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MacGregor, Martin (2000) *Làn-mara 's mìle seòl ("Floodtide and a thousand sails")*: Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland in the Later Middle Ages. In: A' Chòmhdhail Cheilteach Eadarniseanta Congress 99: Cultural Contacts Within the Celtic Community: Glaschu, 26-31 July. Celtic Congress, Inverness, pp. 77-97.

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Deposited on: 24 February 2014

**‘Làn-mara ’s mìle seòl’ (Floodtide and a Thousand Sails): Gaelic
Scotland and Gaelic Ireland in the Later Middle Ages**

Martin MacGregor

I

*Bha thu aig Gaidheil Eirinn
Mar fhear dhiubh fhéin ’s de’n dream.
Dh’ aithnich iad annad-sa an fhéile
Nach do reub an cuan,
Nach do mhill mìle bliadhna:
Buaidh a’ Ghàidheil buan.*

[You were to the Gaels of Ireland as one of themselves and their people. They knew in you the humanity that the sea did not tear, that a thousand years did not spoil: the quality of the Gael permanent.]¹

The words of Sorley MacLean have become something of a Q-Celtic clarion call in recent years. They commemorate his brother Calum, whose work on each side of the North Channel on behalf of the Irish Folklore Commission and of the School of Scottish Studies, recording the oral tradition of those whom Calum, quoting the Irish poet F. R. Higgins, described as ‘the lowly, the humble, the passionate and knowledgeable stock of the Gael’,² is as potent a symbol as there could be of the continuing reality of a greater Gaeldom, however attenuated, into our own times. Whether it be because poets and the evidence of poetry feature largely in what I have to say to you; or because the loss of Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith means that our poets are currently very much in our thoughts, it was another line of Sorley’s,

¹ Somhairle MacGill-Eain, *Reothairt is Contraigh: Taghadh de Dhàin 1932-1972* (Edinburgh, 1977), 172-3.

² Calum I MacLean ‘Traditional Songs from Raasay’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* [TGSJ] xxxix-xl (1942-50), 192.

from the poem *Reothairt* (Springtide), which kept recurring to me as I pondered the theme of this conference and this paper. *Làn-mara 's mìle seòl* - floodtide and a thousand sails³ - somehow seemed to conjure up the optimism, the unstoppable and density of cultural connections between Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland in the later middle ages, and the scale of the human traffic to and fro across the North Channel which these connections imply.

Let me briefly sketch in a conceptual and chronological framework. The tenth to twelfth centuries marked the highwatermark in what we can regard as the first phase in the existence of a Gaelic world which embraced Ireland, Man and Scotland. Politically, 'men from one part of this Gaelic region involved themselves in the affairs of another part'; culturally, 'practitioners of Gaelic high culture in Scotland looked to Ireland ... for leadership and learning'.⁴ That unity survived the English invasion of Ireland in 1169, independent developments within the kingdom of the Scots, and the outbreak of war between Scotland and England in 1296, and was still there in the fourteenth century, albeit now spread across the smaller canvas represented by those parts of Ireland outwith English control, and those parts of Scotland which continued to be Gaelic-speaking, most notably the MacDonald Lordship of the Isles. The sun now rose and set upon a Gaelic world whose horizons had contracted, but which remained viable and vital. This second phase in its existence, the era of 'floodtide and a thousand sails' with which I shall be concerned, lasted from the fourteenth century until the seventeenth, when the combined effect of the English reconquest of Ireland,

³ MacGill-Eain, *Reothairt is Contraigh*, 130-1.

⁴ Seán Duffy, 'The Bruce brothers and the Irish Sea world, 1306-29', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991), 59; Dauvit Broun, *The Irish Identity of the Kingdom of the Scots* (Woodbridge, 1999), 2.

the Scottish Reformation, the union of the English and Scottish crowns, and profound changes in the social order in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd brought the shutters down, fracturing the Gaelic continuum almost beyond repair.

Let me give you two contemporary statements, which roughly demarcate the second phase in the existence of a pan-Gaelic world, and which will help us to begin the process of defining the pillars upon which that world's integrity rested. The first is a letter written in the name of Robert Bruce, king of Scots, probably in the winter of 1306/7, at the lowest ebb of Bruce's career, when his hopes of restoring Scottish independence lay in tatters, and he had been forced to take refuge, first in the isle of Rathlin between Kintyre and Antrim, and then perhaps in the Western Isles of Scotland. Bruce turned to Ireland for support, as follows.

The king sends greetings to all the kings of Ireland, to the prelates and clergy, and to the inhabitants of all Ireland, his friends.

