

**THE FORGOTTEN FIRST:  
JOHN MACCORMICK'S *DÙN-ÀLUINN***

Given the current renaissance in the writing of Gaelic fiction with the recent publication of five novels and two collections of short stories under the auspices of Ùr-Sgeul it seems timely to look back at the development of the Gaelic novel, and more specifically at the first Gaelic novel. John MacCormick's *Dùn-Àluinn, no an t-Oighre 'na Dhiobarach*, was serialised in the *People's Journal* in 1910<sup>1</sup> before being published in its entirety in 1912 with serialisation again in the *Celtic Monthly* during 1913–15<sup>2</sup> and further editions appearing around 1920 and in 2003. Within a year of the publication of *Dùn-Àluinn* as a novel, the second Gaelic novel, Angus Robertson's *An t-Ogha Mòr* appeared in print, underlining the renaissance which Gaelic literature was experiencing. Both novels, while remarked upon by contemporaries and by general studies of Gaelic literature, have been all but ignored to date, with no criticism or analysis of either having been published. The main aim of this article, therefore, is to offer some general comments about MacCormick's *Dùn-Àluinn* in the hope that this may open up both the novel and indeed other early twentieth-century Gaelic writers and their work to further scrutiny. Consideration will be given to the author himself, the contemporary Gaelic literary scene and finally some of the more interesting aspects of the novel itself.

The novel's author, John MacCormick (1860–1947), was a native of the Ross of Mull, the eldest of 11 children born to Neil and Annabella McCormick (née MacLachlan). Neil McCormick, whose family had moved to the Ross of Mull from Iona in 1837, was the manager of the Tormore granite quarry (Faithfull 1995: 18–19). John MacCormick received his early education in Mull before attending first the Free Church Normal School in Glasgow to train as a teacher and thereafter the University of Glasgow where he studied Latin, Greek, Logic and Mathematics.<sup>3</sup> After a brief spell teaching on North Uist he seems to have turned his back on that profession and returned to Mull where initially at least he devoted his time to literary

endeavours, most notably the Iona Press, but also as a regular contributor to the *North British Daily Mail*. When his first son was born in 1890 he was described on the record of birth as a 'journalist' although a year later the Census gives no description of his employment. In the record of his marriage and also those of the births of his second and third sons he was variously described as 'Quarry Manager' and 'Quarry Foreman', a change of employment perhaps dictated by the financial demands of supporting a family.<sup>4</sup> His first wife, Jane McLean, died in 1897 at the early age of 29 and at some point after this he settled in Glasgow where he undertook various jobs such as cemetery clerk at the Necropolis to supplement his income from writing, and it was in Glasgow that he died in 1947.

MacCormick was a prolific writer whose numerous Gaelic plays, short stories and the occasional poem were published mainly in the first three decades of the twentieth century. His published collections of stories include *Oiteagan o'n Iar* (1908), *Seanchaidh na h-Airigh* (1911) and *Seanchaidh na Tràghad* (1911). He also wrote a long story or novelette, *Gu'n Tug i Spéis do'n Armunn* (1908) which was a precursor to his longer project of completing a novel. Among his published plays are *Rath-Innis* (1924), *Am Fear a Chaill a' Ghàidhlig* (1925), *An t-Agh Odhar* (1931) and *An Ceòl-sithe* (n.d.). In addition to his literary endeavours his 1923 publication, *The Island of Mull*, reflects his strong antiquarian interest in Highland history, tradition and folklore, particularly that of his native island. In an obituary published shortly after his death in 1947 he is described as being 'the last of a race of Gaelic scholars which in the early years of the present century made a notable contribution to the literature of their Mother Tongue' (*OT*, 22/2/1947: 1). In addition to being a prolific writer, John MacCormick co-founded the Iona Press along with William Muir, a former manager of Tormore Quarry. According to a prospectus for the Iona Press it aimed to provide 'literary as well as geological mementoes of the sacred isle' (MacArthur 1990: 161). Among the dozen or so pamphlets of Gaelic poems and prayers which it published are *The Death of Fraoch* (1887), *A Highland New Year's Carol* (1888) and *The Blessing of the Ship* (1888), a traditional prayer used in Iona by sailors beginning a journey. The pamphlets which this hand press produced feature artwork strongly

influenced by the stone carving and sculpture of the island and hand-coloured by local girls (Faithfull 1995: 18). The Press was publishing from about 1887 and most of its output was concentrated between then and 1893.<sup>5</sup>

In considering the literary context in which MacCormick was writing, it must be borne in mind that secular Gaelic prose writing was barely out of its infancy in the early twentieth century, having only emerged in the 1830s with the publication of journals such as Norman MacLeod's *Teachdaire Gaelach* and *Cuairtear nan Gleann*. Given the strong influence of the clergy over these publications it is unsurprising to find that they featured very little fiction with most material being either religious or instructive in nature. Even in the 1870s, with a fresh flurry of periodicals and newspapers in which Gaelic was printed, there was little in the way of original fiction being published. Instead there was a leaning towards the translation of English fiction. Gaelic oral tradition, however, compensated for any apparent deficiency in Gaelic writing given the abundance of *sgeulachdan* it had to offer. The early 1860s, for instance, witnessed the publication of John Francis Campbell's landmark *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*. It may in fact be that the emphasis placed on recording and preserving oral tradition in the second half of the nineteenth century contributed to the writing of original Gaelic fiction not establishing itself in any meaningful way until the turn of the century. The impact of the Education Act of 1872 which established a national education system should also be borne in mind. While no provision was made for the Gaelic language, at least initially, the existence of a universal, English-oriented education system would have made Scottish and English literary texts more accessible to Gaelic speakers, and thus opened up Gaelic writers to a greater range of external literary influences.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century there were a small number of writers actively producing Gaelic stories. The stories, poems and songs of these writers were much in demand at urban ceilidhs and readings and it was with this audience in mind that they would generally have been writing. Most of these writers were Glasgow-based and included: Henry Whyte ('Fionn'), author of *The Celtic Garland* (1881) and

