of Ireland
’s e ‘g ullachadh na h-ìobairt	while he was preparing the sacrifice
a chuir suas e fhéin air séithir	that put himself up on a chair
as naomhe na ‘n Lia Fàil	that is holier than the Lia Fàil
th’ air Cnoc na Teamhrach an Eirinn.	that is on the Hill of Tara in Ireland.

The Fast-day then, which prepares the communicant for the annual Communion,

has become the purifying time of self-denial in Spain, during which John Cornford was prepared for the sacrifice of his life.

Or one might take the phrase “sàbaid nam marbh” (the Sabbath of the Dead) in the following lines from ‘Hallaig’.

Fuirichidh mi ris a’ bheithe
gus an tig i mach an Càrn,
gus am bi am bearradh uile
o Bheinn na Lice fa sgàil.

I will wait for the birch
wood until it comes up by the cairn,
until the whole ridge from Beinn na Lice
will be under its shade.

Mura tig ’s ann thèarnas mi a Hallaig
a dh’ ionnsaigh Sàbaid nam marbh,
far a bheil an sluagh a’ tathaich,
gach aon ghinealach a dh’ fhalbh.

If it does not, I will go down to Hallaig,
to the Sabbath of the Dead,
where the people are frequenting,
every single generation gone.

The Jewish Sabbath is, of course, the seventh day of the week, the day of rest and, as such, no doubt appropriate to the condition of the dead. But the word ‘Sàbaid’ here must surely have added resonances for anyone who has watched the silent, often black-coated figures who say nothing or speak only in low tones as they emerge here and there from their houses and converge upon the church on a Sabbath evening. The use of the word ‘Sabbath’ prepares us, in fact, for the silence of the vision itself and sanctifies it as does the word ‘coimhthional’ (congregation) some lines later:

’s na h-igheanan ’nam badan sàmhach
a’ dol a Chlachan mar o thùs.

the girls in silent bands
go to Clachan as in the beginning.

Or again:

A’ tilleadh a Hallaig anns an fheasgar,
anns a’ chamhanaich bhalbh bheò,
a’ lionadh nan leathanan casa,
an gàireachdaich ’nam chluais ’na ceò.

coming back to Hallaig in the evening
in the dumb living twilight,
filling the steep slopes,
their laughter a mist in my ears.

A third example, this time a term from the very core of theological discourse, is ‘An Taghadh’ (Election).

In ‘Latha Foghair’, the enemy shells have killed his six companions and he, alone of the group, has survived:

Ghabh aon Taghadh iadsan
’s cha d’ ghabh e mise,
gun fhoighneachd dhinn
cò b’ fheàrr no bu mhiosa:
ar liom, cho diabhlaidh coma
ris na sligean.

One Election took them
and did not take me,
without asking
us which was better or worse:
it seemed as devilishly indifferent
as the shells.

However robust and reassuring the doctrine of Election may have been in the hands of an Augustine or, for that matter, of Martin Luther and the first generation of sixteenth-century reformers, in the hands of the Calvinist orthodoxy of the following century (to which the Free Presbyterians, among whom MacLean grew up, strictly adhere), it had become a terrifying doctrine, underlining the terrible and arbitrary power of the Deity. According to this doctrine, not only had God, in accordance with His eternal decrees, elected some to eternal life, but He who “for His own good pleasure had foreordained whatsoever comes to pass”, had also foreordained some to eternal damnation, good and bad works notwithstanding.

The lines, “Ghabh aon Taghadh iadsan ’s cha d’ ghabh e mise” (One Election took them and did not take me), which surely echo *Luke 17, 34-6* (“Bidh dithis dhaoine anns a’ mhachair; gabhar aon dhiubh agus fàgar am fear eile...”), derive their force from the poet’s long-standing rejection of this doctrine. The poem begins and ends with the grim, inexplicable presence of the six corpses. That is the verifiable reality —

Sianar marbh ri mo ghualainn
latha foghair.

Six men dead at my shoulder
on an Autumn day.

No theological or other rationalisation which is not itself devilish, can explain the randomness of their fate and his escape. MacLean’s use here of the term “Taghadh” (Election), a central term from a rejected theological system, serves only to heighten the expression of bewilderment and deepen the pessimism.

