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The use of some Gaelic songs and poetry in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

Ian Brown, Kingston University, London, and Sìm Innes, Harvard University

John McGrath's touring production of *The Cheviot* with 7:84 (Scotland) brought an interactive and popularised version of historical exploitation in the Highlands to the communities for which its subject most closely related. Indeed, its message and use of Gaelic songs and some Gaelic dialogue, along with the encouragement to resist exploitation, can be seen to form a part in the beginnings of Scotland's 'Gaelic Renaissance' (Macdonald 1997, pp. 69-71). The early 1970s saw the establishment of the West Highland Free Press and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and increasing demands for provision for the language (MacKinnon 1974, pp. 105-110). *The Cheviot* is, of course, much studied and yet, despite the perceived Gaelic renaissance just referred to, the appearance of the Gaelic songs and poetry in the play usually merits not much more than passing reference. They appear without English translation in the most recent published edition. Yet, this is a living language in Scotland and the songs deserve the attention of those interested in *The Cheviot*.

One can justifiably celebrate McGrath's use of Gaelic at a time when activists were forced to fight with reluctant local authorities, the BBC and so on, to push through improvements to paltry or non-existent media, education, road sign provision for Gaelic. (For instance, prior to 1973, little more than one half-hour of Gaelic television programming was broadcast in Scotland once a month (MacKinnon 1974,

p. 107)). Yet, the ways in which McGrath uses the specific Gaelic-language songs and poems in *The Cheviot* is under-researched. This paper explores the significance of some of these and their dramaturgical use in *The Cheviot*. In short, it examines what was intended by the use of the Gaelic songs and whether the meaning and original context of these songs actually support those intentions. In doing so, the article recognises reservations that McGrath himself entered regarding the use of music in drama. As quoted by Elizabeth Hale Winkler, he warns against a sentimental, non-critical approach to music, even working-class collective music such as ‘Red Flag’ sing-alongs; these

are to be distrusted because they work so easily. [...] Music is dangerous because it can be so effective, even if its basic intellectual position is wrong. It worked in Nazi Germany very well. So you have to be very responsible about music, you have to let people know what you are doing. [...] one of the crucial things about [...] the kind of music which I really admire, like Theodorakis, or Kurt Weill, or Eisler, is the critical content. That they all use forms which are popular, which relate to what people can listen to and appreciate. ... But they all bring with them a kind of sensibility and a consciousness and a critical awareness –... not always a politically critical ... often a musicologically critical awareness – to what they are doing, which makes the audience aware of the effect of the music (Winkler 1990, p. 289)

A theme of this article is the ways in which the Gaelic songs in *The Cheviot* can be seen to employ particular musical styles and are used to seek dramatic and

emotional effects. It attempts to bring the kind of critical awareness that McGrath discusses to the task of exploring the extent to which such musical styles and dramatic and emotional effects correspond to the Gaelic source material from which they are drawn.

Talking of John McGrath's choice of musical style in *The Cheviot*, Maria DiCenzo notes the extent to which McGrath locates his songs and their music in a specific cultural milieu. Of *The Cheviot*, she says:

The fiddle is the main instrument used during the play (before the company turns into a dance band) and it provides accompaniment for the songs as well providing musical transitions between scenes. The fiddle is a central part of the folk traditions of Scottish music and forms of entertainment such as the ceilidh, so it contributes to the 'local' feel of the play (DiCenzo 1996, p. 161)

McGrath makes it clear such a localisation, in the terminology of his seminal work, *A Good Night Out*, 'localism', was consciously intended.

[Audiences] responded to the Gaelic folk-singing and the fiddle playing and the folk tunes with no problem, in fact with great pleasure. [... 'Folk' music] contributes a tremendous amount of music from the history of the people to the generally available pool of cultural experience, music with

all kinds of beauty, expressiveness, meaning and, above all, potential
(McGrath 1996, p. 70).

And within the localism he identifies, in DiCenzo's words:

The impact of using the Gaelic language, particularly in the context of celebrating the history and resilience of the Highland people, cannot be [overestimated]¹ (DiCenzo 1996, p. 88).

Yet McGrath himself was not fluent in Gaelic nor would claim to profound knowledge of Gaelic culture. Elizabeth Hale Winkler quotes him, nonetheless, as saying that

in the original performances in the Highlands the audience not only understood the Gaelic songs but joined in. Elsewhere, where Gaelic is less widely understood, the lines [...] are 'meant to be a challenge to the audience' (Winkler 1990, p. 296).

