



'From Optik to Haptik': Celticism, symbols and stones in the 1930s

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'From Optik to Haptik': Celticism, Symbols and Stones in the 1930s

I

Hugh MacDiarmid's 'The Stone Called Saxagonus', first published in his travel guide-cum-polemic-cum-potboiler *The Islands of Scotland* (1939), is blunt in its response to the Celtic Twilight: 'Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser's Hebridean songs – the whole / Celtic Twilight business – I abhor'.¹ This abhorrence is no surprise. By the 1930s, as John Kerrigan has pointed out, '[r]ejecting the Celtic Twilight was almost a convention in itself', and the terms of the rejection were also 'conventional'.² Common targets were the perceived sentimentality, imprecision and intellectual softness of the genre, or its hackneyed presentation of 'the pathetic fallacy or the figure of the lone wanderer', or its inauthenticity.³ The immediate point of comparison for MacDiarmid is Debussy's 'impression of Greig' – 'the delightful taste of a pink sweet filled with snow' – which is far from the (desirable) 'hardy intellectual virility' of Ibsen.⁴ Similarly, Sorley MacLean, in his 1938 essay 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', contrasts Twilight poetry with the 'realist qualities' of 'hardness and clarity and firmness of outline' that he sees in all (true) Celtic poetry with the 'vague, misty, cloudy romanticism' of Celtic Twilight poetry that was, borrowing a phrase from T.E. Hulme, 'fozy with infinity'.⁵

For MacDiarmid and MacLean the question is one of inauthentic sentimentality (limp vagueness rather than limpid 'virility'). But for MacLean it is

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland* (London: Batsford, 1939), pp. xiv-xv. Marjory Kennedy-Fraser gathered – between 1909 and 1925 – three volumes of *Songs of the Hebrides* (and a fourth entitled *From the Hebrides*).

² John Kerrigan, 'Louis MacNeice among the islands' in Peter Mackay, Edna Longley and Fran Brearton (eds) *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 82, n. 43.

³ Christopher Whyte, 'The Gaelic Renaissance: Sorley Maclean and Derick Thomson' in Gary Day and Brian Docherty (eds) *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 143-169, p. 157.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. xiv.

⁵ Sorley MacLean, 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry' [1938] in *Ris a' Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean* (Stornoway: Acair, 1997 [1985]), pp. 15-47, p. 20.

also one of cultural survival: the Twilight had infected or castrated Gaelic poetry. It had led to a 'rapid decline in the backbone of Gaelic poetry' in the 19th century (with the work of Neil MacLeod being – like Twilight verse – 'sentimental, pretty-pretty, weak and thin'), while the 'fine talent' of Rev. Kenneth MacLeod (who was Kennedy-Fraser's Gaelic editor on her three volume *Songs of the Hebrides*) had been 'dissipated in the fogs of Celtic Twilight, a purely foreign non-Celtic development'.⁶ A cutting, satirical quatrain, never published during MacLean's lifetime, describes Kennedy-Fraser as one who 'spoth ... ar Ceòlraidh lùthmhor' [castrated our potent muse].⁷ For George Campbell Hay, meanwhile (writing in praise of MacLean's work in 1941) the Twilight is associated with a 'thick casing of dead ice that has lain over Gaelic literature so long'.⁸ The Twilight was, then, perhaps a 'delightful taste of a pink sweet filled with snow', but also one that could, fatally, harden into 'dead ice'.

II

This chapter explores some responses to the Celticism in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean (especially in the conception of the latter's long poem 'An Cuilithionn' [The Cuillin], written in 1938-1940). These are poets for whom the Twilight was not just a deadening, enervating cultural force, but also a possible threat to their own poetry, and especially their own attempts to create coherent and meaningful symbols derived from the landscape. The risk, in the terms of MacDiarmid's poem, is that every symbol might be a 'Stone Called Saxagonus'.

What MacDiarmid diagnoses in this poem is the skewed or distorting vision of the Twilight (the result of all that fog, foziness and dead ice). 'The Orpheus Choir, Rev. Kenneth MacLeod, and all the rest!' lack 'comicality', 'harsh, positive

⁶ MacLean, 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', pp. 46, 47

⁷ Sorley MacLean, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / White Leaping Flame: Collected Poems*, ed. Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), pp. 420-1.

⁸ George Campbell Hay, letter to Douglas Young, 19 December 1941, quoted in Christopher Whyte, 'Cultural Catalysts: Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay', in Brown, Clancy, Manning and Pittock (eds) *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature Vol. 3: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 151-62, p. 153.