This term appears again later in that remarkable poem of shadow and half-light, ‘Anns a’ Phàirce Mhóir’. The poem is at once a kind of ‘Song of Experience’ and a ‘Song of Innocence’ expressing the happiness of those mild harvest nights in the full moon where now and again the clouds blot out the moonlight and the children play hide and seek among the stooks. The poem also captures the half-frightening delight of hiding and being found in the shadows of a field that seemed limitless: “’s gun fhios...cia mhiad adag a bh’ air an raon” (when no boy or girl knew how many stooks were in the plain). When the stooks are safely harvested, the field is ploughed again for another crop. Straight parallel furrows cut into the surface of the field and never meet. The destiny of each of those carefree children becomes manifest later in all its loneliness (just as the surface of the field changes from the ripe harvest under the moonlight to the bare furrows of the plough).

Oidheche ’n deireadh an fhoghair
’n uair a bha an Taghadh nas ciaire
’s mu’n robh an saoghal ’na sgrìoban
cruaidhe dìreach giara.
’S gun fhios aig gille no nighinn
cia mhiad adag bh’air an raon,
a h-uile h-adag fhathast diomhair
mun robh an t-achadh ’na chlàr maol.

A night in late Autumn
when the Election was dimmer
and before the world was
hard straight furrows.
When no boy or girl knew
how many stooks were on the plain,
every stook still mysterious,
before the field was a bare expanse.

The word ‘fhathast’ (still) in the penultimate line cited, warns us that the children’s destiny is already at hand, waiting merely to unfold itself. The poet who, at an early age was made to learn the catechism answers to questions concerning Election and God’s eternal decrees, adds two lines to those already cited:

Cha robh an Taghadh cho soilleir
is sinne anns a’ Phàirce Mhóir.

The Election was not so clear
to us in the Big Park.

Perhaps there is a touch of irony in the recollection of how facilely as a child he could have trotted out the orthodox answers to these perennial mysteries of fate and destiny.

It has already been acknowledged that biblical and homiletic language runs under the surface of MacLean’s poetry in rich veins, often coming up into the light like out-crops of rock and always serving to give the poetry a firmness and strength.

Aside from those already mentioned by John MacInnes or those used in this essay, there are two or three examples in the poem ‘Urnuigh’ which may serve to

the suffering is explicitly or implicitly set in a social or political context. No one who has read through the compassionate quatrains of 'Ban-Ghàidheal' or felt the throb of its restrained anger, has failed to notice that she carried the seaweed in her creel: "tharruing ise 'n fheamainn fhuar chum biadh a cloinne 's duais an tùir" (to feed her children and to pay the Castle). The girl who was kidnapped on the shore at Geusdo and taken off on the ill-fated "Annie Jane", is representative of the hundreds and thousands who were transported during the Clearances. Again and again, MacLean returns to the sufferings, individual and collective, of those who may be comprehended in 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa':

Gach bochdainn, àmhghar 's dórainn	All the poverty, anguish and grief
a thig 's a thàinig ar sluagh na h-Eòrpa	that will come and have come on Europe's
	people
bho Long nan Daoine gu daors' a'	from the slave ship to the slavery of the
mhór-shluaigh.	whole people.

There can be no doubt that what MacLean learned of the early years of Highland history and what he saw of conditions in Lowland Scotland invited a comprehensive analysis in socialist terms.

What is perhaps of particular interest to us here is that, in developing his analysis, MacLean never falls into the ideological trap of minimizing the significance of the suffering which is (perhaps inevitably) to be met with on the way to the defeat of Fascism and the growth of Socialism. It might be worth considering that what might be called his compassionate balance in the treatment of human suffering is balanced because it has its roots in his early critique of the preaching he heard so much of as a boy and as a youth.

It could be argued that much of this preaching, in its anxiety to put the Cross at the centre of its concern, has erred in failing (or seeming to fail) to take seriously the day-to-day suffering of men and women, particularly their poverty. A piety which can take credit for giving men and women a sense of their eternal value in the eyes of God, at a time when their material condition seems to suggest they have no value at all, has another side. This form of preaching also tended to suggest that the value of their souls and the lost state of their souls, if they remained unconverted, was of such importance as to dwarf the significance of any effort to ameliorate their social condition. If the landlord was cruel, there was One who would deal with him in due time. Rather than taking the law into one's own hands, it would be better to consider that, without conversion, your own soul might join his in Hell. This line of thought lies behind the explicit criticism in 'Ban-Ghàidheal':

Agus labhair T' eaglais chaomh	And Thy gentle church has spoken
mu staid chailte a h-anama thruaigh....	about the lost state of her miserable soul....