In fact, one cast member, Dolina MacLennan, a leading traditional Gaelic singer and expert on folk music, was, of course, an important source of Gaelic material for the play. Clearly, then, McGrath had access to expert input on Gaelic tradition. Yet, we might question whether the playwright fully recognised the cultural roots of the Gaelic songs, and so their deeper cultural significance, derived from their original contexts This paper evaluates not only the immediate dramatic impact of the songs of

The Cheviot, but whether at times their meaning and original significance might tend to undermine – or at least sit incongruously with – their intended use in *The Cheviot*. Already, McGrath's statement quoted above – ‘all kinds of beauty, expressiveness, meaning’ – might be seen to fit into a set of attitudes embedded in a generalisation of Winkler's, when she talks of ‘the longing and poignancy of the Gaelic melodies in *The Cheviot*’. This paper looks carefully at just what differences may exist between the ‘longing and poignancy’ of different Gaelic songs and how far they all in fact fit such categorisation.

Of course, McGrath opens the play with a song in English, James Copeland's ‘These are my mountains’:

For these are my mountains
And this is my glen
The braes of my childhood
Will see me again
No land's ever claimed me
Though far I did roam
For these are my mountains
And I'm coming home (McGrath 1996, pp. 141-2).

This song is a kitsch pastiche, written for the music hall stage. Its author, Copeland, was a successful actor (and father of another, James Cosmo). He was also a comic poet and songwriter. His song, though not explicitly comic, embodies a range

of sentimental motifs about Scotland, its notoriously romantic mountains, exploiting the emotional sense of exile of the Scottish diaspora, or at least the wandering Scot. McGrath was, of course, fully aware of this, describing the song as 'mid-twentieth-century Scottish schmaltz, pure schmaltz' (Winkler 1990, p. 295).

Immediately after this fundamentally exploitative song, Dolina McLennan who was, as already noted, responsible for sourcing the Gaelic songs used in the play, according to the first published edition of the play, 'begins to sing a quiet Jacobite song in Gaelic' (McGrath 1975, p. 7). The song's text is not actually included until a later edition of *The Cheviot*, in the collection of McGrath plays, *Six-pack: Plays for Scotland*. The refrain of the quietly-sung 'song in Gaelic' is 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg' ('My Fair Young Love'), sometimes called 'Chisholm's Lament', and it is thought to have been composed by Christina Ferguson as an elegy on the death of her husband William Chisholm of Strathglass at Culloden (William Gillies 1991, pp. 42-43; Anne Lorne Gillies 2005, pp. 185-89; Mackenzie 1841, pp. 373-74). She mourns her loss: nothing can replace him and Prince Charlie has stolen her heart from her. While the full impact of the juxtaposition is only to be appreciated by those understanding the Gaelic text, the impact of the sentimental 'These are my mountains' against music of true grief and loss sets up a dialectic in the play – which this article is intended to interrogate – between anglicised 'falsehood' and Gaelic 'sincerity'. Copeland's spurious and invasive version of Highland culture is here, for example, set against a genuine classic expression by a native Gaelic-speaker living in the region. However, although *The Cheviot* script tags it as a Jacobite song, and it does arise from the

impact of the 1745-46 Rising, we must question whether it is in fact pro-Jacobite.

Ferguson is blaming Charles Edward Stewart for her husband's death:

Och, a Theàrlaich òig Stiùbhairt,
's e do chùis rinn mo lèireadh:
Thug thu bhuam gach nì bh' agam
Ann an cogadh nad adhbhar;

(O young Charles Stewart,
It is your cause that has left me wretched:
You took from me everything I possessed
In the war on your behalf)

As sung in performance, the song is cut short at this point, but goes on in the original to say:

Cha chrodh is cha chaoirich
tha mi caoidh, ach mo chèile,
ge do dh'fhàgte mi 'm aonar
gun sian san t-saoghal ach lèine –
Mo rùn geal òg.

(It is not cattle and sheep
I'm mourning, but my husband,

Though I've been left alone
with nothing in the world but my shirt,
my fair young love) (trans. Anne Lorne Gillies 2005, p. 185)

In this song of bereavement there is no hint of support for the (often sentimentalised) Jacobite cause. What there is instead is a true sense of loss set against the sentimentality of 'These are my mountains'. Yet, that sense of loss is employed dramatically in a generic way, it might be argued, with little if anything to do with its original meaning, in *The Cheviot*.

This point is clearer if one understands that in Gaelic-speaking circles, 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg' has been very well known; indeed it is a recognised classic of Gaelic literature. For Gaelic-speakers, who would have comprised a substantial part of the play's audience on its first tour of the Highlands, it introduces an implied reference to Culloden and the subsequent Acts of proscription noted by the play's MC. Anne Lorne Gillies argues that in this song Christina Ferguson

reflects not only the grief of any woman left to fend for herself and find a new role in society, but also the feelings of the Gaelic-speaking people as a whole, facing massive social changes which were to culminate in hardship, famine, and for thousands, exile (Anne Lorne Gillies 2005, p. 188).

