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‘Chaidh e nas doimhne agus nas doimhne  
ann an seann theacsaichean’: Gaelic  
history and legend in *An Sgoil Dhubh*  
by Iain F. MacLeòid

Duncan Sneddon

When we think of Celtic elements within fantasy literature, we are usually thinking of the use of elements of Celtic-language literary, legendary and folk tradition or retellings of medieval Celtic-language narratives in English-language writings. This chapter will look instead at one recent novel in Gaelic, *An Sgoil Dhubh* (‘The Black School’) by Iain F. MacLeòid (2014).<sup>1</sup> *An Sgoil Dhubh* is set in a fictional world (or, rather, in several connected fictional worlds), but is also very clearly rooted within Gaelic historical and legendary traditions. In many respects it resembles mainstream modern fantasy, with such common genre tropes as the return of an ancient dark lord and a young man from apparently humble origins finding his destiny as a saviour figure. However, while many fantasy books share a generally Western European-style setting and frames of reference, MacLeòid makes use of personal and group names, creatures, weapons and concepts from a range of Gaelic sources, from folk tales to Old Irish sagas, creating an unmistakably Gaelic setting for his work.

This chapter will attempt to situate *An Sgoil Dhubh* within the contexts of Gaelic tradition and modern fantasy literature, while also considering how MacLeòid uses elements of Norse traditions to create his fictional world. It will investigate how he blends a range of historical and folkloric elements familiar to a Gaelic-speaking audience with others drawn from the medieval Irish literary tradition into a fictional present in a fantasy version of Gaelic culture in a fantasy

<sup>1</sup> All translations of quotations from the novel are mine, and I take full responsibility for any errors in them.

world. This also includes drawing aspects of Norse history and literature into that narrative present, in part due to the influence of the Norse settlement on the real-world history and culture of Gaelic Scotland. *An Sgoil Dhubh* is thus a novel that fits very comfortably into the conventions of fantasy literature, and which is also deeply and distinctly *Gàidhealach*.

Literature in Gaelic is often ignored in assessments of Scottish literature, including of Scottish fantasy literature. For instance, Colin Manlove's classic critical anthology of Scottish fantasy literature includes short stories and folktales in Scots and English, but none at all in Gaelic, apparently on the grounds that 'these tales are closer to Irish and Gaelic than to a peculiarly Scottish tradition' (Manlove 1996: 19). That book does contain extracts from Macpherson's *Ossian* and the Celtic Twilight writer William Sharp, alias Fiona MacLeod, meaning that there is room made for appropriations or imitations of Gaelic literary traditions in English, which we must therefore assume is sufficiently peculiarly Scottish, but none for actual work in Gaelic. What this means in practice is that understandings and critical assessments of 'Scottish' literature are constructed that exclude any Gaelic perspectives, so that 'Scottish' effectively comes to mean 'English- and Scots-speaking Scotland.'<sup>2</sup> This chapter cannot hope to correct this imbalance, but it does aim to demonstrate that fantasy literature in Gaelic is worth engaging with critically. If more critics do so going forward, a more comprehensive understanding of Scottish literature can be built, including fantasy literature, that does not exclude Gaelic perspectives, or fill in the Gaelic-shaped gaps with dubious Romantic appropriations in English.

There is another impetus for this study. The corpus of fantasy and science fiction in Gaelic, while still small, has seen marked growth in recent years, and as Gaelic fiction continues to grow and diversify, it is likely that more fantasy and science fiction will be produced in the language in the coming years. As such, critical approaches to Gaelic fantasy and science fiction that assess these works within their wider genre contexts will become an increasingly worthwhile endeavour, as we come to see these works as not simply Gaelic novels, but Gaelic novels which participate in international genre currents.

While there is a rich store of heroic ballads, folk tales and legendary material in the Gaelic literary tradition, the corpus of modern fantasy literature, a form

<sup>2</sup> This exclusion of Gaelic materials is a widespread issue, and arises from the fact that few Scottish literary and cultural critics are able to understand Gaelic. So an otherwise excellent study such as Julian D'Arcy's *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature* (2012) does not include much relevant material in Gaelic. Donald E. Meek (2018) has recently critiqued this conflation of (mostly urban) Lowland perspectives with 'Scottish' perspectives as a whole, in the context of modern understandings of the 'Scottish' Enlightenment.

of literature that often builds on or makes use of such traditional narrative material, is very small. There are some low fantasy works, such as the short novel *A' Choille Fhiadhaich* ('The Wild Wood') by Coinneach Lindsay, a young adult novel aimed at Gaelic learners (2017). There are also two notable low fantasy short stories, 'An Dùdach' ('The Horn') by Anna Fhriseal (1962) and 'Oisein ann an Tir nan Òg' ('Oisein in the Land of Youth') by Màrtainn Mac an t-Saoir (2003) which are in some respects similar to *An Sgoil Dhubh* in that they adapt traditional Gaelic narratives, both being about the 'return' of long-dormant heroes of Gaelic legend to the modern world. Inasmuch as there is a tradition of modern fantasy literature in Gaelic, therefore, we can note that one of its marked features is the use of characters and themes from Gaelic tradition, something which as we shall see is very much the case in *An Sgoil Dhubh*.