The poem 'Calbharaigh' is written against the back-drop of a protestantism which spoke at length of the suffering of the world, but, by *failing* to do anything about it, ran the risk of reducing its lengthy reflections on the death of Christ (Coille uaine tìr an sgeòil) to mere pietistic rhetoric. In 'Am Buairadh', the sufferings of Christ are nothing in emotional terms compared with the glint of his love's smile. He even goes on to say that his love's beauty has cast a film over the poverty of the world, Lenin's anger, his theory and his praxis.

MacLean appears early on to have found the Christianity in which he was reared defective in its treatment of human suffering, too apt to demote this suffering inside a

“scheme of salvation”. But the interesting thing is that we do not find him falling into the error which too often became characteristic of the Stalinist ideologue, that of relativizing and de-sensitizing oneself to the suffering which inevitably human beings endure on the curve of “crescent history”. His critique of Highland Calvinism in this regard may have saved him from that error.

Closely connected with the theme of *Suffering* is that of *Time*, both in Christian and in Marxist thought. In the poem beginning “Chan fhaic mi fath mo shaothrach” MacLean begins by expressing misgiving as to the significance of his life-work, writing poetry “in a dying tongue”, but the poem goes on to suggest that there is a time-scale within which this, and his love and the sufferings of the masses throughout history may have significance. This is what we have been ‘given’:

Ach thugadh dhuinn am muillion bliadhna 'na mhir an roinn chianail fhàsmhoir, gaisge 's foighidinn nan ciadan agus miorbhail aodainn àlainn.	But we have been given the million years a fragment of a sad growing portion, the heroism and patience of hundreds and the miracle of a beautiful face.
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‘Gaoir na h-Eòrpa’ counterpoints the claims of political engagement and personal love and commitment, and in doing so startlingly evokes the suffering of Europe under Fascism. But in ‘An Roghainn’, which is in many ways its sequel, MacLean brings the argument to a resolution: one who avoided direct involvement in the Spanish War was certainly not fit to encounter the “thunderbolt of love”. The poignancy of love is for those who accept the political cross:

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 the cross's death in the hard extremity of Spain, and how then should I expect the one new prize of fate?
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This would have led to suffering and death for the cause. Certainly, the deaths of such figures as Connolly, Liebknecht, John MacLean, Dimitrov and Rosa Luxembourg are seen as ‘necessary’. Connolly’s death is spoken of specifically in terms of sacrifice, as we have seen. But both his death and Dimitrov’s sufferings are presented as those of men whose hearts have been “flayed” and “purified” (glainte), so that, in a sense, there is no cause for mourning.

The irreversibility of Time and its irretrievability form the central theme of ‘Hallaig’. Whatever else is to be said about that unbelievably rich and complex poem, it can be said that it affirms, in a way that invites comparison with MacDiarmid’s ‘Island Funeral’, the capacity of loving imagination to transcend and to redeem the betrayals and irretrievable wrongs of history. The deer, which symbolizes Time, is struck by a bullet from the gun of Love and “goes dizzily, sniffing at the grass-grown ruined homes” of the deserted townships of Raasay. Thus it appears that we have also transcended political hope and entered an altogether higher realm of thought.

But where is the eschatology which will comprehend the running sore of Ulster, the war in Vietnam, the atrocity of Auschwitz and the aching beauty of the world? In ‘A’ Bheinn air Chall’ the end towards which human history moves is itself shrouded, or seen only in tantalizing glimpses through the trees as we climb (we hope) towards the summit.

The sense of mystery, tinged with a certain melancholy hope concerning the end towards which we move, had already characterized the poet’s teleology in the closing stanzas of ‘Coilltean Ratharsair’.