The point is that, however effective its dramatic placing, this song is not – at least in an obvious way – simply a Jacobite one. Nonetheless, the way it is referred to

in the first published version of *The Cheviot* as ‘a quiet Jacobite song’, (p. 7) its text not even included in the published script, raises suspicion that such Gaelic-language songs may be being used simply for a generalised emotional effect, often plaintive. They actually, however, embody much more complex attitudes to the human cost whether of, at one level, Jacobitism or, at another, Highlander on Highlander exploitation. There is no doubt a contrast is established in *The Cheviot* suggesting a simple dialectic: Gael equals good, real and authentic – non-Gael bad, false and kitsch. Indeed, following the events in *The Cheviot* focusing on the Clearances and before the last section on the oil boom we are explicitly told ‘English is the language of the ruling class’. (McGrath 1996, p. 180) Such different dynamics of the use and treatment of English/Scots and Gaelic in *The Cheviot* are a key theme of this paper. Here, one notes simply that the dramatic use made of the classic Gaelic song exploits it in a way (perhaps unavoidable in the context of a play whose audience is not all fluent in Gaelic) that over-simplifies its complexity, treating it as what it is not quite a Jacobite song. Thus, it is sentimentalised in the play’s context.

Straight after this song and a brief reference to events post-Culloden the MC announces, introducing the impact of the Clearances, ‘Scene One – Strathnaver’. His announcement is at once followed by the singing of another Gaelic song:

Hé mandu ’s truagh nach tigeadh	<i>Hé mandu</i> it’s a pity that these wouldn’t
Hé mandu siud gam iarraidh	come
Hé mandu gille ’s litir	<i>Hé mandu</i> to fetch me
Hi ri oro each is diollaid	<i>Hé mandu</i> a servant and a letter

Héman du hi ri oro

Hi ri oro a horse and a saddle

Hó ró hù ó

*Héman du hi ri oro**Hó ró hù ó*

(McGrath 1996, p. 142)

This is from a well-known waulking song. Such songs were sung to underpin the working rhythm as newly woven tweed was beaten to soften and shrink it. The song is known from the tradition of the Isle of Lewis, Dolina McLennan's home island, or at least was recorded there in the 1950s.² Waulking songs, often sung by groups of women, can be quite subversive. The one chosen here has verses referring to going to a castle to take away the lover, and swimming of the Caol Ìleach (the Sound of Islay) and Caol Arcach (Pentland Firth) and so on. We might note here that the motifs of servants, castles and literacy reflect Gaelic literature's concern for its own native Gaelic nobility.³ Gaelic was at one time, of course, also the language of the 'ruling class' in the Highlands. It is unclear if this was taken into account when using the song to introduce strife between the people of Strathnaver and the nobility who controlled much of their lives. One suspects that for *The Cheviot*, the narrative of the song appears not to be important, rather the song is used apparently to generate a broad-brushstroke 'Highland Gaelic' atmosphere, an effect reinforced by the entry of a 'Young Highlander', who 'comes on, watches [the singing women and] talks to the audience' about them rather dismissively:

The women were great at making it all seem fine. But it was no easy time to be alive in. Sir John Sinclair of Caithness had invented the Great Sheep;

that is to say, he had introduced the Cheviot to the North. Already in Assynt the Sutherland family had cleared the people off their land – and the people were not too pleased about it (McGrath 1996, p. 142).

The women are then represented, conversing in Scots and Gaelic, as believing all will be well for them:

FIRST WOMAN	Ach blethers –
SECOND WOMAN	Cha chuir iad dragh oirne co-dhiù. (They won't bother us here.)
FIRST WOMAN	The Countess has always been very kind to us.
YOUNG HIGHLANDER	Aye, and she's away in England (McGrath 1996, p. 143).

The conversation goes on to talk of the arrival of soldiers elsewhere, the Second Woman speaking only Gaelic, which is translated in the published text, though it was not in performance, until we are alerted to the arrival of Patrick Sellar and James Loch, two of the more brutal agents of Clearance. Then she says punningly in English, 'I hope they have not come to improve us', implying both 'make us better' and 'clear us from the land': 'Improvement' in Scotland was the general eighteenth- and nineteenth-century term for the Agricultural Revolution of which clearances in the Highlands (and indeed elsewhere in Scotland) formed part. The First Woman responds in Gaelic for the first time: 'Bi sàmhach. (Behave yourself)' (McGrath 1996, pp. 143-4). There is here a clear intention that, while the waulking song might provide

generic atmosphere, an issue this paper discusses, the Gaelic dialogue should stand with its own integrity, not translated in performance for non-Gaelic-speakers. The context and actors' skills, however, made meaning evident. (Brown, who was a non-Gaelic-speaking audience member during the first tour of *The Cheviot*, can vouch for this from personal experience.)

