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Donnchadh Bàn air a chuairt

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Donnchadh Bàn air a chuairt:
From Glen Orchy to Dublin, calling at
Edinburgh, London, and Copenhagen

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process by which some compositions of the Scottish Gaelic poet Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (1724–1812) came to be published in a late eighteenth-century anthology of Irish poetry. In doing so it aims to elucidate the status of Donnchadh Bàn as a literary figure outside Scotland, and to tease out a variety of interesting personal connections between extensive networks of late eighteenth-century European and Anglo-Irish antiquarian scholars.



That Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (1724–1812) was among the first Scottish Gaelic poets to have had his poetry published in translation is not well known. Neither is it common knowledge that he was the only Scottish Gaelic poet to be included in the first Irish-Scottish Gaelic anthology of poetry. As such, he is the first modern Scottish Gaelic poet whose poetry can be said to have had any sort of circulation in Ireland. These facts have received surprisingly little attention from Irish or Scottish scholars.¹ In charting the processes by which

* Research for this article was undertaken during my time as lecturer in Celtic at the University of Glasgow 2011–12. I am grateful to the staff and students of Celtic and Gaelic at Glasgow University for the generous welcome afforded to me during my time there. Much of what appears here was presented at the Saoghalan Dhonnchaidh Bhàin conference at the University of Edinburgh, 14 July 2012. I am grateful to those present on that occasion for comments and discussion. Finally, I am indebted to Professor Mícheál Mac Craith who read an early draft of this article with characteristic generosity. Remaining imperfections are entirely my own responsibility.

¹ They have been commented upon, however, by Mac Craith (2002; 2004).

Donnchadh Bàn's poetry came to be included in this anthology one is faced with a scarcity of concrete documentary evidence. This is not an uncommon challenge in investigations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European antiquarian networks, but is one which ought to be highlighted at the outset, and calls for a judicious and creative approach to what evidence is available. As a secure point of departure, it can be noted that the inclusion of Donnchadh Bàn in the first Irish-Scottish Gaelic anthology of poetry came about during the poet's own lifetime, thanks primarily to one man — Charles Henry Wilson.

CHARLES HENRY WILSON (c. 1756–1808)

The early years of Wilson's life, like his later years, are not well documented. He was born in 1756, the third son of Rev. William Wilson, a Protestant clergyman (Sturges 1949, 400). It seems he may have been educated at Trinity College, Dublin but his name does not appear in the lists of Trinity graduates for the period (Mac Craith 2004, 94). He was living at Mountrath Street, Dublin in August 1782 when a single volume of his, *A Compleat Collection of the Resolutions of the Volunteers*, was published by the Dublin publisher Joseph Hill.² The same year saw his first foray into Gaelic literature with the compilation and publication of *Poems Translated from the Irish Language into the English* (henceforth *PT*). This was also published in Dublin by Joseph Hill, and dedicated to Lord Francis Rawdon (1754–1826), later second Earl of Moira and first Marquess of Hastings. I know of only two copies of this book; one in the library of Columbia University, New York, and another surviving copy which is held in Sir Walter Scott's library at Abbotsford House.³

Sometime between August 1782 and November 1786 Wilson left Dublin for London so that by 1786 the Irish antiquary Joseph Cooper Walker (1786, 81) refers to him as 'a neglected genius, now struggling with adversity in London'. This period of 'adversity' coincides with his

² The final page of this volume contains an advertisement requesting that any material for inclusion in the second volume be sent to the editor: C.H. Wilson, 15 Mountrath Street, Dublin. This second volume never appeared in print.

³ I am grateful to Lindsay Levy of the Advocates Library, Edinburgh, and to Professor Douglas Gifford, Honorary Librarian of Abbotsford, for allowing me to access this work. Scott's copy is missing its title-page but the handwritten title 'Tales translated from the Irish by Charles Wilson' has been inserted. The volume came to Scott via the Irish antiquarian Joseph Cooper Walker (see Ní Mhunghaile 2013, 142; I am grateful to Dr Ní Mhunghaile for making the relevant section of her book available to me prior to its publication).

admission to the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, one of the four English Inns of Court charged with the training of barristers. By this time at least, his father was resident in the parish of Lenev, County Westmeath. Society records show that Wilson was admitted to Middle Temple on 9 November 1786, but there is no evidence to suggest he was ever called to the English bar (Sturges 1949, 400). It would appear instead that the desultory Wilson forfeited a legal career in favour of the life of a writer and journalist.