masculinity' and 'the creative treatment of actuality'; for MacDiarmid 'They have bemused the geology of the islands / Till every other stone has become a Saxagonus' (574).⁹ The 'Saxagonus' is a stone which "'if it be holden against the sun, / Anon it shall shape a rainbow,' / And the rest Gagates and white margery pearls. / A fit setting only for spooks!'"¹⁰ The suggestion is that the Twilightists have misrepresented the 'geology' of the islands through visual gimmicks; reality is seen through a lens of mystical, self-involved – with the pun on those 'margery' pearls – superstition.¹¹ As MacDiarmid's note to the poem clarifies, the stone 'Saxagonus' is described in the sixteenth century book of Howth; it arises as parts of a discussion of myths and realities of Ireland, a veritable land of 'milk and honey', and of unlikely wonders: 'There been fairies little of body, and full hardy and strong. There been barnacles, fowls like wild geese, which grows wondrously upon trees, as it were nature wrought against king.'¹² There is little difference for MacDiarmid, it would appear, between medieval mystical naturalism and the distorting prism of Kennedy-Fraser's Twilightism. Certainly, in her description of Benbecula Kennedy-Fraser presents insubstantial Ossianic visions – 'mirage-like illusions' – with as much basis in reality as fairies and wondrous tree-growing geese: 'Low-lying watery Benbecula of the sea-fords and the lochs and the mirage-like illusions yielded us a great crop of labour lilt and some interesting and valuable Ossianic forms of chanting'.¹³

⁹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland*, p. xv. The Orpheus Choir was founded in Glasgow in 1906 by the composer Hugh S. Robertson.

¹⁰ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, I: 574. MacDiarmid corrects 'Gagathe' in the original.

¹¹ With his masculinist emphasis on 'virility' here and elsewhere, MacDiarmid may also have been drawing on the slang connotations of 'margery', as 'an effeminate or homosexual man', as suggested by Partridge's 1937 *Dictionary of Slang* (see the OED entry for 'margery').

¹² J.S. Brewer and William Bullen (eds) *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts* (London: Longman, 1871), pp. 31-2. MacDiarmid likely discovered the Saxagonus stone in St John D. Seymour, *Anglo-Irish Literature: 1200-1582* (Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 143.

¹³ Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod, *The Songs of the Hebrides* vol. II (London and New York: Boosey, 1917), p. x.

'The Stone Called Saxagonus' was far from the first time MacDiarmid had criticised the Celtic Twilight (and Kennedy-Fraser in particular) in terms of skewed or distorted vision. In *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, published in 1930, he contrasted 'Missus Kennedy Fraser's sangs' which are 'A' verra weel for Sasunnachs and seals' and give a view of 'Tir nan Og / Or the British Empire' and 'bletherin' banshees' with an 'Unguardit frontier facin' a West / No' o' the Blest!', and the possibility that the 'fog' might lift and last and Scotland be 'gien... Europe's een', and so see 'No' Tir nan Og, but America!'¹⁴ That he felt the need to repeat the argument at the end of the decade (and beyond) suggests not just that Kennedy-Fraser was an easy target (which she was), or that MacDiarmid often returned to the same hobby-horses and *cause celebres* (which he did), but also that the Celtic Twilight might have been a cause of some anxiety to MacDiarmid. Despite his attacks on it, the Celtic Twilight was proving remarkably popular and resilient (as it still does to the present day). One problem with the Twilight was that in his poetry of the 1930s MacDiarmid attempted to use the physicality of the landscape as a basis from which new political structures might be imagined;¹⁵ any Celtic 'fog' over the land (or fairies, or wondrously tree-grown birds) could then distort the political creations that might develop. And, in particular, the skewed, obscured or unrooted vision of the Twilight shares some characteristics – its uprootedness, its abstraction (but not the intellectual ambition) – with MacDiarmid's own attempt to create a 'Gaelic Idea' on which to base his cultural renaissance.

¹⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid* (ed. Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken) (London: Penguin, 1985 [1978]), vol. I: 223; italics in the original. MacDiarmid had been arguing for the reversal of 'tendencies in Scottish history which had caused the desuetude of the Doric and of the Gaelic' as early as 1923: c.f. McCulloch (ed.) *Modernism and Nationalism*, p. 170.

¹⁵ See, for discussions of this attempt, John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernisms: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890-1970* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 167-72; Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 78-84 and 91-95; Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 121-2.

Throughout the 1930s MacDiarmid repeatedly explored the possibilities of identifying a 'Gaelic' basis for Scottish culture, as part of his revivalist search for a Scottish culture before and separate from the dynamics of Anglicisation.¹⁶ The image of Cencrastus was one fruit of this search; as he would later explain in a letter to Helen Cruickshank in February 1939, 'Cencrastus ... is a Gaelic (or Scottish) version of the idea common to Indian and other mythologies that underlying Creation there is a great snake - and that its movements form the pattern of history', by using it in his poem, MacDiarmid was attempting to 'glorify the Gaelic element in our heritage (which I believe underlies our Scottish life and history in much the same way that consciousness underlies and informs the whole world of man)'.¹⁷ This association of the 'Gaelic element' and 'consciousness' is somewhat fuzzy and abstract, but then so was the poem. From Cencrastus MacDiarmid developed a 'Gaelic Idea' which would be a balance to the 'Russian Idea' in the 'parallelogram o' forces' which will 'Complete the Defence o' the West, / And end the English betrayal o' Europe'. This, as MacDiarmid himself states, was an 'intellectual device', rather than something rooted in any understanding of Gaelic culture.¹⁸ And when MacDiarmid returns to the same topic in his 1931 essay 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', the relationship of the idea to Gaelic is once more tenuous.