When Loch and Sellar appear, they strike the bargain that will launch the clearing of the people from their land and celebrate it by singing a song entitled 'High Industry' to the tune of 'Bonnie Dundee'. Here they parody Walter Scott's words for that song. Rather than being invited to follow a Jacobite hero, Highlanders are invited to follow 'high industry' in which process they will sell out their own customs and culture:

Your barbarous customs, though they may be old

To civilised people hold horrors untold –

What value a culture that cannot be sold?

The price of a culture is counted in gold. (McGrath 1996, p. 146)

The jolly tune of the well-known song about a royalist defending the Stuart monarchy's rights in 1688-89 becomes the setting for words describing the economic and cultural despoliation of the Highlands at the beginning of the nineteenth century to make way for sheep walks. A tune that usually expresses loyalty to an old and traditional political culture is set to words that betray a whole culture.

Just as earlier the music hall pastiche ‘These are my mountains’ was followed and contrasted by a classic of Gaelic literature, ‘Mo Rùn Geal Òg’, this satirical song, based on a popular tune, is followed at once by a Gaelic song, ‘Mo Dhachaigh’ (‘My home’). A similar dialectical contrast appears to be sought. At first sight, this contrast may appear to parallel the earlier one, employing ‘sincere’ Gaelic text to contradict English ‘duplicity’. This is a point apparently made by Maria DiCenzo when she says:

The more serious point is driven home by the Gaelic song which follows; it is the singer’s (and the audience’s) ‘home’ which has been sold [by Sellar and Loch] in the preceding scene. The shift away from laughter intensifies into the rage and bitterness of the poem, and eventually to the devastating accounts of the violent treatment of the people (DiCenzo 1996, p. 175).

Winkler makes a similar point:

For those do understand [Gaelic], the choice of texts and their placing create meaningful contrasts. For example, the first Gaelic piece, a Jacobite lament, embodies older cultural, religious and political values. It strikes a note of sadness at the beginning. The next Gaelic melody, ‘Mo Dhachaigh’ (‘My Home’), sings of the homely joys of the rustic cottage and of the singer’s peace in the natural surroundings. It offers a strong contrast with the preceding ‘High Industry’, which embodies the greedy

mercenary attitude of the exploiters and the facile optimism with which they clothe their menace of cultural destruction (Winkler 1990, p. 296).

Yet, the source of this song highlights a problematic in *The Cheviot* as to how a sentimentalised vision of Gaelic culture – note Winkler's repetition of the over-simplified description of 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg' as 'a Jacobite lament' – may mislead an anglophone audience. Such a vision, by generalising Gaelic culture as 'good', 'sincere' and always 'suffering', irons out, elides and sells short genuine complexity. The significance of 'Mo Dhachaigh' is not equal to that of 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg'. This song, hymning the attraction of one's own hearth and homeland as meaning more to the singer than a castle, was written by Malcom MacFarlane (Calum Mac Phàrlain) (1853-1931). He was born at Dalavich (Dail Abhaich) on Lochawe-side in Argyll; his family moved to Paisley when he was a child and he was brought up there as a Gaelic-speaker (MacDonald 1983, p. 188). He is, then, very much a part of a later period than the height of the Clearances, the late nineteenth-century movement of people out of the Highlands to the Lowlands and elsewhere. A 'measurer and land surveyor' (MacLeod 1908, pp. 202-04) and a prolific Gaelic scholar and songwriter, 'Mo Dhachaigh' is his most well-known song.⁴ Malcolm C. MacLeod identifies 'Mo Dhachaigh' as being published in *A' Choisir-Chiùil: The St Columba Collection of Gaelic Songs, Arranged for Part Singing* (1900-1913?). It had actually also been published previously in *The Celtic Monthly* (1893) where one reads that it had won a cash prize of £1/1s. (a guinea) for 'best poem' and its words there printed (*The Celtic Monthly*, April 1893, p. 102). This song, then, is part of the large corpus of songs composed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century for a Highland

audience now living in Glasgow, or other parts of the Lowlands. These songs are full of nostalgia, sentiment and cliché, arguably close in spirit to Copeland's sentimental pastiche 'These are my mountains', sharing its falsely sanitised view of the Highlands. They can even be seen as being 'schmaltzy', the term McGrath used to describe Copeland's song.