Whereas we and you and our people and your people, free since ancient times, are descended from one seed of a nation and are urged to come together more eagerly and joyfully in friendship by a common language and by common custom, we have sent over to you our beloved kinsmen, the bearers of this letter, to negotiate with you in our name about permanently strengthening and maintaining inviolate the special friendship between us and you, so that with God's will our nation may be able to recover her ancient liberty. Whatever our envoys or one of them may on our behalf conclude with you in this matter we shall ratify and uphold in the future.⁵

The second statement comes from 1601, at a time when King James VI of Scotland was seeking to assist Queen Elizabeth of England, to whose throne he would soon succeed, by levying troops from the Highlands to participate in the English

⁵ GWS Barrow, *Robert Bruce and the Community of the Realm of Scotland* (3d edn, Edinburgh, 1988), 314.

reconquest of Ireland, then in full swing. But James's plans ran into various kinds of opposition, one of which was spelt out to him by the chief of the powerful Glenorchy division of the Campbells, which dominated much of the central and southern Highlands.

Glenorchy had told him that one of his country whom he meant to have employed had plainly protested though the King, Argyll and he should force them to go, yet they would not serve against that people they were come of and whose language was one with theirs, but be true to them against the Saxons (meaning English) ...⁶

The individual in question may have been Eoin Dubh, brother of the then chief of the MacGregors, 'a very brave and expert man' in the opinion of government which was certainly wooing him for service in Ireland at this time, and who died in the Battle of Glen Fruin on Loch Lomondside in 1603. Eoin Dubh, if he it be, and Robert Bruce, both identified two pillars of pan-Gaelic identity. The first was a pillar of blood, of belief in a common origin. In the words of an anonymous professional poet of the mid-seventeenth century:

The Gael of Scotland and of Ireland long ago were the same in origin and in blood, as our schools relate.⁷

The second pillar was of course language, of which we shall say more in a moment. Bruce also invokes 'common custom', and under that broad banner we might group together specific elements such as similarities in social structure, values and expectations; in formal religious expression and the realm of superstition and belief;

⁶ *Calendar of the State Papers relating to Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots, 1547-1603*, eds. J Bain and others (Edinburgh, 1898-), xiii, pt.2 (1597-1603), 937 (no. 762).

⁷ WJ Watson, 'Unpublished Gaelic Poetry-III', *Scottish Gaelic Studies [SGS]* ii (1927), 84-5.

and in cultural expression. All of this meant that the Gaels of late medieval Ireland and Scotland inhabited very similar mental landscapes, in which the saints of the early Celtic Church, and the heroes of the great saga cycles of early Gaelic literature, to take only two examples, must have been ever-present factors.

Linguistic unity was probably the most important bond between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland in the later middle ages, and obviously fundamental to the cultural connections between the two. That unity, however, was not as automatic as we might assume. Gaelic was the vernacular speech of both regions, but for a long time now, local dialects had been diverging significantly on either side of the North Channel to an extent which may have compromised the ability of those at opposing ends of the Scottish Gàidhealtachd, or of the Irish Gàidhealtachd, or particularly of the greater Gàidhealtachd, to comprehend one another. It is a problem we are of course familiar with today, both in a Gaelic and in a wider Celtic context. It always seems to me regrettable that at gatherings such as these most of us are only able to address one another in the language whose inexorable expansion has been at the expense of our own indigenous tongues. The advent of rapid translation technology provides one answer, but so far as I am aware, no one has yet proposed or attempted the resurrection of a common Celtic language.

The notion of a Celtic Esperanto may sound like Celtic moonshine, yet it was a development along these lines which took place within the Gaelic world in the late twelfth century. What has been termed ‘a medieval exercise in language planning’ resulted in the formulation of an artificial language, which Scottish scholars call Classical Common Gaelic and Irish scholars call Early Modern Irish! The vocabulary and grammar of this language, along with the metrical requirements relating to the

composition of poetry in it, remained virtually set in stone, impervious to vernacular developments, for five hundred years.

Poetry must be mentioned, because it was the poets who were primarily responsible for the birth and spread of this language, and for the maintenance of its purity. This underlines the fact that Classical Common Gaelic was first and foremost a vehicle for literature, and that its birth was an integral part of the reorganisation of high Gaelic culture in the late twelfth century. By 'high Gaelic culture' I mean the pursuit of activities such as poetry, history, law, music and medicine, on a formal, organised, professional basis. Previously this culture had flourished in close association with the monasteries of the Celtic Church, but when the church was reorganised along continental lines in the twelfth century, culture had to seek a new supportive structure upon which to graft itself. It found it in the courts of the Gaelic aristocracy; henceforth the pursuit of Gaelic high culture took place in independent schools maintained by the professions concerned, and under an umbrella of secular patronage.