*Leabhar na Ceilidh* (1898); fellow Muileach John MacFadyen who published collections of stories, *An t-Eileanach* (1890) and *Sgeulaiche nan Caol* (1902); Angus Robertson, author of *An t-Ogha Mór* (1913); and Hector MacDougall from Coll, who was one of the most prolific writers of the period, penning stories, plays and poetry. In the first decade of the twentieth century this coterie of writers found a patron for their work in the form of the Honourable Roderick Erskine of Marr, or Ruaraidh Arascain agus Mhàirr as he was known. Erskine of Marr, who had learned Gaelic from his Harris nurse, was a fervent nationalist and pan-Celticist who held a strong conviction that Gaelic literary standards needed to be raised and that new writing should be encouraged. It was Erskine of Marr who gave a new cohesion and direction to these writers in developing a primarily urban-based ‘school’ of Gaelic literature. He used his private wealth to finance new periodicals in which their writing could be published, periodicals such as *Guth na Bliadhna* (1904–25), *An Sgeulaiche* (1909–11), a weekly newspaper, *Alba* (1908–09) and *An Ròsarnach* (sporadically between 1917 and 1930). It was not only fiction which he encouraged, but the use of Gaelic to discuss a diverse spectrum of topics, albeit with a leaning towards matters political. John MacCormick’s writing appeared in all of the aforementioned periodicals apart from *An Ròsarnach*, and with greatest frequency in the journal devoted to fiction, *An Sgeulaiche*.

Another contemporary who figures large on the Gaelic literary scene and who played a crucial role in supporting and nurturing MacCormick’s writing was Malcolm MacFarlane, a Paisley land-surveyor, born in Dalavich, Argyll. MacFarlane was a member of Marr’s coterie and his advice was frequently sought by Marr and others, a fact to which his voluminous manuscripts letters which are held by the National Library of Scotland testify. Although perhaps best known now as the compiler of *The School Dictionary* (1912) he undertook a great deal of editing of Gaelic material such as the Gaelic column of the *People’s Journal* and was also briefly the editor of An Comunn Gaidhealach’s *An Deò-Grèine*. It is primarily thanks to his efforts that much of MacCormick’s work was published. Writing in *An Sgeulaiche* in 1910 about the frustrations

which MacCormick experienced as a writer he explains that the writer was

an impis gach mìr Gàidhlig a sgrìobh e riamh a thrusadh 's a thilgeil anns an teine. Is coltach gu'n robh e mothachail air an nì so: nach robh a bhuadhan mar sgeulaiche air am meas a réir an airidheachd le breitheamhan a' Mhòid – nì a bha da-rìreadh fìor. Thachair gu'm bheil droch làmh sgrìobhaidh aig Iain; agus tha mi meas nach do ghabh na breitheamhan an dragh orra fèin a phaipeirean a leughadh. Cha do leugh mi fèin trì duilleagan nuair a mhothaich mi gu'n robh sgeulaiche ealanta agam fo m' bheachd. Bho'n àm sin gus an latha 'n diugh thug mi os làimh gach sgrìobhadh a rinn e an Gàidhlig ath-sgrìobhadh 's a chur an clò. (Sg: 21)

MacCormick's handwriting is certainly far from clear as can be seen from his letters to MacFarlane. There was, however, probably more to MacFarlane's comments about the Mòd adjudicators than these words might suggest as he did not always see eye to eye with adjudications or indeed with An Comunn Gaidhealach. Four years after his comments in *An Sgeulaiche*, a draft of a letter which MacFarlane sent to Neil Shaw, Secretary of An Comunn, in 1914 reveals his dissatisfaction with adjudication procedures with a reference to 'certain infamous judgements and other reprehensible circumstances connected with the 1913 Mòd'. More interesting, however is his reference in the same letter to MacCormick's experiences:

I have just this morning received fresh evidence of the rottenness of the judging in the literary competitions, in Mr John MacCormick's markings where he gets 45 percent as the value of his three short stories from one of the judges – who of course will at once be spotted as the only one capable of stabbing a rival in the dark. (NLS Acc.9736/20)

This rival alluded to here *may* have been Angus Robertson, author of *An t-Ogha Mòr*, who was one of the four adjudicators for the

competition in question (*DG* 2, 1913: 12). This and other evidence seems to hint at tensions within the Gaelic literary revival of the early twentieth century. MacFarlane had crossed swords publicly with Robertson in the letters page of the *Oban Times* in 1913 over the latter's novel. In a lengthy and strongly worded letter in response to a positive review of *An t-Ogha Mòr* by Angus Henderson, MacFarlane refers to 'its tortuous method and diction', and to its style which is 'unnatural and affected'. (*OT*, 9/8/1913: 3) This provoked an equally strongly-worded response from Robertson who claimed that MacFarlane 'only writes Gaelic as a foreigner', a comment which stung MacFarlane into replying and so the vitriolic correspondence continued for another month (*OT*, 16/8/1913: 3). Further evidence of tension between MacFarlane and An Comunn – with Angus Robertson on its Executive Council – is evidenced in the speech made by Malcolm MacLeod, President of An Comunn Gaidhealach at the 1913 Mòd in which he heralded *An t-Ogha Mòr* as the first Gaelic novel, eliciting an acerbic response from MacFarlane who observed

It is a pity these things cannot be better managed. Here we have a pioneer author [MacCormick] whose works have been epoch-making. Why the haste to throw him over like so many other pioneers? [. . .] Is it decent to take the credit which is his due from one who has led the way, and by his example, been such a stimulus to others? (*OT*, 27/9/1913: 3)

MacCormick himself seems to have preferred to avoid controversy, although in a letter to MacFarlane he does voice his appreciation that MacFarlane had taken issue with MacLeod over the matter (NLS Acc.9736/19). Clearly there are undercurrents among the various groups and individuals active at the time which would merit more thorough research, but for present purposes it is sufficient to be aware that they existed and may have affected the reception of *Dùn-Àhuinn*.