*An Sgoil Dhubh* is a high fantasy novel, set across a number of connected worlds. The worlds are shut off from each other, and only a select few individuals are able to pass between them. One such individual is Sgàire, the novel's main character. While he is introduced as, and believes himself to be, an ordinary young man of humble origins, it is soon clear that he is in fact destined for greater things, and finds himself embroiled in a struggle against the Draoidhean, a caste of wizards who have usurped the throne of his world, Erda, and assassinated its king. Assisting the king's daughter, Eimhir, and trying first to escape and then to defeat Am Maighstir ('The Master'), a returning dark lord seemingly defeated long ago, Sgàire passes between the worlds, on the way making common cause with their peoples and assembling a cast of allies who in the end take on and defeat Am Maighstir and his forces. The worlds in question are Erda (*uaine agus bàigheil*, 'green and friendly'), Fairge (which means 'ocean', an ocean planet), Arhell (a desert planet) and Is (an ice planet). These worlds share access to a fifth planet, Saoghal nam Marbh ('World of the Dead'), to which their dead go to a gloomy afterlife, and in which Am Maighstir has long bided his time.

The novel is 190 pages long and written in the third person. Extra information is occasionally supplied by extracts from in-world historical and mythological texts, printed in italics. Some of these texts also play a role in the plot of the novel, and are read by characters within it. While not explicitly marketed as a young adult novel, it certainly shares some common features with that genre, including adolescent protagonists and issues around first romantic relationships. *An Sgoil Dhubh*, in keeping with MacLeòid's other work, is fast-paced and entertaining, with well-written, vividly realized action sequences, but the characters are rather two-dimensional, and the story is at times too rushed (Watson 2011: 160–4). It is a flawed novel, but nevertheless an interesting one in

the ways in which MacLeòid situates the world of his novel within the contexts of fantasy literature and Gaelic tradition.

The novel is written entirely in Gaelic (unlike MacLeòid's earlier historical fiction novel *Am Bounty* (MacLeòid 2008), which featured considerable stretches of dialogue in English), and consistently uses forms from MacLeòid's own Lewis dialect. On the lexical level, for instance, he uses *bùrn* and not *uisge* for 'water', *man* and not *mar* for 'like' or 'as' and *feagal* and not *eagal* for 'fear'. There are also instances in which, conforming to common usage in Lewis and some other places, homorganic consonants do not block lenition as they do in other dialects, as for instance in *ann an seann theacsaichean* ('in old texts'), and not *ann an seann teacsaichean* (MacLeòid 2014: 88).<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that these features are used consistently by characters from across the range of worlds in the novel, and in the authorial voice. They are not markers of the dialect or origin of any particular character or community within the text, they are simply part of the language in which the novel is written.

*An Sgoil Dhubh* connects to the wider web of fantasy in several ways, including in the use of common fantasy tropes which can be found in some of the most popular and most influential writings in the genre. While MacLeòid is not primarily a fantasy writer (this is the only one of his six novels to be a fantasy novel, though he has also written one science fiction novel, *An Taistealach* (MacLeòid 2017)), a familiarity with certain foundational fantasy and science fiction texts can probably be assumed, whether as books or in some cases in cinematic adaptations. The works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert and Ursula K. Le Guin would fall under this category. Similarities to certain works by other writers such as Gene Wolfe and Steven Erikson can also be detected, as will be discussed below. This does not necessarily mean that individual instances of similarities between *An Sgoil Dhubh* and other works are all the result of direct borrowing or influence from certain texts, but rather that MacLeòid's work exists within the wider context of fantasy literature, and that the more familiar readers are with that wider context, the more points of contact they will find between *An Sgoil Dhubh* and other writings they know, whether intended by MacLeòid or not. Some of these points of contact are to do with the construction of the novel, such as supplementing the narrative with quotations from in-world historical documents to provide exposition; or with its plot, such as the unsurprising revelation that the protagonist Sgàire, while initially appearing to be an ordinary young man of humble origins, in fact has a great destiny to fulfil. Others involve

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Joan NicDhòmhnaill and Liam Alastair Crouse for advice on this matter.