How the poets went about the business of forging the standard which was Classical Common Gaelic, we do not know, but rather than assume that there was an otherwise unrecorded 'synod of poets' in the late twelfth century, I would tend to agree with Katherine Simms and 'look to the domination of the bardic art throughout Ireland and Scotland by the Ó Dálaigh family in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries'.⁸ The Ó Dálaigh poetic kindred reached Scotland in the person of Muireadhach Albanach, progenitor of the Scottish MacMhuirichs who have been

⁸ Katharine Simms, 'Literacy and the Irish bards', in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge, 1998), 242-3.

described as ‘the longest lived poetic dynasty in Europe’. Whether or not Muireadhach Albanach was also the means by which Classical Common Gaelic came to Scotland, we can regard him as the formal beginning of an epoch in which Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland shared the same literary language, and for the duration of which, in the words of the great Irish scholar Osborn Bergin, ‘the trained professional poet wrote in such a style that it is impossible to tell from his language to what part of Ireland or Scotland he belonged, or to fix his date even approximately’.⁹

I trust you will understand why I have dealt with this point at some length. I do so partly out of a sense of awe - the creation of Classical Common Gaelic seems to me to be an extraordinary and wonderful thing in its own right - but also because the existence of this language is the key to understanding cultural connections between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland in the later middle ages. It was a supra-dialectal bubble which stretched serenely from Kerry to Cape Wrath for five hundred years, and which, in its delivery of a formal structural unity to the Gaelic world, can perhaps be regarded as the successor of the Celtic Church which had performed that role until the advent of twelfth century church reform. Competence in Classical Common Gaelic gave unity to the various branches of the learned orders, and in turn integrated them with the aristocracy, which clearly had to be able to appreciate the endeavours of its employees. It connected the learned orders and the aristocracy of Ireland to their counterparts in Scotland, and must have influenced the commonality of mindset and indeed of personnel evident in both groups on either side of the North Channel. Knowledge of the language was like a passport which enabled the practitioners of high Gaelic culture to move with ease throughout this world, gravitating to the centres of

⁹ Osborn Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry* (Dublin, 1970), 13.

patronage which were the courts of the Gaelic élite, or to the centres of learning which were the schools run by the various professions.

There is abundant evidence for the integration of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland into one culture zone in the later middle ages. Let me begin with four examples. At Christmas 1351, Uilleam Ó Ceallaigh issued a *gairm sgoile*, ‘the summons of a poetic school’, to ‘all the Irish poets, Brehons, bards, harpers, Gamesters or common kearoghs, Jesters and others of their kind of Ireland’. This is ‘the earliest recorded instance of an Irish lay-patron providing a feast exclusively for the benefit of the learned classes’. A poem composed by Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh to celebrate the occasion sheds much light upon its organisation and significance. The poem begins, *Filidh Éirionn go haointeach*, ‘The poets of Ireland to one house’, but subsequently reveals that the summons had been heard beyond the sea, for ‘to accommodate the men of learning from Ireland and Scotland, a temporary town of wattled huts was erected beside Ó Ceallaigh’s castle, with a separate street for each profession’. There could be no happier metaphor for either the *esprit de corps* of the various branches of the learned orders, or the solidarity of the learned classes of Scotland and Ireland.¹⁰

Down to the sixteenth century the Irish Annals contain references to individuals who bear titles such as *oide fear nÉireann agus Alban le dán*, ‘teacher in poetry of the men of Ireland and Scotland’. One such was the Irish religious poet Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn, who died in 1448 as ‘preceptor of the schools of Ireland and Scotland in poetry and general erudition’. Whether such titles were functional or

¹⁰ Katharine Simms, ‘Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 108 (1978), 91; E Knott, ‘Filidh Éireann go haointeach’, *Ériu* 5 (1911), 50-69.

merely honorific is a question which has not been properly investigated, but in the case of Tadhg Óg at least it is not hard to demonstrate a Scottish dimension to his life and legacy. He composed a eulogy of Alasdair, MacDonald Lord of the Isles; and poems, or extracts from poems, of his are to be found in the famous *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, an anthology mainly of Gaelic poetry compiled in the central Highlands in the first half of the sixteenth century; in *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh*, the translation-cum-adaptation of the *Book of Common Order* by John Carswell, Bishop of the Isles, published in Edinburgh in 1567, the first book to be printed in Gaelic in either Ireland or Scotland; and in a manuscript possessed by the famous Scottish medical kindred, the Beatons.

John Carswell's choice of Classical Common Gaelic as the language for his version of the *Book of Common Order* was quite deliberate. One of the additions which he made to it was an Epistle to the Reader, which he addressed, 'Unto every Christian throughout the whole world, and specially to the men of Scotland and Ireland, to such of them as desire to receive the true word of God in their hearts and minds...'. 'We, the Gaels of Scotland and Ireland', is a phrase used early in the Epistle, which contains several other similar references, while in the dedicatory poem which he addresses to his book, Carswell asks it to travel throughout Scotland and 'After that, [to] travel over each wave to the land of Ireland of liberal bounds; though the friars care little for thee, move westwards within their sight'.¹¹ Carswell of course played a prominent role in the efforts to foster Protestantism in the Highlands following the Scottish Reformation of 1560, but clearly entertained the greater hope,

¹¹ *Foirm na n-Urrnuidheadh: John Carswell's Gaelic translation of the Book of Common Order*, ed. RL Thomson (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, Edinburgh, 1970), 113, 171-2.

however far-fetched it may appear to modern eyes, that the cultural unity of the Gaelic world could be maintained and deepened by - and indeed act as a springboard for - the establishment of Protestantism throughout its bounds.