The 'Gaelic Idea' is an intellectual rallying cry, an expression of a desire for renewal (and cultural revolution): it is an 'intellectual conception designed to offset

¹⁶ In 'Scottish Gaelic Policy' in 1927 (in *The Pictish Review*, I:2) MacDiarmid argues for "'connecting up" again with our lost Gaelic culture' but, as Alan Riach suggests, it is only after *To Circumjack Cencrastus* that Gaelic becomes central to MacDiarmid's plans for Scottish cultural renovation: see Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), pp. 50. Notable later interventions (of many) are 'Celtic Front' published in *The Voice of Scotland* in 1938: Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose*, vol. III, ed. Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp. 21-6 and MacDiarmid's introduction to the *Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Carcanet, 1993 [1940]).

¹⁷ Quoted in Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid - Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 251. See also Christopher Whyte's notes to his edition of Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939: The Cuillin 1939 & Unpublished Poems* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011), p. 204, note to VII: 78.

¹⁸ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. I, pp. 222-3.

the Russian idea' which 'calls us to a redefinition and extension of our national principle of freedom on a plane of world-affairs, and in an abandonment alike of our monstrous neglect and ignorance of Gaelic and of the barren conservatism and loss of the creative spirit on the part of those professedly Gaelic and concerned with its maintenance and development'.¹⁹ However, it is only tangentially related to Gaelic itself. Not only has it 'nothing in common with the activities of An Comunn Gaidhealach, no relationship whatever with the Celtic Twilight' but '[it] would not matter so far as positing it is concerned whether there had never been any Gaelic language or literature, not to mention clans and tartans, at all'; to remove any doubt, he repeats that 'from the point of view of the Gaelic idea, knowledge of, or indeed even the existence of, Gaelic is immaterial.'²⁰

This is in part a 'playful' intellectual exercise: as Lyall notes, the essay 'illustrates the extremes that MacDiarmid will go to in order to find a place for his self-confessedly playful vision of the Scottish genius as a balancing mechanism in world affairs during the thirties'.²¹ However, there are major issues with it. One is, in Michel Byrne's words, MacDiarmid's 'sheer presumption' since '[h]owever glorious the world mission being bestowed on Gaelic, the "Ur-Gaelic initiative" is clearly the latest in a long line of alien appropriations of the language and its culture'.²² And it is also an appropriation which relies on an understanding of the world as structured by racial distinctions, and which finds MacDiarmid, in Scott Lyall's words 'on indefensible fascist terrain', proposing a post-socialist nationalism similar to that

¹⁹ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea (1931-2)' in Duncan Glen (ed.) *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 56-74, p. 67.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 67-9.

²¹ Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and the Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 130-1.

²² Michel Byrne, 'Tails o the Comet? MacLean, Hay, Young and MacDiarmid's Renaissance', *Scottlit* No. 26 (2002), pp. 1-3, p. 2. See also Louisa Gairn, 'MacDiarmid and Ecology', in Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch (eds) *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 87-93.

found in Hitler's Germany, which is based on 'race-consciousness' not 'class-consciousness'.²³

Although the 'Gaelic Idea' might be a more 'creative treatment of actuality' than the Twilightists – in the terms of 'The Stone called Saxagonus' – it still has a dubious relationship to 'actuality'. Thus, when MacDiarmid comes to restate the 'Gaelic Idea' in *The Islands of Scotland* (by which point, the life actually lived in the Highlands and Islands is of importance to him), he is somewhat defensive:

'Whatever the general considerations might be, however, my personal concern was not with Gaelic but with Scots and against southern English'²⁴. A purely intellectual conception of a 'Gaelic Idea' which floats free of actual Gaelic culture would be at odds with the argument he makes in his author's note that 'What the Hebrides and the Shetlands – and Scotland as a whole – need above all is a revolution in morale, a return to our roots, a re-discovery of deep realities we have neglected.'²⁵

This, though, is not as transparent an ambition as it may first appear. The ability to discover any actuality or reality (deep or otherwise) is one that MacDiarmid's poetry had also struggled with throughout the 1930s. His evolving support for a 'Gaelic Idea' had paralleled – among many other things – the development of his 'poetry of wisdom', written in synthetic English, which attempted to find a 'correct vocabulary, whether spiritual, technical, or purely associative' with which to describe the world.²⁶ Attempted, but – as shown by 'On a Raised Beach' from *Stony Limits and Other Poems* (1934), the poem on which 'The

²³ MacDiarmid, 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea', p. 70. As Bob Purdie argues, it is most useful to think understand MacDiarmid as a Utopian thinker, who was occasionally influenced by some right wing ideologies, rather than as in any simple way a fascist; Bob Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid: Black, Green, Red and Tartan* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2012), pp. 21-2.

²⁴ MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland*, p. 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xvii

²⁶ C.f. The epigraph to MacDiarmid's 1938 'Dìreadh I': 'I turn from the poetry of beauty to the poetry of wisdom – of "wisdom", that is to say, the poetry of moral and intellectual problems, and the emotions they generate;' MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, p. 1163. W.N. Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid: The Poetry and Prose of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 132.