Despite MacFarlane's negative views on the adjudication of the Mòd's literary competitions there is no doubt that, alongside Erskine of Marr's publications, the competitions were of fundamental

importance in stimulating Gaelic literary productivity in this period. An Comunn Gaidhealach, which had been established in 1891, in addition to its role in campaigning for the advancement of Gaelic's position in Highland schools, had as one of its main functions, as it still does, the organisation of the annual Mòd. There were a number of competitions for literary compositions, including poetry, plays, stories and dialogues and despite MacCormick's experience of adjudication, to which MacFarlane referred, his name appears with frequency over the years as a prize-winner in the competitions for stories and for short plays. In 1911, for instance he won two first prizes, one for a short Gaelic play and another for a story 'based on historical incidents or local legends' (*DG*, 1911: 26). In 1912 he won the competition to write a short Gaelic play for children (*DG*, 1912: 13) and in 1913 he won the competitions for short humorous play and for Gaelic story (*DG*, 1913: 13). In 1925 his poem 'Blàr Inbhir-Chèitein' won him the Bardic Crown at the Greenock Mòd. It can be no coincidence that the first Gaelic novels emerged in this environment which encouraged Gaelic literary creativity and which generated fresh opportunities for writers seeking to publish their work.

Evidence underlining the importance of Erskine of Marr and MacFarlane's influence over MacCormick lies in a letter from 1909 in which Erskine of Marr, writing of the possibility of setting up *An Sgeulaiche*, suggests to MacFarlane that 'a good "Land League" serial such as McCormack (*sic*) could put together (under instruction) would be a good draw and useful politics' (NLS, Acc.9736/15, n.d.). These may well be the seeds of *Dùn-Àluinn* which would then be serialised the following year although to what extent it was written 'under instruction', beyond the necessary editing which MacFarlane would undertake, cannot now be established.

The author's decision to offer his novel for serialisation in the weekly *People's Journal* is likely to have been influenced by MacFarlane who seems to have been acting as an editor for the paper's Gaelic column. It is certainly not likely to have been influenced by financial incentive, as MacFarlane's correspondence reveals that 'the Editor has agreed to pay Mr MacCormick £3.3/-. I

do not know that you will consider that quite satisfactory but in any case it is better than nothing!’ (NLS Acc.9736/16). This compares less than favourably with the £100 which the *People’s Journal* was offering for serial novels in English by the beginning of the twentieth century (Donaldson 1986: 33).

The first announcement that a Gaelic novel was to be published appeared in the *People’s Journal* in April 1910, a month in advance of the paper’s serialisation of the novel. In addition to heralding the appearance of the first novel produced in Gaelic, readers are provided with some information about the main characters and are told that ‘the story is full of light and shade; and tragedy and comedy are skilfully blended’. One chapter of the novel is then published in the paper every week between 7 May and 12 November 1910. There are two main differences between the serialised form and the novel itself. The serialised version is accompanied by both illustrations and the occasional footnote, neither of which is reproduced in the novel. The footnotes tend to offer further information about superstitions or customs which feature in the novel. In the opening instalment of the novel, for instance, which focuses on the death-bed of Dùn-àluinn’s wife, a servant has been sent to Tobar an t-sonais for water which it is hoped will cure the dying woman. The sick woman asks “Am fac i beothach beò?” and it is clear from what follows that the fact that she hasn’t seen any living creature there is a bad omen. The footnote which appears in the *People’s Journal* offers the following information:

Tha tobar ’san Ros Mhuileach ris an abair iad “Tobar an t-Sonais” agus bha seann daoine a creidsinn gu ’n leighiseadh deoch dheth neach a bhiodh tinn. Na ’m faicteadh beothach beò ’san tobar bu chomharra e gu ’n tigeadh neach a bhiodh tinn, bho ’n bhàs. (*PJ*, 7/5/1910: 12)

Similarly, in Chapter 16, which contains the minister’s tirade against landlord tyranny, the serial is accompanied by a footnote stating that much of the novel is based on events of the past, although Mull is not explicitly mentioned on this occasion.



The novel itself, in common with many of MacCormick's short stories, is essentially a historical romance/adventure, but with a strong element of socio-historic commentary. The plot centres on the estate of Dùn-àluinn where a native landlord, Cailean Mòr, is clearing tenants. The novel opens with the death in childbirth of Cailean Òg's mother, leaving Cailean and his new sister motherless. Shortly after this they find themselves with a new stepmother – referred to throughout as a 'Bhan-Fhrangach, the Frenchwoman. Her actual name (Mariette Wolfe) is only mentioned once in the course of the novel. She marries Dùn-àluinn, Cailean Mòr, by somewhat dubious means. Her own husband apparently dies in mysterious circumstances a few chapters into the novel, thereby freeing her to marry Dùn-àluinn. Through the manipulation of this woman Cailean Òg finds himself banished from his inheritance. As a result he leaves the country, bidding farewell to Màiri, his sweetheart, his father having opposed his wish to marry her. On hearing that the ship which Cailean Òg was supposed to be on has sunk with no survivors, all at home think him dead. In Cailean's absence the crofters, under the leadership of their minister, rebel against the system of clearance being pursued by Dùn-àluinn and clearance is more or less brought to an end on the estate. Cailean Òg, meanwhile, has reached first Australia and then New Zealand where he is eventually successful in striking gold. While in New Zealand he takes part in the trial of a miner – Perkins – accused of cheating his fellow miners. Thanks to Cailean's defence Perkins is not sentenced to death, merely to be whipped. Perkins manages to escape before this sentence is carried out. Cailean, having made his fortune in New Zealand, returns home. He brings with him a friend with whom he had become acquainted in New Zealand, and the two arrive in Dùn-àluinn in disguise, and live in a cave, and mix with the estate's tenantry. Cailean Mòr dies shortly after in suspicious circumstances. At this point comes the denouement of the novel as Cailean Òg reveals his true identity and confronts his stepmother and her new factor. It turns out that Cailean's friend whom he met in New Zealand is none other than the 'dead' husband of the Frenchwoman. The man whom she had ordered to murder her husband was Perkins who had then gone to New Zealand, and subsequently returned as her new factor. Both the