‘Last night I slept in Dún Monaidh, in the dwelling of the King of Scots ... my use and wont is to be in Islay one day, another in Kintyre; a day in Man, a day in Rathlin, and yet another on the white look-out cairn on Slievefaud; for a ranting rambling roving blade am I ...’.¹² The individual speaking here, and who makes a common home of Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man, is *An Ceatharnach Caol Riabhach*, ‘the Lean, Grizzled Trickster’, the eponymous hero of a sixteenth century tale of Irish origin. As if to bear out his sentiments, we may note that this tale survived in the oral tradition of Gaelic Scotland until as late as 1969, when it was recorded from the late Domhnall Alasdair Johnson of Aird Mhór, South Uist.¹³

The sort of knowledge changing hands within the late medieval Gaelic world was by no means exclusively artistic and intellectual. Another common currency was news and gossip, for a consequence of the existence of the unified zone of high culture was the existence of a unified media zone with its own very effective bush telegraph, which could broadcast the fame or notoriety of a particular individual throughout its bounds. In recording the death of Tomás Óg Maguire, king of Fermanagh, in 1480, the *Annals of Ulster* describe him as:

A man of the greatest charity and piety and hospitality that was in his time, and a man that defended his territory against its neighbours, and a man that

¹² *Silva Gadelica: A Collection of Tales in Irish with Extracts illustrating Persons and Places*, ed. Standish H O’Grady (London, 1892), i, 276, ii, 312; cf. *SGS* xvi (1990), 218.

¹³ Donald A MacDonald and Alan Bruford, ‘An Ceatharnach Caol Riabhach’, *Scottish Studies* 14 (1970), 133-54.

made churches and monasteries and mass-chalices, and was in Rome and twice in Santiago on his pilgrimage. And full were Ireland and Scotland of the fame of that Tomás.¹⁴

A decade later, the *Annals of Loch Cé* give the death of Aonghas Óg, son of the lord of the Isles, in the following terms:

MacDonald of Scotland, the young lord, the best man of his contemporaries in Ireland or Scotland, was unfortunately slain by an Irish harper, called Diarmaid Cairbreach, in his own chamber.¹⁵

The prime source for the circulation of information of this sort was clearly the free movement of the learned classes - note in this last instance the Irish origin of Aonghas Óg's harpist - and can hardly be regarded as a disinterested public service provided by them, for their daily bread depended upon knowledge of where generous patrons were to be found. The Scottish harper-poet, Giolla-Críost Brúilingeach, who visited the court of Tomaltach MacDiarmaid on the Rock of Loch Cé in the mid-fifteenth century, makes no bones about what has brought him from Gigha to Connacht:

I have come, good the reason, from Scotland to visit thee, as is meet, drawn by thy fame ... I have come to crave a boon from thee, from Scotland... A harp in special grant me at my request, thou king.¹⁶

The Irish annals confirm Tomaltach's reputation for generosity, and in a later poem Giolla-Críost reveals that his request had been granted. Giolla-Críost belonged to the branch of the Mac a' Bhreatnaich (Galbraith) kindred of hereditary harpists based in

¹⁴ Cited in *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, ed. WJ Watson (Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, Edinburgh, 1937), 267.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42-43, 263.

the isle of Gigha, off the Kintyre peninsula, and we have evidence that virtually at the same time of his own sojourn in Ireland, Irish poets were passing him en route to Gigha, and for precisely the same reasons. For them the attraction was Niall, chief of the MacNeills of Gigha, whose early death evoked a moving elegy from his ‘loved yokefellow’ Aithbreac inghean Coirceadail:

Poets came from Dún an Óir, poets too from the Boyne to seek his curling hair; oft did they come drawn by his fame; just as often they got from him all their wish.¹⁷

If we are to believe the evidence of another poem in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, it was fame of a different sort which was acquired by a likely descendant of Giolla-Críost Brúilingeach, Lachlann Mac a’ Bhreatnaich. This mock-elegy portrays him as the prince of scroungers, capable even of stealing the gift given to his servant lad, and whose death has left Begging bereft:

In the world there is not one man to exalt Begging; Lachlann’s death we deem vexatious; ill news is that in Ireland.¹⁸

Another pointer to the existence of this unified cultural and media zone, and consequence of it, was the degree of knowledge of the geography and topography of Ireland which existed in late-medieval Gaelic Scotland. Presumably the reverse was also true, although it is easier to point to evidence emanating from the Scottish side. Aithbreac inghean Coirceadail of Gigha was a layperson, not a professional poet, but can allude quite naturally to a specific place in the far south-west of Ireland. The

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60-63, at 60-61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15; William Gillies, ‘The Gaelic Poems of Sir Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy (II)’, *SGS* xiii, pt. ii (1981), 263-76.

source of her poem, the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, also includes an account of the size and divisions of Ireland.