Stone called Saxagonus' intellectually balances – necessarily failed. In 'On a Raised Beach' MacDiarmid attempts to reach beyond the senses (and the aesthetic sense) to discover a unity underlying the sensible 'haecceity' of the stones on the beach.²⁷ For this, the power of sight, the apprehension of the visible, doesn't suffice; and in his attempts to find a language fully to depict haecceity, the poet moves 'from optik to haptik', apparently in the hope that touch will give more immediate access to the phenomenological world, and a means of describing that world through language.²⁸ MacDiarmid refracts here the ideas of the American psychoanalyst Trigant Burrow, who he quotes in *The Islands of Scotland*, and for whom the substitution of 'words for the physiological experience presumed to underlie them' is a 'dissociative process' which has lead 'man' to lose 'touch with the hard and fast milieu of actual objects and correspondingly with the biological solidarity of his own organism.'²⁹ For Burrow, that is, language separates us from 'physiological experience', and so any attempt to use language to describe reality will necessarily be in vain: in the words of the poem it is '[b]ringing [...] aesthesis in vain to bear' on the world.³⁰ The poem, then, rejects the idea that poetry is able to "'realise" the natural world', in Gairn's words, or to 'testify to the intimacy between language and the landscape' in Brannigan's: any 'intimacy' does not overcome what Iain Crichton Smith sees as the 'terrible apartness' of the poet from his environment.³¹ But in the poem there is, nevertheless, a consciousness beyond geology of- a 'supreme creative power', a unifying 'Alpha and Omega, the Omnific Word' which 'Is the beginning and end of the world, / The unsearchable masterpiece, the music of the spheres'; crucially, this

²⁷ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. I, p. 423. Page references given within the text. C.f. Bold, *MacDiarmid*, 297 for a useful gloss on MacDiarmid's borrowings from Dun Scotus in this passage.

²⁸ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. I, p. 423. For a lively exploration of the centrality of the haptic to modernism, see Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015 [2013]).

²⁹ MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland*, xi.

³⁰ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. I, p. 423.

³¹ Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, p. 5, Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernisms*, p. 170, Iain Crichton Smith, *The Golden Lyric: An Essay on the Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Akros, 1967), p. 22.

is both 'unsearchable' and 'silent' – the poet aspires to 'the silence of supreme creative power, / The direct and undisturbed way of working / Which alone leads to greatness'.³² These stones may offer 'hard, intellectual virility', in the terms of 'The Stone Called Saxagonus', but they only avoid in their symbolising a music of 'delicate pastel shades' or 'romantic nostalgia' by reaching towards silence.³³

III

In Gaelic, if you are 'in two minds', you can be said to be 'eadar a' chlach 's an sgrath': 'between the stone and the turf'. This could be seen as the position of Gaelic writers in the 1930s who would write about the Scottish landscape: balanced between MacDiarmid's silent stones and the twee turf of the Twilight hillsides. In particular, Sorley MacLean, the main figure of the 'Gaelic Renaissance' – who was encouraged, published and feted by MacDiarmid, and with whom he developed a life-long friendship – had to come to terms with the continued pressure of the Twilight on the one hand, and also the complex nature of MacDiarmid's celebration of Gaelic on the other. As we have seen, there are ways in which MacDiarmid's rejection of the Twilight 'chimed with MacLean's own concerns', in Michel Byrne's words.³⁴ However, MacDiarmid's solutions – the abstraction of a Gaelic Idea, the creation of a synthetic English, or the recourse to silence as a way of subverting the failings of language – were not (and for various reasons could not be) those of MacLean.³⁵ MacLean's problem was how to develop – in words he would use to

³² MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 428-9.

³³ MacDiarmid, *Islands of Scotland*, p. xiv. C.f. Bold, MacDiarmid (1988), p. 298, 308, who notes that 'silence' was also the end-point of the 1926 *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*.

³⁴ Byrne, Michel, 'Tails o the Comet?', p. 2.

³⁵ MacLean was not entirely happy with the uses MacDiarmid put Gaelic to, especially when aesthetic considerations came second to political ones: in a letter to Douglas Young of 22 February 1941 he complained: 'Why the hell has Grieve to boost [William] Livingston as a poet because of his political opinions? He never does that with Scots Lowland poets whom he knows at first hand. He should really stop his pose of interpreter of Gaelic Scotland but perhaps it is not really a pose but honest boosting' (NLS Acc. 6419, Box 38B). Earlier, in a letter of 23 November 1940,

describe 'An Cuilithionn' – a 'native symbolism'³⁶ that was independent of 'purely foreign non-Celtic development[s]', whether by the Twilightists or MacDiarmid; and in terms of 'An Cuilithionn' itself, doing so while in ongoing dialogue with MacDiarmid's work. If, in the terms of the Gaelic proverb MacDiarmid quotes in 'Island Funeral' (in *The Islands of Scotland*), 'Every force evolves a form', the crucial question for MacLean is what 'form' his forces should take (and how that would be different from the terms of the Twilight).³⁷

The nature of MacLean's predicament can be illuminated by the parallel situation in Ireland. In a 1939 radio discussion F.R. Higgins and Louis MacNeice argued, respectively, for a 'blood-music that brings the racial character to mind' and for an "'impure" poetry, and the poet as 'a sensitive instrument designed to record anything which interests his mind or affect his emotions'; MacNeice was, throughout, an advocate of flux, referring to 'the poetry that can be got from "a changing society, or a jumble of clans"' and suggesting that 'if you are inside a changing society the only kind of poetry you will write must recognize the changes going on'.³⁸ However, flux and a changing society can be approached either with gusto or trepidation. Writing about Irish responses to the Celtic Revival, Rónán McDonald draws a useful contrast between the Yeats, who 'recalls being struck with "the sudden certainty that Ireland was to be like soft wax for years to come"', and Daniel Corkery for whom 'Everywhere in the mentality of Irish people are flux and

