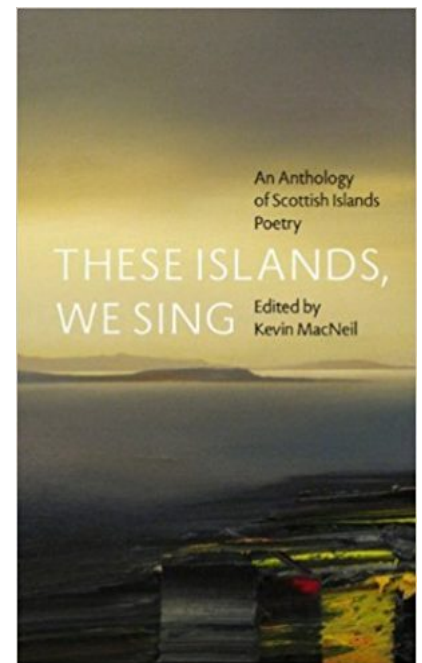


Portable Rootedness and Other Contradictions: Some Thoughts on Contemporary Hebridean Poetry

By Kevin MacNeil

In this informal, inexhaustive essay I shall reflect on continuing challenges and recent developments in Hebridean poetry, concentrating especially on the six years that have elapsed since the publication of *These Islands, We Sing: An Anthology of Scottish Islands Poetry*. As I wrote in my introduction to that book:



Poetry is grossly undervalued today, and even dedicated readers sometimes overlook the disproportionate excellence of 20th- and 21st-century poetry from the Scottish isles: a strange confluence of self-defeating injustices. I believe this is the first poetry anthology of its kind — that is, one with a remit wide enough to bring in writing from any Scottish island, but distinct enough not to include Highland or other mainland work.

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affirmation of this thorny truth in an important essay by Iain Crichton Smith, 'Real People in a Real Place' (written in 1982 and first published in *Towards The Human*, Macdonald Publishers, 1986). Smith's long essay, as remarkable for the strength and lucidity of its opinions as for its continuing relevance, de-romanticises insular life and culture:

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Many and varied types of otherness are foisted upon islanders; these can provide material for poetry, yes, but they can also be deeply counter-productive. Thus, the poet is fighting external pressures, assumptions, stereotypes, even before she has begun to put ink on paper.

Smith criticises the narrow, patronising portrayals of islanders one encounters in books such as *Whisky Galore* and the novels of Lillian Beckwith — simple, comical characters who speak a language no islander has ever spoken. By a process of insidious osmosis, these publications, bolstered by external perceptions of them, seep into the islander's consciousness as reminders of who we are (but never really were), and of who we are seen to be — and the boundaries dissolve with an injustice that is tacit, invisible and lasting.

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The problem goes deeper still. For you can write poems of the utmost integrity — true to your heart, your mind, your worldview, your craft, your experience — but they might nonetheless be considered disloyal by a parochial reader, one who willfully or otherwise misinterprets the poem (and, likely, in an insular Scotland, misinterprets the *poet*). The Hebridean poet must often withstand assumptions relating to poetry, the poet's own poetry, and the poet him- or herself.

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By contrast, the contemporary poet is ‘seldom living at home’, is university-educated, literate in Gaelic, and has excellent English. The latter description certainly applies to many of the newer Hebridean poets, such as Babs NicGriogair and Pàdraig MacAoidh.

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Smith is partly referring here to what is sometimes called ‘the paralysis of analysis’ — a sense of stasis that settles troublingly over one’s efforts, replacing dynamism with doubt, a fatalistic and unwanted compulsion to go back to first principles every time one attempts to write. This is substantially the human, true-life result of the ‘othering’ of island culture, and of the ‘marginalising’ and the ‘silencing’ that I refer to in *These Islands, We Sing*.