II

At this point in my presentation I wish to pause. We have established the existence of a pan-Gaelic cultural world embracing Ireland and Scotland in the later middle ages, and in a moment we shall look in more detail at the nature of the connections which operated within that world. But culture was only one of the bridges which spanned the North Channel in this era. What I want to do now is to look briefly at those other bridges, in order that we can appreciate the cultural connections in their proper context. We shall find in any case that frequently it is via cultural sources, principally poetry, that we find information about these other types of connection.

This last point can be illustrated if we begin with a fundamental preliminary matter, namely the practical business of travelling between Gaelic Ireland and Scotland in the later middle ages. Since the men of learning formed one of the most conspicuous elements within what was a constant traffic of people, livestock and merchandise across the North Channel, it is no surprise that we can glean from their writings insights into the nature of voyages which, for all the shortness of the distance from the Mull of Kintyre to Antrim - twelve miles at its narrowest point - could be fraught with hazard; voyages 'upon the stormy sea of clustering wave-tops, chill and huge, the home of grilse and salmon', in the words of one Scottish poet who had accomplished it.¹⁹ A particularly poignant example concerns the solicitude of a father for his son on the latter's departure from Islay to County Sligo for medical training in

¹⁹ Watson, *Scottish Verse*, 42-43.

1541. The father, Niall Beaton, made for his son a small psalter or prayer-book, into which he wrote in Latin the Vulgate version of Psalm 118 which begins, 'Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord'.²⁰

The Irish author of a poem composed around 1250 to the chief of the Clan Donald in Scotland represents himself as a dyed-in-the-wool landlubber, paralysed with fear at the prospect of crossing the sea to his patron:

... horror of the sea has stifled me. Between us is Coire dhá Ruadh, I fear it ... Not less is it a trouble that Coire Bhreacáin is before me, its pride when it is sultry bends the firm masts. One foot I put forward into the ship, the other foot behind as a support, when going to the east. I should be an ill hand at the oar against the perilous sea: on a calm river I tremble when I take charge of a boat's rudder. How to settle myself I know not, when going over the wave: I know not whether it were better to sit, I fear to lie down in the ship. It is my own grip upon it which holds the ship together; lest the surging billow should break it, I keep my hand on the ship's side. In my native district men ask what ships look like; little of the sea is visible from the highest steep mountain in it. Thy father offered - a pleasing guile - to bring me lying in his ship; a couch was offered me by Conn's fair-haired descendant.²¹

Mention of the couch brings to mind another poem composed around fifty years later which also focuses upon the sea journey between Ireland and Gaelic Scotland, but from the very different perspective of the sailing of a war fleet under the command of Eoin MacSween, to reclaim his patrimony in Knapdale, in Argyll. The poet creates a precise and evocative word-picture of the elaborate fitting-out of the ships, blending military detail with the luxurious arrangements made for the accommodation of the female passengers:

Tall men are arraying the fleet, which swiftly holds its course on the sea's bare surface: no hand lacks a trim warspear beside a shield, polished and shapely.

²⁰ JWM Bannerman, *The Beatons: a medical kindred in the classical Gaelic tradition* (Edinburgh, 1986), 44-5, 109.

²¹ Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 171-2, 292-3.

Gold and ivory inlaid swords deck the prow of the brown-sailed barques; to the ships' sides are fastened shields and a rank of bright spears.

Behind shields on speckled ships project scarlet deck-houses encrusted with gold; fair helmets and neck-pieces hang on the sides of the sharp, jutting yard-arms...

The women of Ireland are in the ships' bower-houses, where there are high-placed beds for stately maidens; speckled cushions are arranged for them, couches where ladies may lie alone.

Speckled throws of silk and sendal like rushes strew the ships' floors; the raven sail of the MacSweens, a red silk banner above each mast.²²

A woman who probably came across from Ireland to Scotland in precisely this fashion, and at very much the same time, was Áine, daughter of Cú-maige na nGall Ó Cathán, chief of an important kindred which ruled most of what is now County Londonderry. Probably late in the thirteenth century, Áine married Aonghas Óg, chief of the Clan Donald, and a key supporter of Robert Bruce during the Wars of Independence. She exemplifies one very obvious and ancient reason for movement between Ireland and Scotland, that of human settlement. More specifically, she was one among many women in the late medieval era for whom the move was brought upon by marriage, usually dictated by political considerations. Áine also exemplifies the freedom of movement within the Gaelic world - in 1338 she was the recipient of an English safe-conduct allowing her to travel between Scotland and Ireland at will. And she exemplifies the potential scale of such movement, and of the settlement which it could entail, for when she travelled to Scotland to marry Aonghas Óg, she did not travel alone, but brought with her a human dowry or marriage-gift. *Tochradh nighean a' Chathanaich*, 'the dowry of Ó Cathán's daughter', was how tradition remembered those who accompanied her, described in one source as an 'unusual