MacLean had complained to Young in opposite terms of MacDiarmid's 'arty attitude to politics'. C.f. Byrne, 'Tails o the Comet', p. 2 and Whyte's notes in MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, p. 125. Neither was MacLean, it would later appear, a fan of MacDiarmid's 'poetry of wisdom': Michael Davitt, 'Scots steel tempered wi' Irish fire: *An Interview with Sorley MacLean* (Edinburgh, 18 July 1986)' [published in *Innti 10*: Nollaig, 1986 pp. 29-40]; translated by Susan Wilson and Louis de Paor and published in Wilson, *The Correspondence Between Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean*, p. 288.

³⁶ Sorley MacLean, 'My relationship with the Muse' [1976] in MacLean, *Ris a' Bhruthaich*, p. 12.

³⁷ MacDiarmid, *The Islands of Scotland*, p. 32.

³⁸ Quoted in Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 201.

uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing.' As MacDonald argues, in Yeats, 'the malleability metaphor cleaves to the modern, suggestive of possibility and indeterminacy, rather than the fixed identity of essentialist nationalism' whereas '[i]n Daniel Corkery's view, colonized Ireland is more plastic, more uneven, more traumatized than the sentimental versions promulgated by the twilighters', with the 'quaking sod' metaphor indicating 'a precarious subjectivity rendered invisible and inarticulate by foreign dominance'.³⁹

MacLean can be seen as caught somewhere in the middle of Higgins, MacNeice, Yeats and Corkery. He was opposed to any racial basis for Gaelic culture: one of his problems with the Celtic Twilight had been the parallels between the Celtic Twilight and 'deliberate romanticising of racism, brutality and irrationality fostered by fascist propaganda. That is the new and most terrible opium for the people ever devised'.⁴⁰ However, he was also wary of unrooted 'flux', a 'mosaic'd approach to reality, and indeed 'contemporaneity'. In 'Realism of Gaelic Poetry' he expresses a preference for poetry that has 'its roots in reality' (unlike that of Kenneth MacLeod); parallel to this was his objection – in a letter to Young on 2 February 1941 – to contemporary poetry in which 'a jungle of bristling, more or less surrealist imagery which strikes the eye'.⁴¹ Similarly, in a letter to Young on 2 February 1941 (in which he passes negative judgement on MacDiarmid's *Golden Treasury of Scottish*

³⁹ Rónán McDonald, 'The Irish Revival and Modernism', in Joe Cleary (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 51-62, pp. 53, 56.

⁴⁰ MacLean, 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', p. 19. Douglas Young jokingly suggested that a German victory in the war would see the boosting of MacLean's 'expurgated' work 'as an autochthonous Scots-Gaelic national-socialism, *keltisches Blut auf keltischem Boden* [Celtic Blood on Celtic Soil]'. Letter from Young to MacLean, 3 October 1941, NLS MS 29540. C.f. Christopher Whyte, 'Sorley MacLean's "An Cuilithinn": the emergence of the text' in Wilson McLeod, James E. Fraser & Anja Gunderloch (eds) *Cànan & Cultar/ Language & Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 3*, (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), pp. 111-128, p. 115.

⁴¹ MacLean, 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry', p. 18. MacLean, letter to C.M. Grieve, in Wilson *The Correspondence Between Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean*, p. 185.

Poetry, cribbed translations for which MacLean provided) MacLean also expresses a liking for Ezra Pound, whose 'virtuosity is I think richer and more varied and more satisfying than the meagre mosaiced whinings of Eliot and the flat slicknesses of Auden etc etc, all so keen to express their age. All this contemporaneity I think just nonsense'.⁴² Although he hoped to create a 'native symbolism' – to shape the wax of the Highlands, as it were – there is always that possibility that this symbolism will be swallowed up in an indeterminate 'quaking sod' (this last, as we shall see, has direct parallels in the imagery of 'An Cuilithionn'). McDonald argues 'there are those who reject the Revival in the name of a harder social realism and those who reject it for avant-garde modernism'.⁴³ There are also those, however, such as MacLean, who try to do both at once, and have to answer the question of how dependable a social realism or avant-garde modernism build on a quaking sod, a jumble of clans or a moulding of symbolic wax can be.

The difficulty for MacLean was, in his own words, was that he 'came to maturity at the time of the great symbolist movement in European poetry, which you've got in Yeats, Eliot, MacDiarmid, Blok in Russia and Paul Valéry in France',⁴⁴ but that he was dissatisfied with what he labelled the 'Symbolist Aesthetes, Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Valery, Stein, Proust etc.'⁴⁵ But how, then, to be a Symbolist, and to avoid aestheticism; how to develop a Symbolism that does not serve to obfuscate reality (or as in poems such as 'Calbharaigh' [Calvary] or 'Ban-Ghàidheal' [Highland Woman] real social problems)⁴⁶? MacLean was a symbolist, but also inclined towards a nuanced form of 'realism', particularly in his celebration of the Gaelic nature poetry of the 18th century (especially Alexander MacDonald's 'Birlinn Clann

⁴² NLS Acc. 6419 Box 38B.