As a journalist he was prolific and was editor, for a period, of the London periodical *The Gazetteer*. His translation of the Danish comedy *Heckingbom* by Peter Heiberg was published in 1799 under the title *Poverty and Wealth*. Another comedy, *The Irish Valet*,⁴ was published posthumously in 1811, also in London. Wilson was also a prolific literary editor, editing *Beauties of Edmund Burke* (London, 1798), *Myrtle and Vine* (London, 1802) and *Brookiana* (London, 1804), among other titles. He died in London on 12 May 1808 and his obituary in *Gentleman's Magazine* (1808, vol. 78.1, 469) reads:

In his 53rd year, Charles Henry Wilson, esq., late of the Middle Temple. He was several years editor of 'The Gazetteer;' and there are few daily or periodical publications of any standing which have not occasionally indebted to his contributions. He was author of the 'Wandering Islander', 'Polyanthea' [...] and many more original productions, compilations, and translations, to none of which he would suffer his name to be prefixed. His attainments were universal. He was deeply versed in the Antiquities and Literature of the Gothic, Scandinavian and Celtic nations [...] He was a native of the North of Ireland, and migrated to the metropolis upwards of twenty years ago. Born to no fortune, he ran his career of life without doing more than to provide for the day which was passing over him, a fate not uncommon to men entering the word under the same circumstances, and possessing similar endowments, joined to a strong relish for social enjoyment.

⁴ This book is also dedicated to 'Lord Moira', the same Lord Francis Rawdon to whom Wilson's earlier volume was dedicated. Rawdon had succeeded his father as the Earl of Moira in 1793.

SELECT IRISH POEMS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

Wilson's work which is of greatest relevance to the present investigation, however, is not among those listed above; it is an obscure and little-known ninety-six page volume. As in so many of Wilson's publications, the author is not named on the title page, neither is the date or place of publication given. It does bear a title, however: *Select Irish Poems Translated into English* (henceforth *SIP*). There are only three copies in existence that I know of: one in private possession, one bound in a manuscript in the National Library of Ireland (MS G 411) and one in the library of Trinity College, Dublin.

Although the book itself does not bear a date, we can confidently assign it to 1792. Hardiman (1831, vol. 2, 171–72) and Ua Casaide (1928) both suggest this date for different reasons but a more authoritative reference is that contained in a letter from Wilson to the Danish antiquarian Prof. G. J. Thorkelin, dated 20 October 1791: 'I intend without delay to publish my Irish work this winter' (EUL La III 379 Doc. 849g). As to the place of publication, we may suspect Dublin: the printer's broken upper-case *L* would appear to be that of Joseph Hill, the Dublin publisher of Wilson's early work. The place of publication is potentially significant. Wilson was resident in London in 1792, and his novel *The Wandering Islander* was published in London in the same year. The choice of a Dublin publisher then may be an indication that Wilson had an (Anglo-)Irish audience in mind for *SIP*, although the possibility that he simply could not find a London publisher willing to take on the work cannot be ruled out.

The contents of the anthology, eighteen items in all, are as follows:

Item	Page	Title
1.	1–20	The song of Dearg
2.	20–26	To Colonel Vallancey
3.	27–37	Oran an tSamhraidh
4.	38–40	From the Irish of Thady Ruddy: Ode to Hugh O'Nial
5.	41–44 ⁵	Oran gaoil
6.	45–49	Colin and Selina, a tale
7.	50–58	Oran do Mhorair Ghlean-urchaidh
8.	59–63	Laoid[h] Thailc Mac Trein

⁵ These pages are missing from the NLI copy (NLI MS G 411).

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|-----|-------|--|
| 9. | 64–65 | An teagas rioghdha |
| 10. | 66–68 | Oran gaol. Ode to a relation |
| 11. | 69–72 | Plearaca na Ruarcach |
| 12. | 73–77 | The Feast of O'Rourke |
| 13. | 78–80 | Aoimbo agus Umbo |
| 14. | 81–83 | Aoimbo and Umbo |
| 15. | 84 | Seumus Meic Cuarta:
Bfearr gearan bháin i Bírinn |
| 16. | 85 | Seumus Meic Cuarta:
If thro' life's road I'm doom'd to ride |
| 17. | 86–92 | Queen Alla's lamentation |
| 18. | 93–96 | Tailc mac Trein: The dewy morning
has her pinions spread. |