the use by MacLeòid of certain physical objects and settings within the novel. Some of those points of contact will be discussed here, helping us to situate the novel within the wider tradition of modern fantasy literature, before we go on to situate it in its specifically Gaelic context. There are many such instances in *An Sgoil Dhubh*, of which the following few will suffice to demonstrate the use of established fantasy tropes.<sup>4</sup>

One common trope within fantasy literature is the presence of an ancient weapon, usually a sword, which is presented to or discovered by a character who will wield it while fulfilling some grand destiny. The most famous example in fantasy literature, as with many such tropes, is probably that in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the sword Narsil/Andúril has such a function for Aragorn, marking him out as the heir of Isildur. David Gemmell's *The Sword in the Storm*, discussed in this volume by Anthony Smart and Alistair Sims, provides another example (Gemmell 2001). This is now so well established as a fantasy trope that it can be considered a cliché, and is parodied as such in Terry Pratchett's comical fantasy novel *Guards! Guards!*, in the battered, unimpressive-looking sword of the six-foot tall (adopted) dwarf Carrot Ironfounder-sson (Pratchett 1989). MacLeòid furnishes Sgàire with such a sword, *an Claidheamh Gorm* (the Blue Sword), introduced in a prophecy in a passage from 'Leabhar Stairsich', 'Agus aithnichidh daoine e [.i. fear ... a dh'fhosgla na Dorsan]oir bidh an Claidheamh Gorm aige agus bheir e beatha gu tè a bha marbh' ('And people will know him [i.e. a man ... who opens the Doors], for he will have the Blue Sword and he will give life to one who was dead') (MacLeòid 2014: 84) both of which prophecies are indeed fulfilled. As we shall see later, Sgàire also wields another sword, which roots him in the Gaelic folklore tradition as clearly as *an Claidheamh Gorm* roots him in the fantasy tradition.

Another point of contact with Pratchett's Discworld books comes at the very end of the novel, in which Sgàire and Am Maighstir have their final confrontation in a vast hall of books, with each book containing a full record of an individual's life: *Air a sgrìobhadh ann, ann an litrichean beaga, biodach, bha beatha cuideigin – gach mionaid a bha iad air an t-saoghal air innse gu grinn agus gu mionaideach* ('Written in it, in tiny little letters, was somebody's life – every minute that they

<sup>4</sup> Ragnall MacilleDhuibh, in his positive review of the novel in *The Scotsman* (2016), admitted that he has very little familiarity with fantasy literature at all, and did not attempt to assess it in the context of fantasy literature as such. While critical assessments of *An Sgoil Dhubh* certainly must engage with its use of Gaelic tradition, as well as MacLeòid's writing style, pacing, etc. as MacilleDhuibh does, a more comprehensive assessment of the novel should also try to set it in its genre context, which is what is attempted here.

were in the world, told elegantly and in minute detail') (MacLeòid 2014: 186). In Pratchett's *Mort*, similar books are to be found in the library in Death's house, writing themselves in accordance with the lives of the people whose biographies they are (Pratchett 1987: 58–9).

In chapter fourteen of *An Sgoil Dhubh* Am Maighstir, wearing the body of the dead Rìgh nan Draoidh, is able to access the latter's memories. This functions to fill in some backstory about Rìgh nan Draoidh, and how he fell under Am Maighstir's influence, but it also connects *An Sgoil Dhubh* to the wider context of fantasy literature. The living being able to take on the memories and consciousnesses of the dead is not unknown in fantasy. A good example is the person of the dead Chatelaine Thecla, and later the persons of all previous Autarchs living in and being accessible to Severian, in Gene Wolfe's science fantasy series *The Book of the New Sun* (2000a, 2000b). Similarly, the arcs of the mage Quick Ben and of Toc the Younger/ Anaster/Toc Anaster in Steven Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* (1999–2011) series illustrates the same basic idea, if on a much larger and more ambitious scale.

When Sgàire travels to the ocean world Fairge, he finds that the people there live on giant ships called *birlinnean*. *Birlinn* is of course simply the ordinary Gaelic word for a galley, such as were commonly used in the western Highlands in the late medieval period, but in *An Sgoil Dhubh* the *birlinnean* are of a much greater order of magnitude, being essentially floating towns. While by no means a very common fantasy trope, similar floating communities can be found in at least two very popular classics of the genre, in the island boats of the lake dwellers in Gene Wolfe's *Sword of the Lictor*, in his *The Book of the New Sun* series (Wolfe 2000a, 2000b), and perhaps in a more closely analogous form in the great rafts of the Children of the Open Sea in Ursula K Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore* (see Le Guin 2012).