Indeed, Derick Thomson, poet and, from 1963 to 1991, professor of Celtic at the University of Glasgow, has called these Gaelic texts 'Homeland Verse' (Thomson 1974, pp. 223-29). He suggests that, while these songs often make some muted reference to the reality of the Clearances and show some nationalist feeling, their romance and idealised settings often overshadow any overtly political comment. Thomson actually calls some of these 'pop songs' since they were largely meant for the nineteenth-century cèilidh circuit in the Lowlands. He includes 'Mo Dhachaigh' in this genre of 'pop songs' and calls it 'a pretty picture postcard of a song' (Thomson 1974, p. 232). Gaelic-speaking critics often see these songs as frivolous, given that they so much mute the political reality of what was happening in Gaelic-speaking communities. Arguably, of course, such a stern view fails to take account of context. Would the audience at a cèilidh in Glasgow have wanted to hear songs about famine, clearance and forced emigration? Nevertheless, in a sense 'Mo Dhachaigh' occupies for Gaelic literature the spurious territory of Copeland's 'These are my mountains', with which *The Cheviot* begins. Yet, while the English-language song is used and subverted unmercifully and comically as an example of sentimental and emotionally exploitative writing throughout *The Cheviot*, there is no sense in the play of the Gaelic song being perceived as a falsely emotive kitsch artefact to be undermined for

dramatic effect. It appears to be taken at face value, as if anything written in Gaelic is *ipso facto* 'sincere'. Certainly, while DiCenzo's analysis of the dramatic effect of the contrast between Sellar and Loch's version of 'Bonny Dundee' and 'Mo Dhachaigh' makes sense, it is also true that the effect is arguably derived from a misunderstanding of the Gaelic song's commercial roots as being authentically traditional.

Such a misunderstanding may feed into one of the issues that emerges from a study of *The Cheviot*, an implication that Highlanders were simply virtuous victims with no personal agency, evicted from their homes and personal security, even from some form of idyll. There is no doubt the Clearances involved indefensible brutality, but its victims were complex human beings with complex motivations and attitudes. Generally those evicted had experienced hard living and working conditions, while in many cases those ordering or executing the clearing were themselves Gaelic-speaking Highlanders. While the need of those evicted and moved away from their home regions for some form of comforting reminder of their origins, however ersatz, is understandable, there is no sense in *The Cheviot* of understanding of the politico-emotional complexity of the origins of a song like 'Mo Dhachaigh'. This song's 'sincerity' is of a different sort from 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg'. In fact, it embodies its own emotional falsehood. With its sentimental themes, it lacks the direct emotional impact of 'Mo Rùn Geal Òg', which, post-Culloden, foreshadows the exploitation to befall the Highlands partly as a result of the quasi-genocidal treatment of the Highlands after the 1745-6 Jacobite Rising. The choice of a song like 'Mo Dhachaidh' marks the problematic nature of appropriating cultural material from another culture – in a

language and from a context not necessarily understood – to achieve an effect the original song may not quite support.

The Gaelic song ‘Mo Dhachaigh’ is followed at once by the recitation in translation of a poem by Donnchadh Buidhe, ‘the Chisholm Bard’, cursing the sheep and the men who have drive the people from the land to make way for them:

Destruction to the sheep from all corners of Europe. Scab wasting, pinning,
tumours on the stomach and on the hide.

Foxes and eagles for the lambs. Nothing more to be seen of them but
fleshless hides and the grey shepherds leaving the country without laces
on their shoes.

I have overlooked someone. The Factor. May he be bound by tight thongs,
wearing nothing but his trousers, and be beaten with rods from head to
foot. May he be placed on a bed of brambles, and covered with thistles.
(McGrath 1996, p. 147)

The implication of the poem is clear. As it concludes, Patrick Sellar enters and says to the audience ‘I am not the cruel man they say I am. I am a business man’ (McGrath 1996, p. 148) before ‘He winks’ and leaves the stage to a scene in which three characters talk mainly in Gaelic of the Clearances’ progress and their will to resist them. What is striking, however, about the inclusion of this version of the

Gaelic poem is that, unlike other Gaelic texts used in *The Cheviot*, it is clearly second-hand. It is in fact the version cited in John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances* (1963, pp. 144-5), described by him there as 'an inadequate prose translation only'. The inclusion of this version of the text might, on a severe reading, hint at an ambivalence in the play's relationship to its Gaelic sources. However sincere in intention, the use of second-hand material derived from English-language sources which express their own doubts about the quality of the material being presented as from Gaelic sources, implies some difficulty, for whatever reason, in sourcing Gaelic originals. In this, the choice in some measure reflects the flawed choice of 'Mo Dhachaigh' as if it represented traditional values of the Gàidhealtachd.