Items 2 and 6 are original compositions in English. Items 3, 5 and 7, ('Oran an tSamhraidh', 'Oran gaoil', 'Oran do Mhorair Ghleanurchaidh') are the sole examples of Scottish Gaelic and are all compositions of Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir. Item 5, 'Oran gaoil', is the only one of the three to be translated, however (item 10). The translation would seem to suggest that Wilson's knowledge of Scottish Gaelic was extremely rudimentary and that he was largely reliant on his knowledge of Irish to decipher Donnchadh Bàn's work. This is perhaps most clear in Wilson's mistranslation of the title 'Oran gaoil' as 'Ode to a relation' (item 10), rather than 'A love song'. The orthography used by Wilson indicates clearly that he was drawing on the first edition of Mac an t-Saoir's poetry (henceforth *DB1*), published in Edinburgh in 1768, rather than the second edition (henceforth *DB2*), published in 1790.

The scarcity of *SIP*, even at the time of its publication, accounts for the fact that Donnchadh Bàn's status as one of the first Scottish Gaelic poets to have had his verse published in translation, or included in an Irish-Scottish Gaelic collection, has not been acknowledged more widely.⁶ The occurrence of Donnchadh Bàn's poetry in this context — a Dublin-published collection of 'Irish' (sic) poems, compiled by a London-based Anglo-Irish author — presents us with a number of questions. Mícheál Mac Craith (2004, 96) has already wondered at the relevance of Donnchadh Bàn's inclusion, working on the assumption that there were only two Scottish Gaelic poets to have published individual collections of their poetry at this time: Donnchadh Bàn and

⁶ There is no reference to *SIP* in Thomson (1990) or Black (2012), for instance.

Alastair Mac Mhaighstir Alastair (Alexander MacDonald, c.1695–c.1770). While Mac Craith seems to have underestimated the amount of verse published in Scottish Gaelic during the eighteenth century (cf. Black 2012, esp. 600–09), we may still ask why Donnchadh Bàn's was chosen for inclusion rather than any other Scottish Gaelic poet, why were these particular poems chosen and why were they taken from *DB1* and not *DB2*? Most importantly of all, perhaps, how did Charles Henry Wilson first come to know of Donnchadh Bàn's poetry?

While there is limited evidence for the circulation of Scottish Gaelic publications in eighteenth century Ireland (Ní Mhunghaile 2010, 258–62), these tend to be almost exclusively religious works. Taking *DB2* as a yard-stick, we note that it does not contain a single instance of an Irish subscription, out of over one and a half thousand subscriptions, strongly suggesting that Wilson did not come into contact with Donnchadh Bàn's work in Ireland, but more probably in London. This raises a further set of questions, however. Judging by the subscription lists of *DB2*, Donnchadh Bàn's poetry made little impact in London.⁷ Even if it had made a significant impact upon Scottish Gaelic speakers in London, however, we do not know Wilson to have had any contact with Scottish Gaels in London and his lack of competence in the language certainly suggests that Wilson was not introduced to Donnchadh Bàn's poetry by a Scottish Gaelic speaker. The more probable conduit is a Scandinavian one which we have already encountered, an antiquarian with an interest in the Norse heritage of Gaelic Scotland who maintained an extensive literary correspondence with Wilson around the time of the publication of *SIP*.

GRÍMUR JÓNSSON THORKELIN (1752–1829)

G. J. Thorkelin, a naturalised Dane of Icelandic origin, is now best known for his *edito princeps* of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, published in 1815. Thorkelin discovered the *Beowulf* manuscripts, by accident it would seem, on an extended research trip to Ireland and Great Britain, while working for the Danish Royal Archives (on which see Kiernan 1986). At the time of his trip Thorkelin was Regius Professor of Antiquity in the University of Copenhagen and Keeper of The Danish Royal Archives. His royal and social connections helped him to obtain

⁷ There is a single London subscriber to *DB2*: 'Mr Niel Maclaine, of the Highland Society, London'.

a generous grant from Denmark's Christian VII (1766–1808) in order to

travel through Great Britain, Ireland, and the Isles, for two years in order to collect and record all the extant Danish and Norwegian monuments, deeds, and documents [...] on his promise to deliver on his home-coming to Our National Archive and the great library all the collections he in such manner may procure.