The final example is of a somewhat different kind, in that it is not a trope but a demonstration of MacLeòid's connection to the wider fantasy tradition. Additionally, our previous examples have all been taken from fantasy literature, but it should be recognized that a contemporary writer of fantasy is not sealed off from fantasy in other media, but rather inhabits a culture in which fantasy is present in films, television, visual art and games of various kinds (note that Stephen Erikson and Ian Cameron Esslemont originally developed the world of the vast *Malazan* series through role-playing games). All of these may influence a fantasy writer, and certainly form part of the wider web of understandings and expectations about fantasy worlds which readers bring with them to new texts. In at least one instance a direct line of influence from a fantasy film on *An Sgoil*

*Dhubh* can be posited, where MacLeòid writes, ‘*Ach cha robh Am Maighstir a’ roinn a chumhachd le duine eile, ge bith cò iad*’ (‘But The Master did not share his power with anyone, whoever they were’) (MacLeòid 2014: 91). This bears a striking resemblance to a line spoken by Gandalf to Saruman in Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but not found in Tolkien’s book: ‘There is only one Lord of the Ring, only one who can bend it to his will. And he does not share power!’ This should remind us that when contemporary fantasy writers create their works that non-literary fantasy media are often among their influences, and form part of the wider context in which their work should be interpreted.

If the tropes discussed above mean that *An Sgoil Dhubh* can be situated fairly comfortably within the genre conventions of modern fantasy, it is also a text deeply rooted in Gaelic tradition. MacLeòid creates a web of allusions to Gaelic oral tradition, history and medieval literature to create a very *Gàidhealach* setting for his novel, a text that is not merely written in Gaelic, but is built on recognisably Gaelic foundations. In the discussion above, it was observed that the greater degree of familiarity a reader has with fantasy literature as a genre, the more they will see connections between *An Sgoil Dhubh* and other texts, and be able to assess it in relation to them. The same is true of the use of Gaelic tradition in the novel: the more familiar a reader is with Gaelic folklore, history and literature, the more they will recognize in the creation of a new, fictional world, seeing the use in a new setting of materials familiar to them. The titular black school itself is an example of this: *sgoil dhubh Shàtain* (‘Satan’s black school’) was where certain individuals learnt magic from the Devil (Campbell 2005: 157–8).

We can see this in MacLeòid’s use of personal names. For instance, the princess of Erda who escapes the assassination at the start of the novel, and who becomes Sgàire’s companion, is named Eimhir, a modernized spelling of Emer, the wife of Cú Chulainn in the early medieval Irish literary tradition. MacLeòid is of course not the first modern Gaelic writer to repurpose Emer – Sorley MacLean also did so in his poem-cycle *Dàin do Eimhir* (‘Poems to Eimhir’) of 1943. Such is the reputation and prominence of MacLean’s cycle in Gaelic literature that any reader encountering the name (which is not a common one in Scotland) would surely be reminded of *Dàin do Eimhir*. MacLeòid thus makes a double reference in using this name, to both medieval and modern Gaelic literary traditions. MacLeòid uses the name from medieval literature, but he does not use the medieval character: Eimhir is not Emer dropped into his novel.

The same is true of Maedhbh. Medb, another prominent character in early medieval Irish literature, has her name repurposed in *An Sgoil Dhubh* as the



leader of one of the great *Birlinnean* of the sea-planet Fairge. Unlike Medb, Maedhbh is not a queen, and again we should note that she is not simply the medieval literary character transposed into the novel, though her temperament is certainly reminiscent of Medb's: *Dh'fhairich Sgàire gur e boireannach cunnartach a bh' innte agus gu robh i cleachdte ri faighinn na bu mhiann leatha* ('Sgàire felt that she was a dangerous woman and that she was used to getting what she wanted') (MacLeòid 2014: 44).

Sgàire's mother is named Gormshuil, which is also the name of a Lochaber witch known in oral tradition well into the twentieth century (Calum MacLean Project 2017). MacLeòid may have taken the name from this witch, though Gormshuil in the novel is not herself a witch. The name may also have been prompted by Dùn Ghormshùil, an Iron Age brooch in Carnish, Uig in the Isle of Lewis. Another possible source of inspiration is the novel *Gormshuil an Rìgh*, written by Fionnlagh MacLeòid, the uncle of Iain F. MacLeòid, which also incorporates folkloric and Norse elements (MacLeòid 2010a).

These are major characters in the novel, but there are also very minor characters whose names are clearly derived from medieval literary traditions or Gaelic oral tradition. For instance, Gormshuil's charioteer is named Laog, presumably based on Cú Chulainn's charioteer, Lóeg. Moving away from proper names and from the Old Irish literary tradition, we can see the use of more recent Gaelic tradition in the nickname of one of the characters, Torcuil nan Cath ('Torcuil of the Battles'). The nickname form 'X nan Cath' is well-attested in Gaelic tradition, and in using it MacLeòid works in a network of allusions that most readers will recognize. Most famously, the nickname is applied to Eachann nan Cath (known in English as Hector MacDonald), a very distinguished soldier of the Victorian era, and also Eachann Ruadh nan Cath, a MacLean chief killed at the Battle of Harlaw in 1411, and subject of the *ceòl mòr* tune 'Cumha Eachann Ruadh nan Cath'. MacLeòid draws upon the assumed knowledge of his readers, who will recognize the allusions to significant figures in Gaelic history.