The original Gaelic of this poem on the sheep was published in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* in the 1880s. The song is given the title 'Òran dha na Cairich Mhòra' ('Song to the Great Sheep') and the first line is 'Ge b'e h-aon rinn an duanag, chaidh e tuathal an tòs' ('Whoever composed the song, was mistaken from the beginning'). Donnchadh Buidhe Chisholm's song has 32 quatrains and *The Cheviot* uses the rough translation of parts of Verses 27, 28, 30 and 31 provided by Prebble. In the *Transactions* the accompanying introduction to the song remarks as follows:

Here is a song by Duncan Chisholm, i.e. Donnachadh Buidhe. Duncan, I ought to remark, left his native Strathglass for Nova Scotia early in this century, he, along with his neighbours, having been evicted from their holdings in order to make room for sheep. I am indebted for the words of

the song to a gentleman in Nova Scotia, whose father and grandfather I well remember before they left the Brae of Glencannich (Chisholm 1884-85, p. 221).

This song is not well-known. Its tune is not known to the current authors, nor presumably to the 7:84 company, and so it is called a ‘poem’ in the play, although it would have been intended to be sung originally. There were major clearances in Strathglass (the area south of Beaully) at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Eric Richards says,

In 1801 Strathglass was almost totally cleared by William Chisholm and his wife Elizabeth Macdonnell, and there followed heavy emigration from Fort William, Isle Martin and Knoydart, In 1803 four ships took 500 people from Strathglass, many of whom suffered indescribable hardships on the trans-Atlantic voyage (Richards 2000, pp. 145-46).

There were certainly Chisholms who went to Nova Scotia and a few poems survive by another Strathglass Chisholm who ended up in Nova Scotia: Dòmhnall ‘Gobha’ Chisholm (1735-1810) who settled in Antigonish County, Nova Scotia. This ‘poem’, while mediated through Prebble’s book, can certainly be seen to be used appropriately in *The Cheviot* in relation to its origins.

The next use of a Gaelic song returns to an original, although largely for atmospheric effect. ‘Soraidh leis an àit’ (‘Farewell to the place’)⁵ is by Màiri Mhòr

nan Òran, Mary MacPherson (1821-98), the great Skye poet, who will be discussed in further detail below. It comprises praise of Skye with mention of sadness over having to leave Skye for Glasgow. *The Cheviot*, in fact, gives only the first four lines:

Soraidh leis an àit'	Farewell to the place
An d'fhuair mi m' àrach òg,	In which I was raised,
Eilean nam beann àrda	The island of the high
Far an tàmh an ceò.	mountains
	Where the mist resides.

(McGrath 1996, p. 156).

This brief, primarily atmospheric, insertion follows a series of speeches itemising a number of atrocities committed on behalf of landlords during the Clearance and precedes a representation of the trial of Patrick Sellar for murder and other crimes. He was acquitted of all of these by judge and jury – in *The Cheviot* to the sound of ‘Land of Hope and Glory’ being hummed. In these juxtapositions the play continues the device of contrasting the worldviews of the resident Highlanders who are evicted and those who support their eviction. A sycophantic doggerel poem in praise of the Duke of Sutherland by Lord Francis Egerton, which begins ‘He found our soil by labour unsubdued [...] (McGrath, 1996: 157) is juxtaposed by a translation of a Gaelic poem in the Duke’s ‘honour’ beginning:

Nothing will be placed over you
But the dung of cattle. [...] (McGrath 1996, p. 158)

The lines translated here are from a song which begins ‘An uair a thig an t-eug ort’ (‘When death comes to you’) which first appeared in print in the *Oban Times* in 1883 under the title ‘Òran air Fear a bha a’ Fuadachadh nan Gàidheal’ (‘Song on a man who was evicting Highlanders’) (Meek, 1995: Gaelic 74-76, English 203). It has been attributed to Dr Iain MacLachlainn Rathuaidhe (John MacLachlan of Rahoy⁶) (1804-74), Morvern; and the song linked to a factor in Ardnamurchan (MacDonald and MacDonald, 1911: 289, xlvi n.).⁷ McGrath’s source for this again appears to have been Prebble’s *The Highland Clearances* (1963, p. 180).⁸ In *The Cheviot* (McGrath 1996, p. 158), these lines in English from ‘An uair a thig an t-eug ort’ are introduced as ‘A translation of a Gaelic poem in honour of the Duke of Sutherland’. The authors are not aware of any traditions linking this song to Sutherland and it seems that McGrath may have linked it to the Duke of Sutherland because it follows a discussion of Sutherland in Prebble.