(Translated in Kiernan 1983, 2)

Arriving in August 1786, Thorkelin lodged in Brownlow Street in central London while his work saw him based not far away in the British Museum (Harvey Wood 1972, 347). A significant portion of his work, however, was in visiting the major libraries of Ireland and Great Britain as he had outlined in his grant application to the Royal Court:

From Great Britain, not a little can be expected. From time immemorial the sciences have flourished there, and constant friendship has bound it closely to your Majesty's most glorious forefathers. The negotiations and letters of our blessed kings from the Middle Ages, of which we do not even possess copies, are preserved in scattered places in Oxford, in Cambridge, in the national museum, in Edinburgh and in Dublin. Unknown treasures are preserved in the cathedral churches [. . .]. (Cited in Harvey Wood 1972, 20)

Early in his residency in London, a visit to Scotland, and in particular to the Highlands and Islands, was made possible by the invitation of George Dempster, the Scottish M.P. who had been introduced to Thorkelin upon his arrival in London by Sir John Sinclair. Sinclair had met Thorkelin in Copenhagen in 1786. The attraction of Dempster's invitation to Thorkelin is obvious:

I beg the favour of your company on Wednesday morning to breakfast about nine o' clock that we may concert finally our time and manner of travelling. I have undertaken to witness the laying of the foundation stones of two new towns in the western coasts of that kingdom [Scotland], which will enable me to shew you the whole kingdom to a more advantage than I could have done otherwise. We are to be there the 25th June [1787]. (EUL La III 379 Doc. 231)

Dempster's tour of the Highlands and Islands was undertaken in his capacity as a member of The British Society for Extending the Fisheries and Improving the Sea Coasts of the Kingdom. The aim of The British Fisheries Society, as it was more commonly known, was to develop industry along the west coast of Scotland (Dunlop 1978, 1–6). A committee of the society was tasked with inspecting sites where towns could feasibly be established in the hope of facilitating local industry. Thorkelin left London on 7 June 1787 for Scotland to make what would be one of his most fruitful and, for us, most important trips.

THORKELIN IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

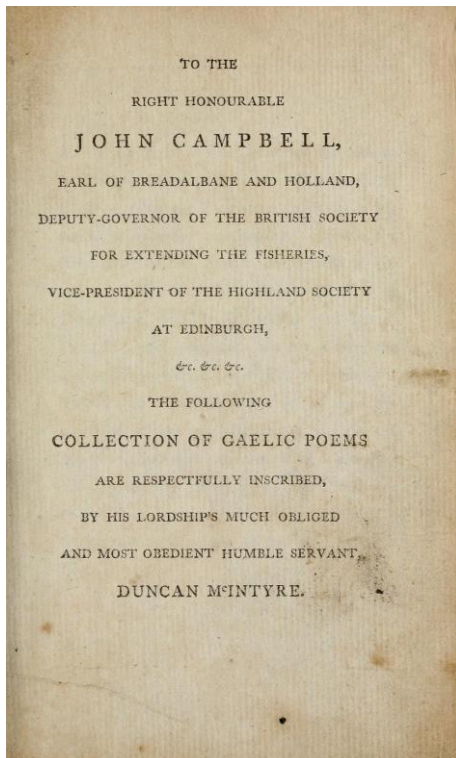
The committee gathered at Inverary and it was from there on 27 June they set out to Tobermory via Oban. Members of the committee included, at various points, the Duke of Argyll, the Earl of Breadalbane, Sir Adam Fergusson M.P., Isaac Hawkins Browne M.P. and Francis Humberstone Mackenzie of Seaforth M.P. as well as Dempster and Thorkelin (Dunlop 1978, 30). From Tobermory most of the committee continued to Canna (although Argyll himself returned home), and from there sailed to Skye⁸ and onwards to Harris in the revenue cutter *Prince of Wales*. Eventually Thorkelin, in the company of Dempster and Browne, reached Stornoway on 23 July. Here they stayed for a period before sailing back to the mainland where they parted company. Thorkelin went to Thurso to visit Sir John Sinclair; he would subsequently rejoin Dempster at Skibo in Sutherland where the Dempster family were staying (Fergusson 1934, 163–64).⁹ The Dempsters, along with Thorkelin, returned to their home in Forfar on 10 October 1787 (*idem*, 169), their guest not leaving Scotland until November 1787.