Different aspects of the martial history of Gaelic Scotland are also woven into *An Sgoil Dhubh*. For instance, the group of mercenaries who attack Sgàire's village in chapter 10 are called the *Gall-òglaigh*, after the actual historical mercenaries of late medieval Gaelic Scotland, many of whom found violent employment in Ireland (McDonald 1997: 154–6). More recent martial traditions are referenced in the presentation of the Fàidhean in *An Sgoil Dhubh*, who function as a royal bodyguard. Their battle cry is *Cuidich an Rìgh!* ('Aid the King!'), which is also the motto of the Seaforth Highlanders, a historical Highland infantry regiment now part of the Royal Regiment of Scotland (see Am Baile, n.d.). In this instance,

as in many of the others discussed here, this reference would not survive a hypothetical translation of the novel into English. The cry ‘Aid the King!’ would make sense in the immediate context as a fairly obvious battle cry for the royal guard, but the reference to a regiment of historic importance in Gaelic Scotland would be lost, an example of the very specifically *Gàidhealach* worldbuilding of the novel.

Other references are to places and objects from the medieval Irish literary tradition, primarily (as with the personal names mentioned above) drawn from the Old Irish saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’). For instance, during the aforementioned battle with the Gall-òglaigh, *[T]hog [Gormshuil] Gae-bolg, an gath uabhasach sin a dh’fhosgladh brù duine le ceud gath beag eile na bhroinn*. (‘[Gormshuil] lifted the Gae-bolg, that terrible dart that opens a man’s belly with a hundred other small darts inside it’) (MacLeòid 2014: 60). The Gae-bolg is, of course, the fearsome weapon with which Cú Chulainn kills his foster-brother Fer Diad in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (O’Rahilly 1976: 94, 207).

Cú Chulainn and Fer Diad had of course been trained as warriors by Scáthach. In *An Sgoil Dhubh*, there is also an elite warrior school run by a woman, but it is called *Sgoil Cogaidh Aoife* (‘Aoife’s School of War’). Why the role of Scáthach in the Old Irish tradition should have been transferred to Aoife (Old Irish *Aífe*) is unclear – the two are certainly not interchangeable in the source material. Aside from her name, Aoife in the novel has nothing in particular in common with Aífe in the medieval tradition: indeed, we could say that her character is basically that of Scáthach but named after Aífe. Another minor change from the Old Irish source material can be seen in one of MacLeòid’s place names. The open space in front of the castle in the Priomh Chathair (‘Main City’) of Erda is called *Emain Machra*, clearly derived from *Emain Macha*, the court of Conchobar in *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and other sagas (O’Rahilly 1976: 12–17, 136–9). MacLeòid does not ‘update’ the spelling here, as he does with *Aífe* > *Aoife* and *Emer* > *Eimhir*, leaving the lenition of the *ms* unmarked. This may be because *Aoife* and *Eimhir* are both well-established contemporary spellings of those names, whereas *Emain Macha* is usually known only in its older spelling. There seems to be no particular reason for the addition of the *r* in *Machra*, and it may simply be a spelling error.

Also drawn from *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, though apparently via English translation, is MacLeòid’s *solas a’ ghaisgich* (‘hero’s light’). From the context, *Chitheadh iad solas a’ ghaisgich os cionn Ghormshuil agus Dia nan Cath còmhla rithe agus chuir i uabhas air na fir air a’ bhàta* (‘They saw the hero’s light above Gormshuil, and the God of Battles together with her, and she terrified the men on the boat’)

(MacLeòid 2014: 63), it seems clear that this is based on descriptions of the *lúan láith* in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, which O'Rahilly in her edition of the first recension translates as 'the champion's light' (O'Rahilly 1976: 14, 137) and Ciaran Carson in his popular translation renders 'hero's light' (Carson 2007: 38).

Cú Chulainn provides another model for MacLeòid in the aftermath of the battle: *An dèidh a' chatha bha an solas-gaisgeil cho làidir os cionn Gormshuil gu robh aca ri bogadh ann an tocasaid uisge fuar, agus thàinig ceò bhon uisge sin agus bhlàthaich e, gus bho dheireadh thall ghabh Gormshuil riochd boireannaich a-rithist* ('After the battle the heroic light over Gormshuil was so strong that they had to immerse her in a barrel of cold water, and steam came from that water and it was warmed, until eventually Gormshuil regained her womanly form again') (MacLeòid 2014: 64). This is clearly derived from the account of the young Cú Chulainn needing to be immersed in water to cool him down after his first expedition in the *macgnímrada* section of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (O'Rahilly 1976: 25, 147–8).