⁴³ McDonald, 'The Irish Revival and Modernism', p. 54.

⁴⁴ Donald Archie MacDonald, 'Some Aspects of Family and Local Background: An Interview with Sorley MacLean', in Raymond J. Ross and Joy Hendry (eds), *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), pp. 211-222, p. 219. C.f. Whyte's notes to MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, 122.

⁴⁵ Letter to Douglas Young, 1 Oct 1940, NLS Acc. 6419 Box 3B. That 'aesthete' here is pejorative is clear from his famous rejection of Yeats in a letter to Young of 6 Dec 1940 as 'a crossed troubled aesthete'.

⁴⁶ MacLean, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich*, pp. 20-1 and pp. 16-7.

Raghnaill' [The Galley of Clanranald] and Duncan Bàn MacIntyre's 'Moladh Beinn Dorainn' [In Praise of Ben Doran], both of which MacLean helped MacDiarmid translate) and the anonymous Gaelic songs of the 16th to 18th centuries. In 'Realism in Gaelic Poetry' MacLean argues that '[t]he great poem is ... always in some way realistic in that, however, transfigured it is by passion, emotion, or fusion of emotion and intellectuality, it has its roots in reality, not in a dream world'; 'great' Gaelic poetry of the 17th and 18th centuries avoided such 'weak sentimentality' by ignoring the pathetic fallacy - 'To the modern Gaelic poet the sea gives spiritual messages; to the older poet the sea gives no message. It is either a power to be conquered or enjoyed by man or a ruthless force that destroys precious lives. Gaelic realism is inconsistent with the pathetic fallacy so overdone in the poetry of Europe.'⁴⁷

A native 'symbolism', of course, will do little but 'give messages'. The task for MacLean in writing 'An Cuilithionn' is to give a specific political message (it is a determinedly propagandist socialist tract) while also finding 'roots in reality' and to create (in Christopher Whyte's words) 'a dream poem about political commitment [that is] visionary, even hallucinatory from beginning to end' while avoiding the pathetic fallacy.⁴⁸ Like the Christian Church he often criticised, MacLean decided to build his vision on rock: in his case the gabbro of the Black Cuillins. The poem develops three main symbolic geographic symbols: the Cuillin range of hills (on one level a symbol of the indefatigable human spirit, 'of difficulty, hardship and heroic qualities'); the bog of Maraulin, which is opposed to the Cuillins, and represents

⁴⁷ MacLean, *Ris a' Bhruthaich*, pp. 17, 32.

⁴⁸ Christopher Whyte, 'Introduction' to MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, pp. 1-28, p. 4. Whyte's excellent edition gives a full discussion of the complicated publishing history of the poem, and a clearly delineated account of the different versions of the poem. Emma Dymock also offers in-depth analysis of MacLean's symbolic landscape in the poem in "'Cas agam anns a' bhoglaich agus cas air a' Chuilithionn": unstable borders in the poetry of Sorley MacLean', in Emma Dymock and Wilson McLeod (eds) *Lainnir a' Bhùirn - The Gleaming Water: Essays on Modern Gaelic Literature* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2011), pp. 87-102 and "'That Cry Alone Will Last": Scottish and European Perspectives in Sorley MacLean's *An Cuilithionn*' in Emma Dymock and Margery Palmer McCulloch (eds) *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011), pp. 116-31.

‘bourgeois appropriation’, which renders ‘large parts of the western cultural tradition ... unusable for the purposes of revolutionary change’; and ‘an t-Aigeach’, the Stallion, a rock formation on the Waternish peninsula on the Isle of Skye, who represents revolutionary spirit (and has been castrated by the bog, much as Kennedy-Fraser had castrated ‘ar Ceòlraidh lùthmhor’ [our potent muse] in MacLean’s unpublished quatrain).⁴⁹ On one level, this symbolic landscape suggests an attempt to reclaim the hills from the distorted vision of the Celtic Twilight: the 1939 version of the poem certainly contains particularly vicious attacks on Celtic Twilight figures, connecting their work to the Highland Clearances: he imagines weaving – if he were Kennedy-Fraser – ‘ceòl air mhòr-thruailleadh’ [adulterated music] that would make ‘ceòl-sithe den Fhuathas’ [fairy-music of the Terror].⁵⁰

To base these symbols – and this rejection of the Twilight – in different types of ‘reality’, MacLean makes two separate gestures at the beginning of the poem, one cultural and the other physical. The first is to dedicate the poem to MacDiarmid and Alexander MacDonald, the 18th century author of ‘Birlinn Clann Raghnaill’ (they would quickly be joined by the poet and land activist Mary MacLeod, ‘Màiri Mòr nan Oran’, as a third presiding spirit over the poem). The second is to imagine the poet, in realistic descriptive terms, climbing the Cuillins (MacLean was a keen climber):

Anns an dìreadh bhon choire,
cas air sgeilpe, miar air oireig,
uchd ri ulbhaig, bial ri sgorraig,
air ceum corrach ceann gun bhoile...