It is at this point that we must investigate the Danish antiquarian's relationship with Donnchadh Bàn and note his subscription to *DB2* as 'Professor Thorkeline [sic], Copenhagen'. Interestingly, there remains one sole copy of *DB2* in Copenhagen's Royal Library. (Of the five editions published during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this

⁸ Some members of the committee took a detour via Uist, there encountering one of the MacMhuirich bards, who entertained the committee members with stories relating to Ossian ('Piscator' 1792, 8, 212): '[12th July 1787] By the way, overtook an old man, riding on a small horse, with a young person of each sex attending him. He accosted the company with great courtesousness. Found he was Macmuirish Clanranald's blind bard.'

⁹ Dempster was laird of Skibo, having bought the estate in 1786.

is the only one represented in the Royal Library.) Given the paucity of London subscribers to *DB2*, I would assert that Thorkelin came into contact with Donnchadh Bàn's work not in London but during the course of his tour of the Highlands and Islands. This is all the more likely when we recall that Thorkelin's expedition to the Highlands and Islands was undertaken in the company of John Campbell (1762–1834), fourth Earl of Breadalbane, a Clan Campbell aristocrat with close connections to Donnchadh Bàn (Thomson 1990, 183–84). Thorkelin seems to have been on particularly good terms with his fellow committee member — the earl, one of Scotland's sixteen representative peers in parliament, even invited him and his friends to tour the House of Lords at some point after their Highland tour.¹⁰



That Thorkelin subscribed to *DB2* while on his tour becomes a near certainty when we note that he is not the only member of the expedition to appear among its subscribers: 'Right Honourable John Campbell Earl of Breadalbane, 8 copies', 'George Dempster, Esq. M.P.', 'Mr. John Campbell, of the *Prince of Wales* cutter' (the revenue cutter on which some members of the committee had been sailing since departing Oban on 28 June).¹¹ That the earl was a subscriber is not surprising in the least; *DB2* was, after all, dedicated to him. It is interesting, however, that the dedication makes specific mention of him in his capacity as deputy-

¹⁰ The undated invitation is preserved as EUL La III 379 Doc. 100.

¹¹ The following is from the account of the journey published by 'Piscator' in the Edinburgh literary periodical *The Bee*: 'Here [in Oban] they also found waiting for them [the committee] one of the Custom-house cutters, commanded by captain Campbell of Campbeltown, who had been appointed by the lords of the Treasury to attend the committee' ('Piscator' 1792, 8, 83).

governor of the British Fisheries Society. The poet had been a forester on the Breadalbane estates and would go on to serve as a member of the Breadalbane Fencibles in Edinburgh. By 1804 it was noted in *DB3* that the poet was, in his retirement, ‘rendered not uncomfortable by the beneficence of that nobleman’.¹²

Breadalbane, however, is by no means the only possible conduit through which Thorkelin could have come into contact with Donnchadh Bàn’s poetry. Thorkelin had a large number of acquaintances and obviously made an impression while in the Highlands, as Rev. John MacIntyre¹³ indicates in a letter from Glen Orchy manse dated 10 April 1788:

On your way to Inverary you passed part of a Sunday at my church, and I had the pleasure of spending some time in your company on the evening of the day on which the Duke of Argyll and the other[s] [...] set out from Inverary on their tour to the Western Isles. (EUL La III 379 Doc. 548)

The search for an advocate for Donnchadh Bàn, someone who might have collected subscriptions on his behalf may not be necessary. Angus MacLeod (1952, xxxiii) has suggested that Donnchadh Bàn may have been touring the Highlands during the years 1786 to 1788, in search of subscribers. The evidence presented above supports MacLeod’s suggestion as it pertains to 1787, making it distinctly possible that Thorkelin actually met the poet. Not all of the British Fisheries Society committee members subscribed, however, leaving little doubt but that Thorkelin, Dempster and Captain John Campbell subscribed at the same time. This being the case, we can ascribe the date of their subscription, and the apparent presence of Donnchadh Bàn in the Highlands, to somewhere between the final week of June and the start of August 1787. Their place of subscription then could be Inverary or, perhaps more likely, one of the islands of Mull, Canna, Uist, Skye, Harris, or Lewis.¹⁴

¹² For further discussion of the relationship between Donnchadh Bàn and this branch of Clan Campbell, see MacilleDhuibh (2006) and also Thomson (1990, 183–84).

¹³ Rev. John MacIntyre was the father-in-law of Rev. John Stuart of Luss, the man who saw *DB1* through the press.