stepmother and Perkins are imprisoned for their crimes, presumably including the murder of Dùn-àluinn himself. Cailean finds his old sweetheart and his young sister, and all who are morally upstanding are left to live happily ever after. This summary, which necessarily omits some of the finer points of the plot, demonstrates that the novel is an adventure story, but with strong social undercurrents specific to the Highlands. The plot has much in common with a number of MacCormick's Gaelic stories, stories such as 'S Leam Fèin an Gleann' and 'Oighre an Dùn Bhàin'. These stories share similar patterns of conflict, exile abroad, adventures abroad, return to the Highlands and a resolution of the circumstances which had caused their departure.

Neither the time nor the exact location of the novel is specified by MacCormick, although the novel is described in the *People's Journal* as being set about the beginning of the nineteenth century in the West Highlands. The reference in the novel to Cailean and his friend heading from Australia to New Zealand when word came of gold being found there would suggest a timescale closer to the 1860s. As far as geographical location is concerned it would seem that MacCormick has chosen Mull or its environs. The names Cailean and Eachann are each used for two different characters and were associated with the Campbells and the MacLeans respectively and towards the end of the novel when Dùn-àluinn dies he is on his way home from the fair in Salen, and it is remarked, 'bidh torradh an so nach robh riamh a leithid 'san dùthaich bho 'n latha thiodhlaiceadh Lachann Mór Dhubhairt am Muile'.<sup>6</sup> Like so many parts of the Highlands, MacCormick's native district, the Ross of Mull, which belonged to the Duke of Argyll, experienced clearances in the middle of the nineteenth century and is likely to have provided him with some inspiration. The Duke's factor in the Ross of Mull between 1845 and 1872 was John Campbell, 'am Factor Mòr', who has been described as being 'unparalleled as a focus for resentment in 300 years of Mull history' (Currie 2000: 354). He dealt harshly with tenants, most notably during the potato famine of 1847 when rents were raised by fifty percent, and the effects of the clearances which he carried out were felt as keenly by MacCormick's family as any, since most of his father's brothers left the Ross of Mull during

his time as factor.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while there are strong echoes of the writer's native land, he leaves the location of the novel sufficiently vague to enable readers from most parts of the Highlands and Islands to relate to the novel's social backdrop.

Published comments on *Dùn-Àluinn* either at the time of its publication or since are few and far between. The two contemporary reviews traced were published in the *Oban Times* and in An Comunn Gaidhealach's *An Deò-Grèine*. The *Oban Times* reviewer Dr Cameron Gillies (and one of MacFarlane's correspondents) is fulsome in his praise for MacFarlane's role in bringing the novel to publication. Of the novel he declares 'it is out and out Highland and Gaelic in plot and plan and feeling and expression. It is a treat in store for every Gaelic speaker' (*OT*, 2/11/1912: 3). He does however, complain of 'an occasional turgidity of adjectives in descriptive parts which does not add to otherwise admirable wording' and 'there is also quite a number of unfamiliar words which may, or may not be Gaelic, but which give a strained feeling to the story'. It may be that the reviewer's scepticism about some of the vocabulary was due to his not being wholly familiar with MacCormick's native dialect, since a letter from Mary Maclean, a native of Mull, to MacFarlane says of the novel's language, 'the Gaelic was *very* local' (NLS Acc.9736/16, 3/8/1910). The novel is also received favourably by the anonymous reviewer in *An Deò-Grèine* who observes that the appearance of both it and Angus Robertson's *An t-Ogha Mòr* are a sign of a new epoch in Gaelic literature and states 'that the central aim of the story is to place the tyranny of landlords under a strong search light' (*DG* 10, 1913: 31). Since then the novel has received no consideration except from Donald John MacLeod in his doctoral thesis which touches on it briefly and in his paper surveying the history of Gaelic prose (MacLeod 1969: 69–71; MacLeod 1977: 212). His description of it, some sixty years after its initial publication, is as 'a rather anaemic adventure yarn [...] [given] some weight by interpolating a long diatribe by one of his characters against the Clearances' (MacLeod 1977: 212). There is clearly some divergence between the contemporary reaction to the way in which MacCormick deals with the issue of land reform and the reaction some sixty years later. The Crofters' Act of 1886 did not bring about

the radical changes in land legislation for which many had hoped and as a result land reform was still very much on the Highland political agenda in the early twentieth century. Land raids, and the threat of land raids, were common in the period in which MacCormick was writing his novel and this coupled with his personal knowledge of the clearances and emigration in the Ross of Mull have left their mark on the novel. The next section of this paper will therefore consider this aspect of the novel in more detail.

From the outset of the novel, with the death-bed scene as Cailean Mòr's wife lies dying, there is a strong sense of *caochladh* in the novel, a theme which pervades Gaelic verse of the nineteenth century. We find the land mourning her death:

Cha robh uchd nach robh air a leòn. Cha robh sùil air nach robh deur. Cha robh cnoc nach robh a bhreo-chual féin air, air sgàth Baintighearn Dhùin-àluinn. Ghleidh na beanntan féin an ceò mu 'n guailnean; agus cha d' éirich dealt na h-oidhche bhàrr duilleagan nan craobh mar b' àbhaist. Sheinn an t-allt a choronach, is rinn a' ghaoth co-sheirm ris am measg nam preas'.  
(DA: 28)

The physical landscape remains prominent throughout the novel often with a resonance of nineteenth century verse. In the following excerpt we see the land through Cailean Òg's eyes when he returns from university as pre- and post-clearance scenes are juxtaposed:

Cha robh uair a rachadh e dhachaidh nach robh atharrachadh r' a fhaicinn: an sluagh air an sguabadh á baile an sud is á baile an so; is far an robh, eadhon an dé, sluagh lionmhor a' toirt am beathachaidh as an fhonn a leasaich iad féin le saothair an làmh, 's a thug iad gu rian 's gu feum, bho riasg is bho roinnich, gus an robh blàth a' bhuntàta is diasan a' choirce a' gliostradh 'sa ghréin an àite an fhraoich bhadanaich 's na luachrach fheusagaich, cha 'n 'eil an diugh ach tobhtaichean falamh is achaidhean lom. (DA: 46)

Cailean Mòr is portrayed from the outset as a disreputable character who spends much of his time away from his estate while involving himself in degenerate pursuits – ‘b’ e chompanach an duaircean bu mhotha. B’ e àite tathaich an drùth-lann a b’ isle. Bha cur-am-mach anabarrach ann’ (DA: 21–22). He is clearly the antithesis of all those praise-worthy qualities for which Highland chiefs were traditionally praised by poets, and unlike many poets of the nineteenth century MacCormick does not overlook the landlord’s role in the clearances on his estate. Yet, even in this fictional setting where the author has the opportunity to make a clean break with the nineteenth-century Gaelic poet’s tendency to blame sheep, shepherds or the English before blaming his chief, MacCormick cannot help but make an excuse for Cailean Mòr’s conduct – he was orphaned when young and consequently did not receive appropriate guidance in his youth. Although Cailean’s long Highland pedigree is made clear, so too is the reality of his position in the new socio-economic order, as he is consistently referred to as *uachdaran* rather than *ceann-feadhna*.

The protagonist, Cailean Òg, heir to Dùn-àluinn, stands in opposition to the forces which are destroying the estate. He represents continuity with the past and with Highland tradition and it is partly through him that a process of regeneration takes place by the end of the novel. It is he, not his father, who embodies all that is traditionally expected of a clan chief (although he too is only ever referred to as *uachdaran*): kindness, honesty, fairness, eloquence, wisdom and courage. His generosity is evident when he helps those of his father’s evicted tenants whom he encounters in Glasgow, ‘fhad ’s a ruigeadh a phòca air, dheanadh e fuasgladh orra’ (DA: 44). In New Zealand he defends Perkins (alias the merchant and the factor) in order to ensure that justice is served, the irony of which is only revealed at the end of the novel when readers discover that the man whom he defended is not merely guilty of fraud, but also of murder. Cailean Òg is, of course, in a position to empathise with those who have been driven from their homes as he too has suffered this experience. At the end of the novel the people and the land which mourned Cailean Òg’s mother and which suffered under his father’s management are revitalised by Cailean himself:

Rinn Cailean òg uachdaran math; agus cha robh a bhean chaomh 'na grabadh 'sam bith air. Dh' fhàs an sluagh lionmhor agus sona aon uair eile, agus bliadhna an déidh bliadhna chiteadh smùid 'ga togail an sud 's an so, far an robh teinteinean fuara fad bhliadhnachan athaiseach. (*DA*: 258)

Here MacCormick reflects the traditional Gaelic, and indeed Celtic, concept which dictates that a land will flourish under a good and rightful rule. A ruler's shortcomings were seen as having repercussions on the entire land, as evidenced by Cailean Mòr's rule. Cailean Òg is not, however, the sole agent of resolution in the novel. The first stage of progression is through the resistance of the tenantry to Cailean Mòr's policy of clearance. It is the chapters featuring this resistance which represent the most successful and convincing part of the novel, drawing as they did on events during the Land Agitation period of the 1880s. The revolt in Dùn-àluinn is led by the parish minister, 'am ministear mór':

Bha 'n sluagh air éirigh 'na aghaidh. Bha iad iomadh latha roimhe sud bruich a chum éirigh. Cha robh 'gan dìth ach ceannard g' am brosnachadh 's g' an stiùradh; agus fhuair iad e. Fhuair iad am ministear mór còir, ach mi-fhortanach [...] Bha iad air an dùsgadh as an t-suain 'san robh iad agus chuir an dùsgadh sin clach an craos ain-tighearnais feadh na Gaidhealtachd air fad. (*DA*: 131–32)

The minister openly condemns the clearances being carried out and, albeit unwillingly, he leads a riotous crowd of tenants to Cailean Mòr's castle. A few chapters later the minister addresses a crowd of tenants on the subject of land rights. An entire chapter is devoted to this lecture in which he echoes the pro-crofter rhetoric of the later nineteenth century, condemning the system of land division within the Highlands and insisting that the circumstances of the Gaels are no better than those of slaves – 'Cò thug a leithid de ùghdaras da thairis oirbhse is gu 'm faod e ur làimhseachadh mar thràillean dubha nan Innsean?' (*DA*: 137). MacCormick's minister may have been inspired by the Iona minister, the Rev. Archibald MacMillan, also

known as the ‘Ministear Mòr’, an outspoken individual who fell out of favour with the Duke of Argyll at the end of the nineteenth century (MacArthur 1990: 194) or perhaps by the Rev. Donald MacCallum who was the most prominent member of the nineteenth-century Highland clergy to campaign actively on behalf of the crofters. The minister does, however, have a flaw in his fondness for alcohol, and this prevents him from achieving heroic stature and so Cailean Òg is not upstaged as the hero. As so often happens with tragically flawed characters, the minister’s condition deteriorates in the course of the novel, to the point where he is reduced to living in a cave. Another possible source of inspiration for MacCormick’s outcast minister was a nineteenth-century Baptist schoolmaster in the Ross of Mull who, according to oral tradition, was evicted from his home and resorted to teaching in a cave by the shore, a cave which the Baptists used for worship after being put out of their meeting house.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that MacCormick’s minister did not sit well with the 1912 reviewer, Cameron Gillies, who commented, ‘the “ministear mór” is right away from anything we ever knew in the Highlands. He is artistically the worst-drawn character in the book’ (*OT*, 2/11/1912: 3). MacCormick himself had had his doubts about the minister as an earlier letter to MacFarlane reveals that when ‘I was writing *Dunaluinn* I thought I made the minister too rude but in considering he was rude only when drunk I let him have his say as that particular vice is I am sorry to say too true in some’ (NLS Acc.9736/16). The minister, in fact, from a present-day perspective at least, would seem to be one of the stronger characters, although it is easy to see why readers a century ago may have had their misgivings about the way in which a ‘pillar of the community’ was represented.