After exploring the impact of the oil industry on the Highlands, *The Cheviot* finishes with two dynamic verses from Màiri Mhòr nan Òran’s *Eilean a’ Cheò* from which more mournful verses were heard earlier in the play. The plaintive tone of those earlier extracts is replaced by one of defiance. *The Cheviot* gives an English translation of both in which one line of the first verse is quite loosely translated, while the specific geographic link to Skye is dropped in order to end on a more universal note. It is instructive to contrast the translation used with one published by Donald Meek:

Gaelic	English	translation	Cheviot English
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(Meek)

Ach cuimhnichibh gur sluagh sibh

Is cumaibh suas ur còir;

Tha beairteas fo na cruachan

Fon d'fhuair sibh àrach òg;

Tha iarann agus gual ann

Is luaidhe ghlas is òr,

'S tha mèinnean gu ur buannachd

An Eilean uaine' a' Cheò.

Cuimhnichibh ur cruadal,

Is cumaibh suas ur sròl;

Gun tèid an roth mun cuairt duibh

le neart is cruas nan dòrn;

Gum bi ur crodh air bhualtean,

'S gach tuathanach air dòigh,

'S **na Sasannaich** air fuadach

À Eilean uain' a' Cheò.

Remember that you are a

people and stand up for

your rights; wealth lies

beneath those mountains

where you spent your

early life; iron and coal

are stored there, and grey

lead, and gold, and mines

to bring you profit in the

green Island of the Mist.

Remember now your

toughness and hold your

banner high; the wheel

will surely turn for you by

the strength and power of

fists; your cattle will yet

have pasture, and each

farmer live in style, and

the English will be

banished from the green-

clad Misty Isle.

Remember that you are

a people and fight for

your rights- There are

riches under the hills

where you grew up.

There is iron and coal

there grey lead and gold,

there is richness in the

land under your feet.

Remember your

hardships and keep up

your struggle

The wheel will turn for

you by the strength of

your hands and the

hardness of your fists.

Your cattle will be on

the plains

Everyone in the land

will have a place and

the exploiter will be

driven out.

It is interesting, for example, that McGrath has censored Màiri Mhòr's reference to 'na Sasannaich' and translated it as 'the exploiter' rather than 'the English'. In some ways, the reference in the original Gaelic song is problematic. Màiri Mhòr, here and elsewhere in the corpus of her songs, lays the blame for the Clearances at the door of 'na Sasannaich'.⁹ This fails to make sense since the Clearances were mostly carried out by other Highlanders, or other Scots, and people replaced by sheep, managed by Lowland Scottish shepherds. Indeed in another song Màiri Mhòr herself explains, 'Chan e Sasannaich uile bu chòireach, ach uachdarain dhona nach b'fhiach' ('The English are not completely to blame, but bad worthless landlords') (Meek, 1977: p.101, and see 97). Perhaps when referring to 'Sasannaich' she intends the notion of Gaels being cleared from Highland villages to make way for sporting estates and deer parks populated by English visitors.¹⁰ Although, if Màiri Mhòr means this, blaming the English is rather akin to blaming the sheep. However, such a usage in 'Eilean a' Cheò' is, it could be argued, one of the reasons why much of the Gaelic verse connected to the Highland Land Agitation is described by Meek as not offering 'a sustained social or political analysis of the situation' (Donald Meek, 1974-76: 318. One can understand why McGrath chose to render this as 'exploiter' since by doing so it allows him to end the play on a more universal note.

The effect or significance of Gaelic-language songs – and poetry – in *The Cheviot*, then, has not been, arguably, fully comprehended. Maria DiCenzo observes

The songs serve a series of more specific functions within the play. Structurally they help to punctuate the play by bringing segments to a close [or serve] a narrative role [...]. But other songs such as the opening ‘These are My Mountains’ and in the play serve a more atmospheric and often celebratory function because they reinforce the value of tradition and language, and they encourage participation on the part of the audience (DiCenzo 1996, pp. 161-2).

Yet, as we have seen, ‘These are my mountains’ is far from reinforcing ‘the value of tradition and language’. (162) And, for a Gaelic-speaking audience, the Gaelic songs may indeed encourage participation, but one is left wondering how much the dramatic structure of *The Cheviot* engages with the songs’ and poems’ meanings even in the participation of a Gaelic-speaking audience. Further, of course, for a non-Gaelic-speaking audience no such participation can exist. All that remains, judging from the comments of critics we have quoted, is a generalised ‘atmospheric and often celebratory function’, (161) which is based in several of our examples on a false reading of the songs’ significance.