These problems are real. When one adds to them a natural concern over how the writing will be perceived by the local community — family, friends, neighbours — perhaps the wonder is that Hebridean poets exist at all. They do so in frustratingly small numbers — especially when one considers how gratifyingly

many talented poets there are living and writing in, say, Shetland.

One recent, and very welcome, development in Scottish literature is the creation of *Tuath*, a Gaelic supplement to the free literary publication *Northwords Now*. This is likely to have a beneficial impact upon Hebridean writing — and indeed the first issue, edited by the multilingual poet Rody Gorman, includes contributions from Hebrideans Màiri NicGumaraid, Maoilios Caimbeul and Pàdraig MacAoidh. In her essay ‘Beachdan’ (‘Opinions’), NicGumaraid writes:

I wonder if there isn't something inveterately skillful, if not wholly dishonourable, in the ability to faze, or freeze, out one's own intellectual heritage — in order to blend in with the opinions, and the values placed upon the opinions, of someone else. If there is, I'd say the native Gael probably has it down to a fine art. The ‘I kent his faither’ syndrome which so long plagued the arts and airts of mainland Scots and Scotland for decades, if not centuries, has had its equivalent in the ‘offshore islands’ in the form of ‘Who do they think they are?’ Always a difficult question. Who indeed.

Plus ça change. The difficult points Iain Crichton Smith raised in his essay in 1982 are still very much with us.

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Aonghas ‘Dubh’ MacNeacail, Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul, Rody Gorman, Anna Frater, Maoilios Caimbeul, Dòmhnall S. Moireach, and Babs NicGriogair are among the writers who explore these problems against the vast theme of diaspora in a bilingual collection of essays and commissioned poems called *Struileag: Cladach gu Cladach/Struileag: Shore to Shore*. Most of these names, of course, are familiar — writers whose voices are distinctive, whose contribution is assured.

The poets in the *Struileag* anthology must negotiate their relationship with tradition and innovation (‘make it new’), local issues and global interdependence, history and, to one extent or another, autobiography. The poems are diverse — encompassing secular psalms, raps and that all-too-rare Japanese form incorporating prose and haiku, the haibun. The result is a refreshing mix of the familiar and the provocative; an accompanying CD, which sets the poems to music (folk, rap, etc) has a similar atmosphere of passion, edginess and innovation.

One of the themes explored in the *Struileag* project is exile; historically, of course, this is a loaded word. In current times, even in a digital age, it is often incumbent upon poets to leave their home island and acclimatize to a new place, a new culture. A poet, native Gaelic speaker and peace activist from Lewis, Babs NicGriogair refers to herself as an urban Gael, or a Stornoweegie (cleverly juxtaposing Stornowegian and Weegie, an informal term for a Glaswegian). ‘My external points of reference are different, but the moral compass remains very much the same,’ she says. ‘I feel strongly that urban Gaelic poetry can have a revitalizing part to play in Scotland’s identity at this particular juncture in time, and hope that I may be able to contribute to its flourishing — in a contemporary cityscape that has a vibrant Hebridean diaspora amongst many others.’

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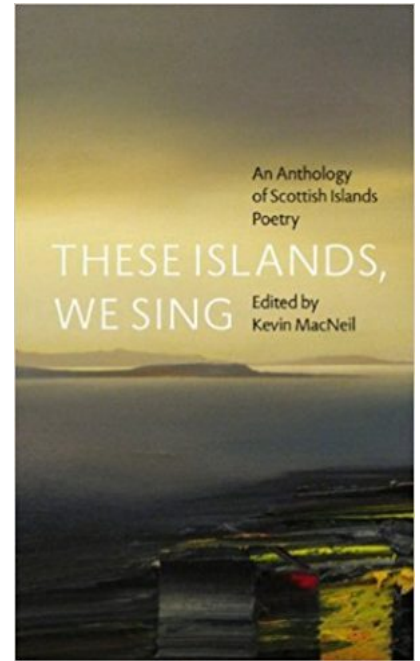
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