An alternative voice in the novel which offers a slightly different perspective to that of Cailean Òg and of the minister is that of the tenants themselves who form a sort of rustic chorus. This tool used commonly by novelists and playwrights is employed by MacCormick to comment on events and to provide additional information. When Cailean Òg returns home in disguise he is told by Eóghan a’ Chiobair’s wife that the estate has a new factor, ‘nach ’eil bàillidh ùr air tighinn do ’n bhaile; is tha mi cinnteach gu ’n tig

reachdan ùra cuideachd' (*DA*: 216). This is the first hint we have that although the clearances have stopped they may be about to begin again. Similarly, it is the local pedlar Eachann a' Phaca who is the first to voice his doubts about 'am marsanta Gallda'. The merchant's appearance in Dùn-àluinn, near the beginning of the novel coincides with that of the Frenchwoman and it is only through Eachann's comments that the readers' suspicions are aroused to the fact that there may be some connection between the two characters. At one point Eachann observes that the merchant must have murdered another pedlar:

Cha 'n fhaod e bhi nach ann a mharbh am marsanta Gallda fear-pac eile mu 'n urrainn da leithid de chùnnradh a thoirt seachad: agus 's ann air a tha fìor choltas an t-slaightire. Cha mhór ri cliù na Ban-fhrangaich gu 'm biodh uiread malairt eatorra. An tràill!  
(*DA*: 53)

Elsewhere an old man observes of the merchant that there is not an occasion that the merchant goes to the castle that the Frenchwoman doesn't take him to her room and buy from him. It is only at the end of the novel that it becomes clear that his suspicions were correct and that the merchant was in league with the Frenchwoman, and that he is in fact none other than the man who attempted to murder her husband, alias Perkins in New Zealand, alias the new factor.

Eachann is the most prominent member of the chorus, primarily because he is so outspoken, and at times he seems to talk nonsense. He is frequently the butt of the other characters' jokes. Yet, as is so often the case, the apparent fool is the one who speaks most sense. The last job which John MacCormick had was that of cemetery clerk at the Necropolis where he would sit translating Shakespeare into Gaelic and it may be that this is of significance here.<sup>9</sup> While Gaelic tradition has its share of fools, such as Gilleasbaig Aotrom, Eachann's role is strongly reminiscent of the Fool in *King Lear*. The Fool, contrary to appearances, is in fact one of the most perceptive characters in the entire play. Like Lear with the Fool, it is with Eachann that the minister seeks refuge when he is cast out of his charge, the refuge being a cave, just as Lear and the Fool take refuge



in similarly basic accommodation. When Cailean Òg and his companion return to Dùn-àluinn in disguise and arrive at Uamh-nam-farrabhalach, they are greeted with Eachann's mockery:

“Glaodh ris na searbhantan. Ho-ho-hó” Is bhuaileadh Eachann a dhà bhois air a chéile. “Tha mi cinnteach gur h-ann dh’ ionnsuidh na seilge a thàinig sibh. O nach iomadh slinnean féidh a théid a chrochadh ri mullach na h-àrdraich so mu ’n téid an geamhradh seachad!” ars Eachann (*DA*: 226).

For all Eachann's banter, there is an element of social commentary here, based on reality for many Highland estates, in his reference to strangers coming to hunt deer on the estate. Just as we are aware of his uneasiness about the English merchant, so it is Eachann who draws the reader to speculate about the new factor – who in fact turns out to be that very merchant.

Riamh bho ’n d’ thàinig am marsanta Gallda tarsuinn air, bliadhnachan roimhe sud, bhiodh e cumail cinn chruaidh ris a’ bhàillidh ùr, ged nach robh aige ’na aghaidh ach gu ’n robh a bhruidhinn coltach ri bruidhinn a’ mharsanta Ghallda. (*DA*: 231–232)

It would seem therefore that *Dùn-Àluinn* is more than a mere ‘adventure yarn’, providing as it does a fictional view of social change in the Highlands. When considered alongside nineteenth century and contemporary Scottish fiction it is evident that there are certain elements which they have in common. In *Dùn-Àluinn* the tenantry are being uprooted and dispersed and, paralleling this, Cailean Òg's family is similarly torn apart with his mother dead, his sister in England and himself in New Zealand. The destruction of the family unit emphasises the theme of social upheaval and it is Cailean Òg who challenges the new social order and who restores stability and traditional values to this microcosm of Highland society. This places MacCormick's novel in the same sort of mould as those nineteenth-century Scottish novels which Douglas Gifford has described as being ones of ‘mythic regeneration’, novels such as

Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, Hogg's *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* and Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* (Gifford 1988: 218).