As Ragnall MacilleDhuibh notes in his review of the novel, *An Sgoil Dhubh* contains *iomadh mac-talla ann bho bheul-aithris na Gàidhlig* ('many echoes of Gaelic oral tradition'), of which a few will now be considered (MacilleDhuibh 2016). For instance, when MacLeòid writes of *na Sìth* and *eich uisge*, he writes of creatures well known to anyone with the faintest passing knowledge of Gaelic folklore, commonly translated as 'fairies' and 'water horses' or 'kelpies', respectively (Campbell 2005: 1–27, 106–17). MacLeòid uses them to create dangerous antagonists for Sgàire and his companions, building from the associations he can assume his readers will have with these creatures, while presenting them in new and original contexts, including an extensive original backstory for the Sìth.

The backstory concerns an ancient feud between two brothers named Torcuil and Tormod, which are both ordinary Gaelic names of Norse origin. Their descendants are known as Siol Thorcuil and Siol Thormoid ('the seed of Torcuil' and 'the seed of Tormod'), which are also the usual names in Gaelic for the MacLeods of Lewis and Harris and the MacLeods of Skye respectively. Siol Thormoid here are the Sìth, and their progenitor Tormod becomes one of the antagonists, Siol Thorcuil are the true royal line, to which Sgàire himself belongs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Since Iain F. MacLeòid is himself a MacLeod from Lewis, and therefore of the (real world) Siol Thorcuil, it is perhaps not surprising that he makes his fictional family-namesakes the 'good guys' here!

We can also observe that at some points the fantasy tropes in the novel overlap with the use of Gaelic traditional materials, which is perhaps to be expected given that much fantasy literature builds on folkloric and medieval literary traditions. For instance, Sgàire's sword (before he is given *An Claidheamh Gorm*, discussed above) glows brightly in the dark: *Thug e a-mach a chloidheamh agus chitheadh e gu robh e air atharrachadh. Far an robh e air a bhith dorch, bha e a-nis cho soilleir ri daoimean le faobhar air nach gabhadh srucadh.* ('He took out his sword and he saw that it had changed. Where it had been dark, it was now as clear as a diamond, with an edge that could not be scuffed') (MacLeòid 2014: 67). Later, in the dark hall of the many books, he uses the light from his sword as a torch. Glow-in-the-dark swords are of course not unknown in fantasy literature (a good example is Bilbo's sword Sting, from *The Hobbit*, later given to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*), but *An Claidheamh Sholuis* ('The Sword of Light'), which often appears in Gaelic folk tales, sometimes as an object of quests, may be the reference here (Campbell 1994: 91–109, 206–17). A double-facing reference, looking both to Gaelic tradition and to fantasy tradition, this helps to create a fictional world that fits comfortably in both.

This is also true of the description of Sgàire's native island, which is both fictional and fantastic (having portals to other worlds) and also easily recognizable to anyone familiar with the Western Isles: *Fada gu siar air a' phrìomh chathair agus gàrraidhean brèagha a' Chaisteil Dheirg, bha sreath de dh'èileannan a bha coltach ri seudan nan laighe air a' mhuir* ('Far to the west of the main city and the beautiful gardens of the Red Castle was a series of islands like jewels lying on the sea') (MacLeòid 2014: 16); *'S e eilean beag rèidh bhon tàinig Sgàire, gun mòran chraobhan air ...* ('Sgàire came from a small, flat island without many trees ...') (MacLeòid 2014: 48). When Sgàire returns from Sgoil Cogaidh Aoife, he spends some time on his own: *Bha e a' fuireach air eilean beag ann an seann teampall far an robh iad ag ràdh a bhiodh daoine cràbhaidh aig aon àm. Bha na teampaill sin a-nis nan tobhtaichean le fear a' fàs orra.* ('He was staying on a small island in an old temple where they said that devout people used to be at one time. Those temples were ruins now, with grass growing on them.') (MacLeòid 2014: 123). This could easily be imagined as any one of dozens of old chapel sites in the Western Isles, about which MacLeòid's uncle, Fionnlagh MacLeòid, has written a book (F. MacLeòid 1997). The setting is one that Iain F. MacLeòid clearly finds intriguing, and one rooted in, and symbolic of, the histories of particular locations, as in another of his novels, *Ìmpireachd* ('Empire'), he has his protagonist sit in the ruins of an old chapel and contemplate the long history of the place and his own and his community's fleeting part in it (MacLeòid 2010b: 129). In

setting, then, as with the use of Gaelic historical, folkloric and medieval literary materials, MacLeòid can be seen to be building a very *Gàidhealach* fictional world, one which is in many respects recognizable to Gaelic readers, but also new and set within a literary genre that most of its readers will know only or mainly in English.