There are certainly some interesting uses of Gaelic song and poetry in this English-language play, but they are not all consistent in the way they use original Gaelic material. There are instances where no translation is given and the text is

meaningful, although not perhaps vital to an understanding of what is going on, as in ‘Chisholm’s Lament’ by Christina Ferguson, or ‘Mo Dhachaigh’. In the case of these two songs, the generalised impact sought appears based on a misunderstanding of the song’s original significance – or at least the original significance of the first is not exploited and that of the second ignored. Another sort of instance exists where it seems a Gaelic song is used simply to situate or contextualise the action or narrative as occurring in Gàidhealtachd, but the song lyrics are not really connected to the subject of *The Cheviot*: these include the use of ‘Hé Mandu’. In such an instance, however, the song is well known and so also providing entertainment for the knowledgeable audience. There are instances of Gaelic songs that are not so well known recited as poetry in English: the ‘poem’ by Donnchadh Buidhe is an example of this. Yet another way of using Gaelic song involves leaving the Gaelic song untranslated, but using it for ironic effect where a non-Gaelic audience is expected to pick up on emotion, as in the use of ‘Eilean a’ Cheò’. Finally, the play concludes with a song sung and translation given: there other verses from ‘Eilean a’ Cheò’ are used.

McGrath himself comments on what we may call the imprecise use of music: ‘Music can become mindlessness; emotion can become manipulative and can obscure judgement’ (DiCenzo 1996, p. 59). In the interview with Elizabeth Hale Winkler quoted at the beginning of this article, he warned against a sentimental, non-critical approach to music: ‘you have to be very responsible about music, you have to let people know what you are doing’ (Winkler 1990, p. 289). In order to achieve this, he argues for those who use music dramatically and politically to demonstrate ‘a kind of sensibility and a consciousness and a critical awareness –... not always a politically

critical ... often a musicologically critical awareness – to what they are doing, which makes the audience aware of the effect of the music’ (Winkler 1990, p. 289). The difficulty with the Gaelic songs and poems in *The Cheviot* is that such a responsibility about music, letting ‘people know what you are doing’, and such a critical awareness, let alone a musicological critical awareness, are at best elusive for the audience and are not implicit in the ways the songs are used in the script. Rather, the Gaelic songs – and poems – are appropriated dramatically in ways that on occasion may work with their original grain, but arguably more often – ‘Mo Dhachaigh’ is a case in point – do not seem to work with the grain of the song’s significance or underlying meaning at all.

Endnotes.

¹ In the original the final word used is ‘underestimated’. Email communication with Professor DiCenzo (1 September 2013) has clarified that this was a misprint.

² *Tocher 2* (1971), 60-61; Comunn Gàidhealach Leòdhais (ed.), *Eilean Fraoich: Lewis Gaelic Songs and Melodies* (Stornoway, Acair, 1982, first published 1932), 84-85; A much longer version, supplied by the Rev. Alexander Stewart (‘Nether Lochber’), was published in *An Gàidheal* Vol. 5, No. 57 (1876), 279-80.

³ For more on this see William Gillies, ‘Clan Donald Bards and Scholars’, in Gillian Munro and Richard A.V. Cox (eds), *Cànan & Cultar / Language and Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 4* (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2010), pp. 91-108, at 93.

⁴ It can be listened to at http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/orain/mo_dhachaigh/?lang=gd.

⁵ The best source for information on her and her work is D. E. Meek, *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran* (1977). This song can be heard at http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/oran/orain/soraidh_le_eilean_a_cheo/?lang=gd It

⁶ He was known in Gaelic as ‘An Dotair Ruadh’ (‘The Red-Haired Doctor’). See John MacInnes, ‘MacLachlan, John’, in Derick S. Thomson (ed.), *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland* (1983), 179; H. C. Gillies (ed.), *The Gaelic Songs of the late Dr. MacLachlan, Rahoy* (Glasgow: 1880); MacLeod, *Modern Gaelic Bards*, 65-94.

⁷ It should be noted that both the Ardnamurchan and Dr MacLachlan links have been called into question.

⁸ Prebble thanks Somhairle Mac Gill-Eain in the ‘Acknowledgements’, who in turn appears to have taken this from Samuel MacLean, ‘The Poetry of the Clearances’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 38 (1937-41), 293-324 at 303; Somhairle Mac Gill-Eain, *Ris a’ Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*, ed. by William Gillies (Stornoway: Acair, 1985), 56 with English translation

⁹ For instance, see Meek, *Màiri Mhòr nan Òran*, 101, 129. It could be that she is referring to Highlanders being cleared from villages in order to make way for deer parks and sporting estates visited by the English, see for instance Meek, 1997: 113.

¹⁰ See for instance Meek, 1997: 113.

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