MacCormick's microcosmic Highlands does however lack 'realism', with an absence of harrowing accounts of evictions, hardship and suffering and painful leave-takings on emigrant ships as can be found in such contemporary sources as Donald MacLeod's *Gloomy Memories* or in Norman MacLeod's 'Long Mhór nan Eilthreach'. Instead these are glossed over in a way which accords with the general tendency of nineteenth-century British novels to overlook the less savoury aspects of the social problems which they discuss. It has been observed by R. G. Cox in 'The Reviews and Magazines' with its focus on the nineteenth century that 'realism must not be carried to the point of sordid; social criticism must not become too disturbingly precise and political' (Cox 1982: 194). This presumably has much to do with audience, as those reading MacCormick's work would have been doing so for entertainment rather than for incisive social criticism. Certainly a significant portion of this urban readership would be able to relate to the situation presented in the novel, whether through personal experience or through hearing the accounts of others, but that is not to say they wanted to be reminded too vividly of unpleasant memories of the past. Instead MacCormick seems to have aimed for some middle ground by incorporating a strong thread of social commentary, but ensuring that at no point does it completely supersede the romantic adventure side of the novel. The conclusion, with Cailean Òg restored to his inheritance, may seem somewhat unsatisfying to a present day readership. While there has been an improvement in the situation of the tenantry over the course of the novel it has taken the form of a return to a pre-Clearance idyll and is thus a step backwards rather than forwards to cope with the pressures of an increasingly commercialised world and with tenants still apparently having no legal tenancy rights. For an early twentieth-century emigré audience, however, this may have been a wholly acceptable, and indeed anticipated, conclusion and should be judged accordingly.

Stylistically the novel owes much to Gaelic tradition. The influence of the *sgeulachdan* of oral tradition is evident in both the plot, with the step-mother, exile and successful return of the hero,

and in the timescale of the novel which is a lengthy, indeterminate period. For the most part – with the notable exception of the minister – there is little character development, with stereotypes being used and in a number of cases, particularly those from outwith the community, their personal names are hardly ever used.

The writing can at times be ponderous and on occasions lapses into Ossianic-like evocations of scenery as when Cailean Òg's return to his estate is described:

Bha bùirich an uillt, nuallan an eas, agus iargaltachd an t-seallaidh mu 'n cuairt, a' cur oillt air an t-Sasunnach. Cha do thachair e r' a leithid riamh a h-uile ceum gu 'n d' thug e. Bha e daonnan a' cur ionghnaidh air, an cruadal 's a' mhisneach a bha 'n Cailean; ach an uair a chunnaic e an dùthaich 'san do thogadh e, thuig e le thùr nàdarra féin, nach b' urrainn ach ceatharnaich tighinn am mach á laifeid nam fuar-bheann oillteil ud, far an robh an tein-adhair a' dannsadh air mullach nam beann, fuaim an tairneanaich a' leum bho bhinnean gu binnean 's an stoirm a' gleac 's a' beadradh ris an eas, a bha sloistreadh nam bearradh, 's a' teicheadh le uamhas gu sàmhachair nam bruach an grunn a' ghlinne fhàsail. (*DA*: 208)

The accusation of adjectival turgidity which is levelled at MacCormick is perhaps overly harsh since here he was following the style of nineteenth-century writers of Gaelic in using two or three adjectives with the same or similar meaning, a technique both influenced by the rhetoric of oral tradition and preaching and consciously feeding back into an oral environment (see Kidd, forthcoming). Typical examples of this include 'cha do shuidh riamh an Dùn-éidinn no an Lunnainn cùirt a b' òrdaile, a bu shoineannta, a bu shuimeala, no a bu shuairce [...]' (*DA*: 186) and 'bha Cailean air a mheas 'na dhuine pongail, deas-bhriathrach, ionnsuichte, (*DA*: 189). These verbose moments tend, however, to be restricted to the most serious and dramatic points in the novel. MacCormick was equally capable of precision and of highly visual yet concise turns of phrase as when he talks of the clearances as 'an obair ghràineil a bha 'g itheadh na Gaidhealtachd mar an luibhre bhàsail' (*DA*: 46) and

when he describes the effect which a' Bhan-Fhrangach had on the widowed Dùn-àluinn, 'chuir i tuaineal 'na cheann, mar a chuireas an neas an ceann an eòin, agus laigh e aig a casan' (*DA*: 48). The novelist seems though to be most at ease and also most successful when he is dealing with the estate's tenants, his rustic chorus, and particularly with humorous encounters. One such example is when Eachann a' Phaca tries to say the word 'di-làrachadh':

“‘Di-làrachadh,’ Eachainn! ‘Di-làrachadh!’” arsa Dòmhnall saor, le triotan gàire.

“Seadh!” ars Eachann. “‘S e sin a tha mi a’ ciallachadh; ach dhi-chuimhnich mi ’n fhuaim. Dh’ fhàg an li-dàrachadh so an dùthaich gun daoine.”

[. . .]

Feuch a rithis e, Eachainn,” ars an greusaiche.

“Ciod è ghlagail a th’ oirbh?” ars Eachann.

“Abair ‘di-làrachadh,’” ars Dòmhnall saor; “‘di-làrachadh’; ‘di-làrachadh.’”

“‘S nach e sin a tha mi ’g ràdh?” ars Eachann – “‘di-ràlachadh’; ‘di-di-dalàrachadh.’” (*DA*: 160–61)

Clearly MacCormick enjoyed playing with language. When Cailean Òg returns to the estate in disguise he has him pretend to be from Islay and thus imitate that island's dialect, 'tha luidhte nach fheaca, ach bha sinn turas an so roimhe o cheann bliadhnachan. Channa mi sibhse, cuideachd tha mi 'n dùil [...] An do shiu- an do chiubhail an sean fhear?' (*DA*: 216–17)

Traditional imagery features prominently in the novel. The motif of the tree was a standard one in the bardic tradition which, at its most expansive, represented the chief, his family, the clan, the past with its roots and ancestors as well as the tree's future potential. Of Cailean Mòr's genealogy, MacCormick writes

Chinn iomadh geug mhaiseach air a' chraoibh-ghinealaich, agus dh' fhàg an toradh an lorg 'nan déidh an eachdraidh na rioghachd. Chinn geugan mosgaineach oirre cuideachd aig iomadh àm bho na fhreumhaich i an talamh sultmhor Dhùin-àluinn. (*DA*: 19)