The novel also makes use of elements of Norse history and literature, some of which also overlap in interesting ways with aspects of Gaelic tradition. Personal names provide one strand of the Norse element in *An Sgoil Dhubh*. Some of these are straightforward Norse names, such as Fenrir. Fenrir in the novel is the king of the great wolves who live on the island where Aoife keeps her warrior school. He is clearly inspired by the wolf of that name in medieval Norse literature but, as with Eimhir and Maedhbh, is not simply the existing medieval character drafted into the novel, he is a new character who happens to bear a familiar name.

Gormshuil's mother in the novel is named Astridr. This is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, even if a reader does not recognize this as a Norse name, the fact that it violates the *caol ri caol agus leathan ri leathan* Gaelic spelling rule means that it would strike them immediately as 'foreign'. Secondly, the fact that Gormshuil (who bears, as we have seen above, a name known in Gaelic folklore traditions) has a mother with a Norse name is an indication of the blending of these two cultures in the novel, the bringing together of Norse and Gaelic traditions to create the fictional culture of the people of Erda.

Other examples include personal names that are Norse in origin, but which have become common in Gaelic, and which readers may or may not know come from Norse.

These are presented in their ordinary Gaelic spellings, which at one level conceal their Norse origin (in contrast to 'Astridr'), but on another epitomize the historical blending of Gaelic and Norse cultures in the real world in parallel with the blending of the 'Gaelic' and 'Norse' elements to make the fictional culture of Erda.

Examples in the novel are Tormod, Torcuil, Ìomhair, Amhlaidh and Sgàire. Sgàire (sometimes Anglicized as the Biblical name 'Zachary', though it has no etymological connection with that name) is the least common of these names today, though many Gaelic readers will know it from the song 'Òran Chaluim Sgàire', and there is a ruined chapel in the cemetery of Bragar in Lewis called Cill Sgàire, the Norse derivation of which is noted by Fionnlagh MacLeòid (F. MacLeòid 1997: 19).

Norse elements are also used in place names in the novel. Sgàire's home island is called Flodeiy, which is explained as meaning *eilean ìosal* ('low island'). Again,

even if a reader would not recognize this as Norse, they would see it as markedly non-Gaelic, both because it violates the *caol ri caol agus leathan ri leathan* spelling rule, and because it contains the letter *y*, which is not used in Gaelic. Likewise, the parliament of Erda is called *Tingvalr nan Daoine*, a mixed Norse-Gaelic form. ‘Tingvalr’ is of course derived from Norse *Bingvöllr* (‘Assembly field’), whence such place names as Dingwall in the Highlands and Tingwall in Shetland. A reader with an interest in place names would be likely to recognize *Tingvalr* as a Norse element here, but again even if they did not the presence of the letter *v* and the violation of the *caol ri caol agus leathan ri leathan* rule marks it as clearly non-Gaelic.

Another Norse-derived place name is Brisingr, the island where Aoife keeps her warrior school. This is a curious example because it is derived from Old Norse *Brisingr*, which is not a place name at all but rather a family or people, best known in the compound phrase *men Brisinga* (i.e. Freyia’s necklace). It was also used as the title of a bestselling young adult fantasy novel by Christopher Paolini, *Brisingr*, and in Alan Garner’s older *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, discussed in this volume by Gwen Grant, so it may be that here again we have references to both medieval literary traditions and contemporary fantasy books, with *An Sgoil Dhubh* facing in both directions (Paolini 2008; Garner 2010). Again, whether or not this was MacLeòid’s intention, readers familiar with either the medieval source material or modern fantasy or both will bring their own associations to the text when the encounter the word *Brisingr* in the novel.

The people of Flodeiy have several features of their material culture which are clearly derived from very well-known elements of medieval Norse material culture. For instance, Sgàire and his family live in a *taigh-fhada* (‘longhouse’) (MacLeòid 2014: 60), and they sail in what is quite recognizably a Norse longship: *Bha i [.i. long cogadh muinntir Flodeiy] iargalt, le dràgan fiodha na toiseach agus targaiden suas na cliathaichean.* (‘It [i.e. the warship of the people of Flodeiy] was forbidding, with a wooden dragon at its prow and shields along the sides’) (MacLeòid 2014: 25). Less well known, but certainly grounded in medieval Norse literary tradition, is the following, describing the settlement of Flodeiy: *Ma bha cuideigin airson talamh fhaighinn dha fhèin bhiodh iad a’ seòladh air falbh bho tir agus a’ sadail cabair taighe thar na cliathaich. Far am bualadh e tir, ’s ann an sin a bhiodh iad a’ dèanamh an dachaigh, agus sin a rinn Gormshuil agus Aonghas.* (‘If someone wanted to get some land for themselves they would said out from the land and throw the house post over the side. Where it came ashore, that is where they would make their home, and that is what Gormshuil and Aonghas did.’) (MacLeòid 2014: 16). This can be compared to *Laxdæla Saga*, in