[In the ascent from the corrie, / foot on shelf, finger on little edge, / chest to boulder, mouth to jutty, / on balanced step head undizzied...]⁵¹

⁴⁹ MacDonald, ‘Some Aspects of Family and Local Background’, p. 219; Whyte, Notes to MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, p. 178 (note to III: 70) and p. 146 (note to I: 103).

⁵⁰ MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, I: 95-9; p. 36-7. As Whyte outlines, this was one of the passages omitted for publication in 1989: Whyte, Notes to MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, p.143.

⁵¹ MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, I: 11-20; p. 30-31.

One can read in this passage the hope that through this physical act of climbing, the poet's vision, will remain 'gun bhoile' [undizzied].⁵² However, the important thing about it is that – unusually for MacLean's work – it does not create a symbol: this is one of few passages in MacLean's work that could be celebrated for its 'realism'.⁵³

MacLean is not simply climbing the Cuillins, but also 'climbing' on the backs of the two dedicatees to the poem. MacDonald is an example of a poet to whom 'the sea gives no message'. MacLean alludes to 'Birlinn Clann Raghnaill' in the maritime imagery of his dedicatory stanza ('nam biodh agam train do threòir-sa, / chumainn an Clàr-Sgìthe òirdheirc / ceann-caol ri tuinn àr na h-Eòrpa' [had I a third of your might, / I would keep our noble Skye / head-on to the waves of Europe's battle]).⁵⁴ This poem is remarkable for its refusal to draw any explicit symbolism from its extended, rhythmically complex description of a sailing from South Uist to Carrickfergus (and the preparations for the voyage); and in his musically rich realism, MacDonald offers not just a corrective to the Twilightists but also to MacDiarmid. The haptic focus of MacLean's climbing passages suggests at least two separate poems by MacDiarmid: 'On a Raised Beach', but also MacDiarmid's 1938 'Dìreadh III', which begins with a description of climbing another Cuillin, 'Sgurr Alasdair'.⁵⁵ Although MacLean's poem shares a similar technique – the climbing of

⁵² It may, once more, suggest 'virility'. In a letter to MacLean of 26 June 1940 Douglas Young notes: 'Mountaineering has been said in the usual jargon to be a sublimation of the urge to copulation. You have, perhaps unknowingly, worked on that at a few places.' (NLS, MS 29540, quoted in Dymock, "'That Cry Alone Will Last'", p. 118).

⁵³ The other obvious example is the short lyric 'Ceann Loch Aineort' [Kinloch Ainort]: MacLean, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich*, pp. 20-1. The work of his close friend George Campbell Hay, with his precise images of the hills of Argyll and the fishermen of the west coast, comes a lot closer to this 'realist' ideal: C.f. Michel Byrne (ed.) *Collected Poems of Songs of George Campbell Hay* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 2 vols, especially Byrne's notes on pp. 77-80 and 92-4.

⁵⁴ MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, 'Coisrighadh / Dedication': ll. 10-12; p. 30-31.

⁵⁵ C.f. Whyte, Notes to MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, p.128 (notes to I: 1-2 and 18) and p. 204 (note to VII: 68ff). C.f. Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid*, pp. 132, 196 for his discussion of MacDiarmid's construction of a 'verbal obstacle' in 'Dìreadh' – a sudden steepness which obliges the reader to perform a *dìreadh* or act of

the Cuillins to get a view of 'all things / in a cosmic or historical perspective' – it also creates a distance from MacDiarmid's, in its first lines explicitly displacing MacDiarmid's focus: 'Sgùrr Alasdair an sgùrr as àirde / ach Sgùrr nan Gillean sgùrr an àigh dhiubh' [Sgurr Alasdair the highest sgurr / but Sgurr nan Gillean the best sgurr].⁵⁶ Distance is needed – and MacDonald is needed as a corrective – in part because MacDiarmid's poem veers into essentialist Twilight territory, with notions of cultural 'purity' and of romantic enlightenment. MacDiarmid describes being 'possessed' by the 'purity' of the submerged 'treasures of the Gaelic genius ... As in a welling of stainless water / Trembling and pure like a body of light' and ends with an image almost Twilight-esque in its abstraction:

So does Alba surpass the warriors
As a graceful ash surpasses a thorn,
Or the deer who moves sprinkled with the dewfall
Is far above all other beasts
- Its horns glittering to Heaven itself.⁵⁷

This is as far as anything in *Songs from the Hebrides* from the 'realist' nature poetry MacLean celebrated. However, despite its immediate grounding in reality, 'An Cuilithionn' too strays equally far from 'realism'. It mingles imagined first-person historical accounts (as of the girl from Gesto in Part VI), with almost hallucinatory passages of symbolic geological transformation, with lists instances of oppression and revolutionary struggle across human history that is explicitly mythological in its focus (much of Parts VI and VII are spoken by Clio, the muse of history). If MacLean's aim was to base a Promethean socialist symbolism in an actual landscape, then the poem is perhaps necessarily seen as a failure, and one that was doomed from the outset. And certainly MacLean himself would quickly turn against the poem, for political reasons – he suggested that the actions of the Soviet Union

surmounting of his or her own' – and the relationship between climbing in MacDiarmid and in the philosophy of Lev Shostov.

⁵⁶ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, II: 1190. MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, I: 1-2; p. 30-31.