And specifically of Cailean Mòr, the rotten branch, ‘B’ e Dùn-àluinn laoghan na craobhe de ’m buineadh e. B’ e cuideachd, an aona gheug a chrion ’s a shearg ’s a ghrod, làn mhosgain is fhineag is chnuimh.’ (DA: 106) The novelist transfers the poetic motif effortlessly into prose here as he underlines how shameful Cailean Mòr’s conduct was. The tree is made use of again to relate the destruction of the family by Cailean Mòr’s new wife, this time extending the image to incorporate the family nest as well as the tree:

Chuir i r’ a sùil innleachd a ghiùlan am mach, is cha ghabhadh sin dèanamh gun a’ chraobh a leagail còmhla ris an nead a chreachadh, ’s an cuachan a sgapadh ris na gaoithean. (DA: 172–3)

Another example of MacCormick firmly grounding his work in Gaelic tradition is his use of popular Highland belief, as when Dùn-àluinn’s wife dies and ‘sheall an t-aosda saobh-chreideach, caomhail air son rionnaig ùir ’san speur’ (DA: 28). Similarly, Eachann sees a *taibhse*, a sign that someone is going to die and shortly after this the Ban-Fhrangach’s husband is shot.

MacCormick turned his hand to writing plays later in his literary career, but there are times when the novel feels somewhat like a play, or at the very least that it could be very readily adapted for the stage. There are a number of lengthy monologues, such as a’ Bhan-Fhrangach’s and those in the court-scene in New Zealand, which feel more akin to drama than a novel, perhaps due primarily to MacCormick’s repetitive and at times exaggerated style with its roots in the oral side of Highland literary traditions. His use of disguise and deception can be readily envisaged working on the stage with one actor sufficing for three characters – am Marsanta Gallda, Perkins and the Factor – and one for Cailean Òg’s friend and the husband of a’ Bhan-fhrangach. The humorous scenes involving Eachann, to which reference has already been made, would also lend themselves to being performed, and would perhaps be even more successful on stage than in the novel.

All these points contribute to the sense that this first novel, as might be expected, was very much an experiment in writing an extended piece of fiction and that the writer drew on different aspects

of Gaelic traditions and literature as suited his needs, whether consciously or sub-consciously and the result is, as Cameron Gillies claimed, a novel which ‘is out and out Highland and Gaelic in plot and plan and feeling and expression’. That is not to say that *Dùn-Àluinn* does not have its shortcomings, but we must be wary of falling into the trap of judging it by present-day standards and instead must place it firmly in the context of its day and its audience, a primarily emigré audience whose expectations of Gaelic literature do not necessarily coincide with literary tastes today.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Sir Neil MacCormick for sharing with me all he knew of his great-uncle and to Mrs Annabel MacInnes, John MacCormick’s grand-daughter. I am also indebted to Mr Tom Aitchison, Dr Michel Byrne, Professor Thomas Owen Clancy, Ms Rachel Hosker (Glasgow University Archive Services) and Professor Donald Meek for the advice and assistance which they have offered.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The People’s Journal* had a regular Gaelic column at this time.
- <sup>2</sup> October 1913–September 1915.
- <sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Rachel Hosker of Glasgow University Archives Services for this information.
- <sup>4</sup> Statutory Marriages 542/00 0001; Statutory Births 542/00 0002; Statutory Births 542/00 0016.
- <sup>5</sup> The National Library of Scotland holds ‘Photocopies of items printed at the Iona Press 1887–1893 from the collection of Angus Johnston’.
- <sup>6</sup> Lachlann Mòr MacLean died in 1598 at the Battle of Tràigh Ghruineart, Islay, fighting against the MacDonalds.
- <sup>7</sup> I am grateful to John MacCormick’s great-nephew, Professor Sir Neil MacCormick, for sharing this information with me.
- <sup>8</sup> Donald E. Meek, ‘The Baptists of the Ross of Mull’, *Northern Studies*, 26 (1989), 28–42.
- <sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Professor Sir Neil MacCormick for this information.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

<i>DA</i>	<i>Dùn-Àluinn</i>
<i>DG</i>	<i>An Deò-Grèine</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oban Times</i>
<i>PJ</i>	<i>People's Journal</i>
<i>Sg</i>	<i>An Sgeulaiche</i>

**REFERENCES**

- COX, R. G. (1982) 'The Reviews and Magazines', *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature 6: from Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford. London. pp. 182–97.
- CURRIE, Jo (2000) *Mull. The Island and its People*. Edinburgh.
- DONALDSON, William (1986) *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland. Language, fiction and the press*. Aberdeen.
- FAITHFULL, Joan (1995) *The Ross of Mull Granite Quarries*. Iona.
- GIFFORD, Douglas (1988) 'Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814–1914', *The History of Scottish Literature Volume 3. Nineteenth Century*, ed. Douglas Gifford. Aberdeen. pp. 217–59.
- KIDD, Sheila M. (forthcoming) 'An Eye to the Ear: The Interface Between Oral and Literate Cultures in the Nineteenth-century Highlands', *Scottish Studies*.
- MACARTHUR, E. Mairi (1990) *Iona. The Living Memory of a Crofting Community 1750–1914*. Edinburgh.
- MACCALUIM, Alasdair, 'Ruaraidh Arascain is Mhàirr', <http://www.akerbeltz.org/rannsachadh/ruaraidh.htm> consulted on 22/12/2005.
- MACCORMAIC, Iain (1912) *Dùn-Àluinn*. Glasgow.
- MACLEOD, Donald John (1969) 'Twentieth Century Gaelic Literature: A Description, Comprising Critical Study and a Comprehensive Bibliography', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow.
- MACLEOD, Donald John (1977) 'Gaelic Prose', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 49: 198–230.
- MEEK, Donald E. (1989) 'The Baptists of the Ross of Mull', *Northern Studies* 26: 28–42.
- 'Photocopies of items printed at the Iona Press 1887–1893 from the collection of Angus Johnston', held by the National Library of Scotland.
- MACFARLANE, Malcolm – Papers of: NLS Acc.9736.