which Bjorn Ketilsson makes his settlement in Iceland where his high-seat posts washed ashore at what was thereafter called Bjarnarhaven. In their translation of that saga, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson note ‘settlers would often put them overboard within sight of land and build their new homes at the spot where they were washed ashore.’ (Magnusson and Pálsson 1975: 39). As a point of interest there is also a place called Lacasdal (Eng., Laxdale) in Lewis.

We can see therefore that the Gaelic and the Norse elements in *An Sgoil Dhubh* are similar in some respects, for instance in that both repurpose personal names from the medieval literary traditions. However, this is much richer, and much more detailed on the Gaelic side, requiring of the reader a more detailed knowledge of Gaelic tradition and history, while most of the Norse references would be understood by anyone with a basic familiarity with any Viking-themed film, television show, computer games or art, even if they had not read much or any medieval Norse literature themselves. The real detail is in the use of the Gaelic material; the Norse material is simpler, but still creates a network of references that give a Norse ‘flavour’ to the novel. However, the nature of these Norse elements, and the manner in which they blend with some of the Gaelic ones, suggests that MacLeòid is trying to give the fictional *Gàidhealach* culture of his novel a counterpart to the real-world historical influence of the Norse on Gaelic Scotland. The family lineages, in which characters have parents and grandparents with markedly Norse or Gaelic names, the use of common Gaelic personal names of Norse origin and the use of the Norse form of a well-known town in the Highlands as a place name in the novel, all work to fold Norse culture into the *Gàidhealach* culture of the novel. While the blending of Gaelic literary, historical and folkloric materials from different periods into a fictional narrative present creates a fantasy-world version of Gaelic culture, the way in which MacLeòid works Norse elements into that culture brings the period of the Norse settlement of and hegemony over the western seaboard of Scotland into that fictional present, in the same way as he included the Norse settlement as part of the long history of his community in *Ìmpireachd* (MacLeòid 2010b: 129). This was a crucial period in the development of Gaelic Scotland, and especially of the Western Isles, in which iconic elements of the culture of the Western Isles, such as the birlinns and the Lewis Chessmen, to say nothing of the many Norse-derived place-names, especially in Lewis, were created, as described in ‘Na Lochlannaich a’ tighinn air tìr an Nis’ (‘The Norsemen coming ashore at Ness’) by the Lewis poet Ruairidh MacThòmais (MacThòmais 1970: 40). More generally, the medieval-style elements of the novel (swords, spears,

castles and so on) work to make the novel fit in with both the evocations of the prestigious medieval literary tradition and with the conventions of most high fantasy literature.

MacLeòid also makes references to names and concepts from other literatures and traditions. These include Old English (there is one mention of Grendel, though here the monster is female, not male as in *Beowulf*) and Buddhist thought (a single reference to a character having attained *nirbhana*), but these are not as prominent, and since they are only passing references they are not as fully integrated into the fabric of the text as the Gaelic and Norse elements discussed above.

Iain F. MacLeòid has written a very *Gàidhealach* fantasy novel, which integrates a range of different references from Gaelic history and folklore as well as Old Irish literature to create a fictional world which is culturally recognizable to Gaelic readers. It also works in, albeit in less detail, elements of Norse history and literature. This is a culture less familiar to Gaelic readers, but the history of Norse settlement, especially in the Western Isles, as well as its prominent influence in modern fantasy literature, films and games, make it appropriate for elements of it to be worked into this *Gàidhealach* fantasy. And that fantasy is specifically a Gaelic one, not a more generalized ‘Celtic’ one. Of course, being set in a fictional world to a great extent removes *An Sgoil Dhubh* from issues of real-world debates about ‘Celticity’, or about the supposed unities and continuities of Celtic-speaking cultures. However, the use of literary and historical materials from a range of periods being brought into a fictional narrative present creates an interesting alternative version of Gaelic culture, one in which early medieval literary elements, late medieval history and modern folklore are all equally present and equally real, a synthesis of different aspects of Gaelic culture into a richly-textured fictional world. It is a fantasy world of warriors and wizards that nevertheless feels recognizable to Gaelic readers in the twenty-first century. For all its flaws in pacing and characterization, this is a very interesting and ambitious novel (indeed, the first high fantasy novel in the language), and one that repays critical attention.

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