¹⁴ MacLeod (1952, xxxiii) maintains that Donnchadh Bàn ‘certainly visited Mull and Iona after the publication of [*DB2*], and probably before.’

FROM GLEN ORCHY TO LONDON

Thorkelin returned to London in the winter of 1787 not only with a subscription to the yet unpublished *DB2*, but most likely with a copy of the earlier *DB1*.¹⁵ Thorkelin and Wilson set out on an intense literary correspondence in the summer of 1791 but their letters stop suddenly in July 1792 (see Harvey Wood 1972, 166–77). Given the timing and the subject matter of the correspondence between the two men, and Wilson’s otherwise apparent lack of contact with Scottish Gaelic, the only obvious explanation which presents itself is that Wilson was sent *DB1* by Thorkelin once his subscription copy of *DB2* had been published and delivered to Thorkelin in London in 1790.

There would be nothing unusual about this scenario; we have numerous references in the correspondence of the two men which allude to them sending books and manuscripts to one another. Wilson’s letter to Thorkelin dated 20 October 1791 is one such example:

I know not how to thank you for your attention to me, —
I had the pleasure of receiving the books, — and am at a
loss in what manner to return the favour, which I shall
remember as long as I live. (EUL La III 379 Doc. 849g)

It may be, however, that Thorkelin had not yet sent a copy of *DB1* to Wilson but that he may have been just about to. In the same letter Wilson makes a request of Thorkelin:

Will you then send a short account of the progress of the
Survey of Denmark [...] or any other book that is curious

¹⁵ It is tempting to suggest that Thorkelin’s copy of *DB1* may have been a gift from the fourth Earl of Breadalbane with whom, as we have seen, he enjoyed a cordial relationship. In this regard, the presence of another collection of Scottish Gaelic poetry in the Royal Library in Copenhagen can be noted: Angus Campbell’s *Orain Nuadh Ghaidhbleach*, published in Edinburgh in 1785. Black (2012, 605) describes the work as ‘now completely unknown, one suspects [...] to the world of Gaelic scholarship’. Campbell resided at Edramucky by the banks of Loch Tay, part of the Breadalbane estate. Campbell’s book contains a number of poems concerning the Breadalbane Campbells including ‘Cumhadh Iarla Bhraidealban’, a lament for the third earl. *DB2* and Campbell’s *Orain Nuadh Ghaidhbleach* are the only individual collections of eighteenth century Gaelic poetry held in Copenhagen’s Royal Library, the Breadalbane associations of both volumes are suggestive of a connection between the fourth earl and Thorkelin, although this is admittedly speculative. I am grateful to Susanne Budde of the Royal Library, Copenhagen, who was able to confirm for me that both books were once in Thorkelin’s possession.

— as I intend without delay to publish my Irish work this winter [...]. (ibid)

The wording of this letter is curious in that it seems to imply that the reason for Wilson requesting books from Thorkelin is that he intends to publish his ‘Irish work’. It may have been in response to this request that Thorkelin forwarded *DBI* to Wilson. Interestingly, Wilson’s reference to ‘my Irish work’ in October is replaced on the 6 December 1791 by a slightly more ecumenical reference:

I have finished my novel [*The Wandering Islander*] at last, the first volume is almost printed off and as soon as the whole is finished I shall send it you, and then for my Celtic work. (EUL La III 379 Doc. 849c)

Wilson did indeed honour his promise and forwarded a copy of *The Wandering Islander* to Thorkelin; a copy of this somewhat rambling book is still held in the Danish Royal Library. Of more interest here, however, is the issue of semantics: the shift from ‘Irish’ to ‘Celtic’ in Wilson’s description of his forthcoming work may indicate that by December he had decided to include Donnchadh Bàn’s poems.