⁵⁷ MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, II: 1187 and 1193.

during the Warsaw Uprising ‘in 1944 made me question its “commitment”’ (and especially explicit celebration of the Red Army) – but also because of a failure of its symbolism: he felt that ‘much of its symbolism is not in proportion with its theme.’⁵⁸ Some ambiguous phrasing in a later interview MacLean gave with Donald Archie MacDonald suggests that there is a struggle for priority between the symbol and the landscape in the poem: ‘I grew up at that time, when symbolism as such a thing in European poetry and I was affected a lot by ... people, more by MacDiarmid and Yeats, and my symbols almost automatically became the landscape of my physical environment’.⁵⁹ There is a sense that the symbols might *become* the landscape, taking its place, writing over it: propaganda might distort the hills as much as any saxagonal stone.

This would, however, be to underestimate the power of the climax of the poem. Here, the opposite happens: the Cuillin hills appear - à la ‘On a Raised Beach’ - to outlast any act of symbolisation. ‘[Oidhche ‘chinne’ [in the night of mankind] - ‘A fit setting only for spooks,’ perhaps - the poet comes to sense ‘samhlaidh an spioraid / anam leis fhèin a’ falbh air slèibhtean / ag iargain a’ Chuilithinn ‘s e ‘g èirigh’ [the ghost of the spirit, / a soul alone, going on mountains, / longing for the Cuillin that is rising].⁶⁰ But this spectral vision of human longing does not speak only to the persistence of the human spirit; ultimately, the passage also suggests that the mountains will outlive the human spirit itself:

Thar lochan fala clann nan daoine,
 thar breòiteachd blàir is strì nan aonaich,
 thar bochdainn, caithimh, fiabhrais, àmhghair,
 thar anacothruim, eucoir, ainneirt, ànraidh,
 thar truaighe, eu-dòchais, gamhlais, cuilbheirt,
 thar ciont is truailidheachd, gu furachair,
 gu treunmhor chithear an Cuilithionn

⁵⁸ Sorley MacLean, ‘My relationship with the Muse’ [1976] in MacLean, *Ris a’ Bhruthaich*, p. 13.

⁵⁹ MacDonald, ‘Some Aspects of Family and Local Background’, p. 219.

⁶⁰ MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, VII: 352-355; pp. 116-7.

's e 'g èirigh air taobh eile duilghe.

[Beyond the lakes of blood of the sons of men, / beyond the frailty of pain
and the labour of the mountain, / beyond poverty, consumption, fever,
agony, / beyond misery, despair, hatred, treachery, / beyond guilt and
defilement, watchful, / heroic, the Cuillin is seen / rising on the other side of
sorrow.]⁶¹

The Cuillins are not 'pretty-pretty' or 'fozy with infinity' (and nor do they 'glitter to Heaven itself'); in this final 'rising' they resist the poets attempts at symbolisation. But they do not do so in a way that strives for silence. The end not of 'On a Raised Beach' but another MacDiarmid poem is germane. 'Lament for the Great Music' (his celebration of the *Ceòl Mòr* from *Stony Limits*), proposes a synaesthetic new beginning based not on language but on pipe music – 'Look! Is that only the setting sun again? / Or a piper coming from far away?'⁶² Vision gives way to rhythm (a rhythm perhaps based on Alexander MacDonald, who mastered poetry based on the 'Ceòl Mòr'). The answer to Twilight fogs might be – as 'The Stone Called Saxagonus' gestures towards but never quite manages to express (given its own grounded leaden-footedness) – not ultimately visual, but auditory. Despite MacLean's own claims for the visionary nature of 'An Cuilithionn' he is a poet of vision', of the 'jungle of bristling, more or less surrealist imagery which strikes the eye'; but nor he is a haptic poet, grasping the Cuillins for support. He is a poet of the ear, who consistently expressed a preference (à la Eliot) for 'auditory magic' or 'auditory sensuousness', for rhythms which will be a 'more or less tight rope to cross the abyss of silence'.⁶³ In this final passage, with its swirling music – the repetition of 'thar', the assonantal couplets – the Cuillins persist not as a symbol or physical entity but as a rhythm (not that of the 'Orpheus Choir' or the music of the spheres, a rhythm grounded in the resources of Gaelic language itself). To circumvent the threat posed

⁶¹ MacGill-Eain, *An Cuilithionn 1939*, VII: 356-363; pp. 116-9.

⁶² MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, vol. I, p. 482.

⁶³ MacLean, letter to C.M. Grieve 25 May 1940, quoted Wilson, *The Correspondence Between Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean*, p. 185 and MacLean, 'My relationship with the Muse', p. 13. C.f. Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

by the Celtic Twilight's skewed vision of the landscape and the impenetrable nullifying silence of MacDiarmid's stones, that is, the poem moves not just from 'Optik' to the 'Haptik' but also to the 'Phonic'. It is not that its 'symbolism is not in proportion with its theme', but that no 'symbolism' could be: any stone you attempt to turn into a symbol will be Saxagonal. The force of the end of the poem is that belief in a poetry (as well as a landscape) that can, nonetheless persist, beyond symbolism, and beyond theme, in a rhythm tentatively crossing an 'abyss of silence'.