²² Watson, *Scottish Verse*, 6-9; Donald E Meek, '“Norsemen and Noble Stewards”: the MacSween poem in the Book of the Dean of Lismore', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 34 (1997), 1-49.

retinue from Ireland ... from whom sprang twenty-four families in Scotland';²³ and in another as 'seven score men out of every surname under O' Kain'.²⁴

The most significant instance of Scottish settlement in Ireland in the late medieval era also took its cue from a marriage, for this appears to have been the means by which Eoin Mór MacDonald, a grandson of Áine, acquired the area known as the Glens of Antrim at the very end of the fourteenth century. His descendants, Clann Eoin Mhóir, became a major political force on both sides of the North Channel, but more so in Ireland, where the Glens served as a bridgehead for further expansion which resulted ultimately in their becoming earls of Antrim in 1620.

Eoin Mór was actually already in Ireland prior to his marriage to the heiress of the Glens, for he had been banished there by his brother, Domhnall Lord of the Isles, for rebelling against him. It was not uncommon for fugitives from one part of the Gaelic world to take refuge in the other, and temporary asylum could sometimes translate into permanent exile and settlement. We have already seen Robert Bruce fleeing first to Rathlin on being forced to leave Scotland in 1306.

The most significant cause of both temporary and permanent settlement by Gaelic Scots in Ireland, and the reason for most of the human traffic across the North Channel in the later middle ages, was military service. From the thirteenth century Scottish mercenary soldiers bearing surnames such as MacDonald, MacDougall, MacRuairi and MacSween had been participating in conflicts in Ireland. The Irish

²³ 'The Book of Clanranald' in A Cameron, *Reliquiae Celticae*, eds. A MacBain and J Kennedy (Inverness, 1892-4), ii, 158-9.

²⁴ Hugh MacDonald (attrib.), 'History of the MacDonalds', in *Highland Papers*, ed. JRN MacPhail (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh, 1914), i, 20-21.

termed them *gall-óglaich* or gallowglasses, and by 1400 many of them were naturalised in Ireland, dedicated to what one poet calls, 'the art of war'. There was a further phase of intensive Irish recruitment of Scottish soldiery in the sixteenth century, although this was organised on a seasonal basis, and did not give rise to permanent settlement.

These mercenaries can be regarded as a tradeable human commodity, and their movement as part of a wider pattern of commercial links between late medieval Scotland and Ireland. As yet this has hardly been investigated at all, yet in the context of a presentation devoted primarily to culture there is one aspect of trade which should be mentioned. This is the role of Galway (A' Ghailbhinn) as an entrepôt or doorway through which Gaelic Scotland gained access to silk and fine swords, to wine and wax and other Mediterranean exotica. Wherever commodities such as these are mentioned in Scottish Gaelic poetry and song, as they regularly are, Galway is likely to be invoked also, bringing with it a subtle perfume of the foreign, the luxurious, the 'land of spices'.

The last two bridges which I wish to consider are education and religion. The absence of a university within Ireland in the later middle ages meant that university education had to be pursued elsewhere, and in the late sixteenth century we find students from the northern parts of Ireland studying here, at Glasgow. Despite my earlier suggestion that Classical Common Gaelic may have supplanted the Celtic Church in providing a structural unity to the late medieval Gaelic world, religion remained a cause for interaction. This may have been particularly true of Iona, and the cult of Columba. Iona was a magnet for pilgrims from Ireland as from elsewhere. Down to c. 1300 at least there was a strong connection between the monastery of Iona and the monastery of Derry, which became the head of the Columban monasteries of

Ireland in succession to Kells in the mid-twelfth century. Derry was the religious centre of the territories ruled by the Ó Cathán kindred, and was strongly linked to them, and thus it may be that the marriage of Áine Ní Cathán to Aonghas Óg MacDonald was the occasion both of the coming to Scotland of the Ó Brolcháns, who specialised in service to the church and in master stonemasonry, and who were responsible for the establishment of a school of monumental sculpture in the late medieval west highlands, centred at Iona; and of the grant of lands in Islay which Derry continued to hold until the sixteenth century. The abbey of Saddell in Kintyre, and the priory of Oronsay, founded in the late twelfth and fourteenth centuries respectively, may both have been colonised from Ireland in the first instance. Finally, we have already seen how John Carswell hoped to exploit the linguistic unity of the Gaelic world to export Protestantism to Ireland in the era of the Reformation, and exactly the same holds true for the efforts by Gaelic-speaking Franciscan missionaries from Ireland to spread the Counter-Reformation to the Scottish Highlands in the seventeenth century.