SELECT IRISH POEMS – THE SOURCES

The fact that only one of the three Scottish Gaelic poems is translated in *SIP*, and then somewhat sloppily, might indicate that their inclusion was hasty. At any rate, the most economical, and by far the most likely, way of accounting for the Scottish Gaelic elements in *SIP* is through Wilson’s friendship with Thorkelin. Extensive research shows no other connection between the Anglo-Irish, London-based journalist and the Scottish Gaelic poet. This scenario tentatively answers the questions posed by Micheál Mac Craith — why would one choose Donnchadh Bàn for inclusion rather than Mac Mhaighstir Alastair, and were the latter’s Jacobite sympathies a motivating factor in his exclusion. There is no evidence to suggest that political allegiance¹⁶ played any part in Wilson’s selection procedure; the driving force seems to have been chance: Thorkelin was in the right place at the right time during the summer of 1787 and his auspicious correspondence with Wilson

¹⁶ Mac Craith (2002, 96) sets up a binary opposition between ‘the subversive irredentist Jacobite verse of [Mac Mhaighstir Alastair] and the love poetry and nature poetry of [Mac an t-Saoir]’, concluding that Wilson, as ‘the son of a Church of Ireland rector would have little difficulty in preferring Mac an t-Saoir’s ideologically neutral work.’

around the time of the publication in *SIP* further facilitated Donnchadh Bàn's inclusion in the anthology.

Having accounted for the Scottish Gaelic element, it is also worth discussing briefly the origins of the other items in *SIP*. Item 2 ('To Colonel Vallancey') and 3 ('Colin and Selina a Tale') are original compositions and we can suppose that they are the work of Wilson himself. As far as the rest of the contents go, Mícheál Mac Craith (2004, 106), unaware of the extent of Wilson's acquaintance with Thorkelin, has already pointed out the existence of a curious manuscript in Copenhagen's Royal Library. Written by the Irish scribe and self-styled 'professor', Muiris Ó Gormáin in 1764, NKS 173 8vo is, like most other Irish manuscripts in Copenhagen, a Thorkelin acquisition for the library. This manuscript contains thirty seven poems including 'Pléaráca na Ruarcach' (*SIP* items 11 and 12), 'Tuireamh na Meisge' (*SIP* items 13 and 14), 'Gearrán Bhriain Uí Bheirn' (*SIP* items 15 and 16), 'Laoidh an Deirg' (*SIP* item 1), 'Laoidh Thailc mhic Thréin' (*SIP* items 8 and 18) and 'An Teagasg Ríogha' (*SIP* item 9).

If we accept Wilson as the author of the two original compositions — and we have no reason not to — then, between them, Donnchadh Bàn and Ó Gormáin's Copenhagen manuscript account for all but two of the remaining items contained in *SIP*.¹⁷ The correspondence between the Copenhagen manuscript and *SIP*, as well as the Thorkelin connection, would seem to suggest that Wilson may have had this manuscript in his possession, perhaps loaning it to or from Thorkelin. This leads us to re-evaluate the process by which the material for inclusion was selected. It may, in my opinion, owe more to chance than to literary or ideological criteria. The evidence, sparse as it may be, implies that Wilson simply did not have a wide range of material from which to choose when compiling *SIP*, something which may go some way to explaining the decision to include poems in Scottish Gaelic.

As for the Copenhagen manuscript, although we do not know Wilson to have had any direct interaction with Ó Gormáin it seems likely that he did. Ó Gormáin was a 'scribe for hire' during the period in which Wilson himself lived in Dublin and he later functioned as such to a number of middle- and upper-class Anglo-Irish personages

¹⁷ One of these, 'Queen Alla's lamentation' (*SIP* item 17) is also published in the second volume of Wilson's *Brookania* (1804, 73–80) where it is stated that Charlotte Brooke collected the original.

with whom Wilson was acquainted.¹⁸ These included the Countess of Moira, General Charles Vallancey and Charlotte Brooke. We know that during Thorkelin's visit to Dublin he brought letters of introduction to the Earl and Countess of Moira from their son Lord Rawdon, to whom Wilson had dedicated a publication as far back as 1782 when Wilson himself was still resident in Dublin. It was through Lord Rawdon's mother and Ó Gormáin's patron, the Countess of Moira, that Thorkelin was introduced to both Charles Vallancey and Charlotte Brooke, two of the leading authorities on Irish literary matters, exchanging correspondence and manuscripts (written by Ó Gormáin) with them.

THE AFTERLIFE OF *SELECT IRISH POEMS*

While we have been able to explain how three of Donnchadh Bàn's poems came to be included in *SIP*, we know relatively little of how the book was received or to what extent it circulated in Ireland. The scarcity of copies of either of Wilson's Irish works probably speaks for itself. Sir Walter Scott (1814, 130) described Wilson's earlier *PT*, published in 1782, as 'scarce and forgotten, though very curious'. We may note, however, that there is evidence to suggest that Donnchadh Bàn's three poems from *SIP* circulated in Ireland, not only in their published form but also in manuscripts.