But in 'A' Bheinn air Chall', while conceding its meaningfulness to a minority, MacLean rejects the eschatological vision of Dante's *Inferno* or that vision as mediated by the eighteenth-century Rannoch schoolmaster, Dugald Buchanan, in his 'Là A' Bhreitheanais' (Day of Judgement).⁵ In that momentary glimpse of himself in childhood, MacLean speaks of the child's reflection on received eschatology and the apocalyptic, when once faced with the terrible possibility of perdition and separation from God or Paradise without the majority of his own people:

Pàrras gun Phàrras a chuideachd,	Paradise without the paradise of his own
imcheist a' ghiullain Shaoir-Chléirich:	the perplexity of the little Free Presbyterian people, boy :
a ghearan is a dhiùltadh sàmhach	his complaint and silent refusal
'nan toibheum an amhaich Sineubha;	blasphemy in the throat of Geneva;
agus an amhaich na Ròimhe—	and in the throat of Rome—
ged tha Purgadair nas ciùine—	though Purgatory is gentler—
an robair eile air a' chrann	the other robber on the tree
is Spartacus le armait chiùrrte.	and Spartacus with his tortured army.

There is no speculative vision, but a certain specification is laid down — its comprehensiveness will include both the first robber and, of course, Spartacus, the leader of the slaves' revolt.

What is true of Time is also true of the significance of Nature in MacLean's poetry. The indifference of the natural world to the sorrows and joys of mankind is a recurrent theme, for example in 'Am Fuaran'. The mountains, springs and trees 'achieve' significance insofar as they are present and participant in the process of human history. The trees of the cleared eastern townships of Raasay are at once the setting, the personification and the continuing presence of the dead emigrant generation ('Hallraig'). One is reminded of Vernon Watkins' remark in the introduction to his edition of the letters received over many years from Dylan Thomas:

Natural observation in poetry meant nothing to us without the support of metaphysical truth..⁶

The same could be said of the authors of many of the psalms, the Book of Job and the oracles of Isaiah. MacLean might wish to gloss the word 'Metaphysical', but he would (I suspect) be content to admit that this is also true of himself.

The third and final theme to be examined is *Decision*.

It is the nearest thing to an anomaly existing in the practice and preaching of the strictest Highland presbyterianism that, although committed to a thoroughgoing doctrine of Double Predestination, it nevertheless exhorts 'decisions' and makes tireless calls to the unconverted, as though human will had a more significant role to play than presbyterian theory allows. In a religious practice which distinguishes clearly between the converted and the unconverted, the Highland unconverted are allowed a certain freedom to engage in 'worldly' activities, such as piping, singing, dancing and so on. The price they pay is the acknowledgement that they are unregenerate sinners on the way to perdition. They may resign themselves to this status, or they may accept it with occasional pangs of guilt, or they may throw themselves perversely into the unregenerate life and enjoy the fruits of sin for a

season. Whatever the reaction (or whatever mixture of the three possibilities), the conscience is bound to be open to frequent and sometimes painful scrutiny.

The presbyterian Highlander is one of an articulate, religious group of people, among whom the introspective, puritan and (at its most fertile, perhaps) divided conscience has made its home. Much has been written about the internal struggle documented in the *Dàin do Eimhir* poems: it has not often enough been discussed in terms of the refinement of the puritan conscience. It might prove worthwhile, in another place, to examine the tension which can be traced in MacLean's work from 'An Roghainn', through 'Urnuigh' to 'Uamha 'n Oir'. This tension is created by the antithesis between the inexorable movement of history (of which the poet is a tiny part) and the role of individual decision in the purification of the will. If my thesis is correct, this tension also remains unresolved in Highland Calvinism.

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NOTES

- 1 J. Ackerman, "The Welsh Background", in *Dylan Thomas, A collection of critical essays*, ed. C. B. Cox, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1966, p.35.
- 2 *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig, Duanaire Dà-theangach*, deas. le Domhnall MacAmhlaigh, Dùn Èideann 1976, p.193.
- 3 Parts I — III are published in *Chapman*, 4, no. 3, pp.6-13.
- 4 This line is an echo in Gaelic of the last line of the second quatrain of John Cornford's poem to Margot Heinemann:

Heart of the heartless world,
Dear heart, the thought of you
Is the pain at my side,
The shadow that chills my view.

The wind rises in the evening,
Reminds that autumn is near,
I am afraid to lose you,
I am afraid of my fear.

This poem (see *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. R. Skelton, London 1964, p.146) was translated into Gaelic by Sorley MacLean in 1980 (see *Seven Poets*, Glasgow 1981). Also see Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *Journey to the Frontier*, London 1966, p.351 *et passim*.

- 5 *Dàin Spioradail le Dughall Bochanan*, Glasgow 1946, pp.15ff.
- 6 V. Watkins, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. with introd. by Vernon Watkins, London 1957, p.64.