III

Now let us return to consideration of the purely cultural links between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland in the later middle ages, and we may begin by noting correspondences between these and the broader canvas of connections which we have just sketched in. Mobility was an inescapable part of the lifestyle of the practitioners of high Gaelic culture, and perhaps with even greater frequency for them than for non-cultural individuals, that mobility gave rise to permanent settlement across the North Channel. Sometimes this was a consequence of the seeking of asylum; the progenitor of the MacMhuirich poetic dynasty in Scotland, Muireadhach Albanach, left Ireland in

the wake of his murder of his patron's steward. Sometimes it went hand in hand with permanent movement by the aristocracy which patronised them; it seems likely that the progenitors of both the Beaton medical kindred, and the Ó Brolcháin master stonemasons, first arrived in Scotland around 1300 as part of the dowry of Áine Ní Catháin.

The family to which Muireadhach Albanach belonged originated in Westmeath, but he himself had been based in Tyrconnel, modern County Donegal, before coming to Scotland. The Beatons and the Ó Brolcháins both came from Ó Catháin country, modern County Londonderry. There were many others like them:- the Ó Cuinn master stonemasons, apparently from Antrim; the Omeys, who came to Kintyre as weavers, but branched into medicine and the church; the MacMharcais poets, also in Kintyre; the MacEwen poets and historians in Argyll, and possibly of Irish origin; the MacDhuinnshléibhe physicians (Donegal to Argyll); the Ó Conchobhair physicians (Leinster to Argyll); and the Ó Muirgheasáin poets and historians (Donegal to Mull and Skye).

In addition to permanent settlement, there was also a constant traffic of the learned across the North Channel for temporary reasons. We have already met the *cuairt*, or circuit of the courts of likely aristocratic patrons, which we associate primarily with the poets; and the *gairm sgoile*, or general gatherings of the learned for the purpose of celebration and competition. The exalted, almost sacred status of the learned within the Gaelic world, coupled with their own literary and intellectual abilities, and the close bond they often enjoyed with their chief patrons, meant that the poet on a *cuairt* was a diplomat as much as an artist, and his poetry a means of political negotiation: 'It is customary for a chief poet to travel on a mission', was how one Irish poet opened his address to the earl of Argyll about 1555. But there were

three other, connected reasons which might draw the learned across the sea. The thirst to enhance his professional knowledge could impel a member of the learned classes from one end of the Gaelic world to the other, in order to acquire a particular manuscript or to meet a specific individual. Closely allied to this was the desire to attend the schools of learning in the other country. And these professional motives could go hand in hand with a social one, namely the visiting of kinsfolk who had settled across the water. All these reasons coalesce in the journey by Eoin Beaton from Islay to Ireland in 1563, during which he made a circuit of medical schools in south-east Connacht, Mayo and Sligo, some of them run by kinsmen of his, and commissioned copies of two medical manuscripts. One of these manuscripts returned with him to Islay, and subsequently travelled to the isles of Skye, North Uist, and Mull before returning to Ireland in the company of a later Eoin Beaton in 1700.

The unity of the Gaelic world did not preclude feelings of homesickness - *cianalas* - in those who crossed the North Channel. 'Dear to me (my heritage), Scotland's lovely yellow woods', says the Scottish poet Gill-Brighde Albanach in a poem addressed to an Irish patron in the early thirteenth century; over 500 years later Maol-Domhnaich Ó Muirgheasáin looked back with longing to Lewis and Harris from far-off Kerry. 'O God, remember me and I far from Dunollie and my friends', wrote the young Scot Donnchadh Albanach Ó Conchobhair into a manuscript he was writing in Leinster in 1599. 'I am the person of the bad handwriting who wrote this in the homestead of the Lord of Howth Head (Co. Dublin), namely Eoin son of Domhnall, and I am far from my country today', wrote another Scottish Ó Conchobhair in the early seventeenth century. We find an Irish parallel for these homesick Scots in poems composed by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird while sojourning in Scotland around 1600:

A blessing westward from me to Ireland ... she is the mother who nursed us; she is not uncomely to look upon. Westward from Scotland of the melodious waterfalls, a blessing westward from me to Ireland, smooth varied region with smooth plains, an ancient land like to the Land of Promise. To leave her is ground for weakness, sweet is the sound of her gentle wind - green Ireland enclosed by woods - and sweet is the voice of her rivers.²⁵

In this poem Fearghal Óg hints that he had been forced to leave Ireland by the actions of others, but we gain a different impression from another poem which he composed in Scotland, which suggests that he had been lured there in the hope of gaining wealth through his art. In this poem Fearghal Óg gives a novel twist to the homesickness theme by highlighting his inability to practise his own religion in post-Reformation Scotland:

Were all [Scotland's] generously-given gold mine and were I to get all the silver in the cool fresh land of the fair peaks, better than these would it be to hear mass once. I fear reproach for coming to Scotland of the gold drink-horns; in this fair-flowered land of bright fields I receive not the Lord's Body. As I see not in this sunny-earthen lawn of planted trees God's imperishable Body I pray I may not die in Scotland.²⁶

But for the men of culture there were times when loyalty to homeland was transcended by the personal and intellectual fulfilment they derived from friendships forged with their counterparts across the water. Writing at the court of his Scottish patron, MacDougall of Dunollie, in 1597, the thoughts of the Scottish student physician Donnchadh Ó Conchobhair were on the Irish medical school run by his mentor, Donnchadh Óg Ó Conchobhair:

²⁵ Bergin, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, 37-40, 225-7.

²⁶ *Aithdioghluim dána*, ed. Lambert McKenna (Dublin, 1939), i, 204-7, ii, 120-22.

Alas, O God, I feel that I have been long away from where Donnchadh [Óg] is, for it is MacDougall that keeps me here for a month, but by the will of God I shall soon be in the province of Leinster ...²⁷

Round about the same time another Scottish medical man, Domhnall Beaton, was on his way home from Donegal, leaving behind him the companionship of two Irish physicians; ‘and sad am I that I can find no one to discuss a single word since they departed’.

It is clear from the evidence we have that Scotland was commonly visited by Irish poets on tour, and by Irish men of learning in general in order to acquire training and visit schools. But the impression is that as far as cultural movement for temporary reasons was concerned, Ireland exerted a stronger pull on Scotland than vice versa. When we remember the impressive roll-call of Irish men of learning who settled permanently in Scotland, and realise that this dwarfs the evidence for permanent movement in the other direction, it becomes clear that for as long as a pan-Gaelic culture remained in existence, Ireland was its metropolitan centre. As in earlier centuries, Gaelic Scotland benefited enormously from, and was heavily dependent upon, an ongoing infusion of Irish personnel throughout the later middle ages. But it would be wrong to make the further assumption, as some have, that Gaelic Scotland was merely a ‘cultural dependency’ of Ireland, forever in the shadow of her mentor, for in fact she made a vigorous and at times innovative contribution to the common culture. We find no Irish parallel for the late medieval west highland tradition of richly decorated monumental sculpture, and that despite the fact that it was Irish master stonemasons who were responsible for the birth of the tradition in Scotland! Nor do we find an Irish parallel to *ceòl mór*, the classical music of the Highland bagpipe, and

²⁷ Bannerman, *The Beatons*, 103.

this seems to be a direct consequence of a particular Scottish expertise in the music of the harp or *clàrsach*.

IV

In conclusion, let me say something on the setting of the sun on this particular era in cultural connections between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. The era was defined by the learned orders and the language they used, Classical Common Gaelic. Both the learned orders and their language began to wither in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for reasons already given, and perhaps earlier, more rapidly and violently in Ireland than in Scotland. Yet given the convulsiveness of the process of change experienced by the Gaelic world at this time, the tenacity of high cultural unity is remarkable. Maol-Domhnaich Ó Muirgheasáin, who died about 1662, is said to have spent 34 years in Ireland, moving from one poetic school to another, ‘like a bee stealing nectar from flower after flower’, and was regarded there as the last of the great classical poets. Niall MacMhuirich was also in Ireland, and contributed two poems to an ongoing Irish debate about the heraldic symbol of the Red Hand about 1690. His son Domhnall went to Ireland for part of his poetic training in the later seventeenth century, just as his father and earlier MacMhuirichs had done. Around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a member of the Scottish medical kindred, the Beatons, migrated from North Uist in the Outer Hebrides to Antrim, and the employ of the branch of the Clan Donald there; and it may have been his son who composed an elegy for an Armagh poet, using the classical language, as late as 1733.

It was at Derry that perhaps the single most dramatic instance of pan-Celtic cultural co-operation in the era with which I have been concerned took place, and since this also involved a significant input from Wales, I shall make this my finishing

point. I refer to the meeting of the great Welsh polymath, Celtic scholar and Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Edward Lhuyd, and the Scot Eoin Beaton. Lhuyd visited Scotland as part of his 'grand tour' of the Celtic countries undertaken between 1697 and 1701: Beaton, the minister-physician from the Isle of Mull, described in another source as 'the only scholar of his race', was his chief Scottish informant. But it was on Irish soil that the two men met, and it was there that Beaton, among much else he did for Lhuyd, read for him the first two chapters of Genesis from the Gaelic Bible, using the pronunciation of the classical language. This was a meeting pregnant with symbolism, a meeting of modern scholarship with the fast-fading classical culture of the late-medieval Gaelic world. The year was 1700. The language whose pronunciation Edward Lhuyd recorded from John Beaton, and with it the era of 'floodtide and a thousand sails', was almost at its end.