One of the few references to *SIP* in print — and an important one in this context — is that of Edward O'Reilly (1765–1830), the Gaelic lexicographer. Writing in 1820 of Aodh Mac Gabhráin's 'Pléaráca na Ruarcach', a poem published in both of Wilson's anthologies (*PT*, *SIP*), O'Reilly states:

Dean Swift published a verse translation of the poem from a literal translation into English, made purposely for him. A fuller and better translation into English from the original was published in Dublin, about thirty years ago, by a neglected genius by the name of Wilson. (O'Reilly 1820, ccx)

The certain evidence that Edward O'Reilly was in possession of a copy of *SIP* is contained in a manuscript now kept in the British Library: Egerton 154. The manuscript, which contains all three of Donnchadh Bàn's poems transcribed from *SIP*, was written by O'Reilly himself and has been catalogued by S. H. O'Grady (1926, 573) who notes that it

¹⁸ For an account of Ó Gormáin's life see Ní Mhumbaile (2009) and Mac Cathmhaoil (2013).

was written during the initial stages of O'Reilly's study of Irish. O'Reilly's manuscript is not the sole witness to Donnchadh Bàn's poetry in an Irish manuscript in the British Library: a transcription of 'Oran an tSamhraidh' is contained in Egerton 149, a manuscript written in 1821 by Finghin Ó Scannail for the antiquarian and scholar James Hardiman (1782–1855). The ultimate origin of this transcription is also Wilson's *SIP*.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

The evidence presented above draws attention to a little known and rarely referenced aspect of Donnchadh Bàn's poetry. It is, however, an aspect of great interest, not least because the spectre of the Ossian controversy, though not discussed here, looms large in the background to Wilson's *SIP* and his earlier *PT*. While we have noted that Donnchadh Bàn was among the first named Scottish Gaelic poets to have his work published in translation, was the first to be published outside of Scotland²⁰ and the first to be included in a multilingual anthology, he was not acknowledged in *Select Irish Poems* (although neither was Wilson himself). Wilson and Donnchadh Bàn never met and it seems unlikely that the poet was aware of the extent to which his songs had travelled. This is something of a reflection of the attitude of Wilson, and his contemporary antiquarians, to their subject. Wilson had, after all, published Donnchadh Bàn's poems without fully understanding them, never mind acknowledging them as being the works of a living and published author.

This paper has also served to highlight a network of late eighteenth century antiquarians, the extent of which has not been recognised before. The motivations and interests of these parties (Wilson, Thorkelin, Vallancey, Brooke, the Countess of Moira, etc.) varied, but for a number of reasons converge in an interest, however ephemeral, in Gaelic literature. This antiquarian circle of self-appointed literary connoisseurs set to translating the treasures of Gaelic poetry, 'unlocking' them and thereby making the beauty of the poetry accessible.²¹ This concept is, of course, at huge variance with the world of Donnchadh Bàn and his solidly Gaelophone core audience for

¹⁹ I intend to discuss these two manuscripts in greater detail elsewhere.

²⁰ Duncan Campbell would follow with his *Nuadh Orain Gbailach* of 1798, published in Cork.

²¹ The term 'unlocking' is used frequently in the correspondence of this particular antiquarian circle when discussing translation from Gaelic (cf. Ní Mhunghaile 2009, 222).

whom translation would have been pointless at best and an act of vandalism at worst.

ABBREVIATED REFERENCES

- DB1 *Orain Ghaidhealach, le Donchadh Mac-an-t-Saoir. Clódbhbhuailt' ann an Dun-eidinn. Le A. Mac-Dhónuill, air son an Ughdair.* 1768.
- DB2 *Orain Ghaidhealach, le Donnchadh Macantsoir. Clo-bhuailt' ann Duneidinn. Gu feim an Ughdair.* 1790.
- DB3 *Orain Ghaidhealach, le Donnchadh Macantsoir, Clo-bhuailt' an Dun-eidin le Tomais Oliver air son an Ughdair.* 1804.
- EUL Edinburgh University Library.
- NLI National Library of Ireland.
- PT *Poems Translated from the Irish Language into the English* [Charles Henry Wilson. Dublin, Joseph Hill. 1782].
- SIP *Select Irish Poems Translated into English* [Charles Henry Wilson. Dublin, Joseph Hill. 1792].

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