

Sorley MacLean, Derick Thomson, and the Women Most Dangerous to Men

By Ronald Black

Sorley MacLean | Somhairle MacGill-Eain (1911-1996), and Derick Thomson | Ruaraidh MacThòmais (1921-2012), were the two leading Scottish Gaelic poets of the twentieth century. Although the difference in age between them was not great, it is fair to say that MacLean's era was the second quarter of the century, while Thomson dominated the fifty years that followed. Now, those are bold statements, oversimplifications perhaps, and to interrogate them we have to understand some of the dynamics at work on the language in their day, and (obviously) know a little more about these two men and their poetic output.

The eruption of MacLean in the 30s and 40s was like a volcano in a quiet wasteland. There had been no truly outstanding Gaelic poets since the death of Duncan Ban Macintyre in 1812. The first quarter of the twentieth century gave us backward-looking romanticism, an officially sponsored preference for words at the expense of meaning, and some good poets who seemed to draw back on reaching the outer edge of innovation, or were cut off on reaching their prime: Father Allan McDonald of Eriskay, Donald Sinclair from Barra, Donald MacDonald (Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna) from North Uist. Only in retrospect is it even possible to isolate these three names, because none of them was properly published in his own lifetime, and in Sinclair's case we were obliged to wait until 2014 for the collected verse that proved his worth. But knowing that some interesting developments were taking place in the first quarter of the century makes MacLean's achievement only slightly less remarkable.

The elements that gave rise to the poetic volcano are easily listed. They are: MacLean's upbringing in Raasay by a family steeped in traditional Gaelic song; the intense religious ferment of the day, which provided him with the vocabulary of personal introspection; the anger at social injustice which was inevitable in an island that had been subjected to vicious clearances; his education at Edinburgh

University, which opened his eyes to the work of a wide variety of English poets from John Donne to T. S. Eliot; the unexpected rise of the populist right in Spain, Italy and Germany at a time when the left had offered the young the hope of a progressive future; a disastrous love-life; and, finally, service in the British Army in the battle against Rommel's Afrika Korps. These things merged semi-involuntarily in MacLean's brain and came out in an extraordinary gush of pure creativity during the years from 1933 to 1943. There is a dreamlike quality to it all, enhanced by a pervasive use of symbolism; it is a hard-edged, vivid dream which often marches methodically from one topic to the next, but just as frequently marries two or three of the above ingredients in endlessly varying thought-patterns, intensely rhythmical and lightly bridled by rhyme.

There are two principal sequences: *Dàin do Eimhir (Poems to Eimhir)*, in which the central preoccupation is the poet himself and his relationships with women, poetry, politics and homeland; and *An Cuilithionn (The Cuillin)*, an objective survey of world politics in the 1930s, in which the persona — the vantage point — is those great jagged mountains of Skye, a more dynamic symbol being provided by another island toponym, the Àigeach or leaping horse. A third and briefer 'sequence', if that is the right word, is provided by MacLean's North Africa poems of the early 40s, which are among the best verse that came out of the Second World War in any language. The sheer drama of these astonishing ten years of creativity was brought to an end, appropriately enough, by an explosion which almost ended MacLean's life; his collection *Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile (Poems to Eimhir and Other Poems)* was published just weeks after his final discharge from hospital in Inverness in 1943. It was very correctly said in the 1970s that 'we all remember exactly where we were on first opening the book'.

As we have seen, in terms of lifespan there is a considerable overlap between MacLean and Thomson. Indeed, there is equally an overlap between MacLean and the other major Gaelic poets who succeeded him: George Campbell Hay (1915-1984), who also served in the British Army in North Africa, and put the experience to even greater use; Iain Crichton Smith (1928-1998); Donald MacAulay (born 1930). All of them knew MacLean and were inspired by him. To explore the relationship, however, we may point to the three phases that constitute the rest of MacLean's artistic life: the era of 'Hallaig' and other late poems; the era of poetic silence, when he was a hard-working Highland headmaster, not known as a poet even by his own pupils; and, following his

retirement, the era of his renaissance, not as a practising poet but as a literary celebrity. All of these phases caused irritation to some: 'Hallaig' (yes, that celebrated poem in particular) because it panders to a false stereotype of Gaelic verse and represents a betrayal of MacLean's explicitly stated counter-romanticism; the period of silence, because MacLean failed even to publish earlier work that was known to exist, especially *An Cuilithionn*; and his renaissance as a celebrity, because it eclipsed Derick Thomson in particular. It is this 'car-crash' to which I refer when I say very pointedly that 'MacLean's era was the second quarter of the century, while Thomson dominated the fifty years that followed'. Thomson's domination was in terms of ongoing achievement (as poet, as inspiring university teacher, as publisher, and not least as editor, from 1952, of the hugely influential quarterly magazine *Gairm*), but in the eyes of many members of the wider public, especially those unable to read Gaelic, MacLean's celebrity trumped all else.

There is no doubt that MacLean and Thomson were different kinds of poet, and that some of the above remarks will be regarded as controversial. For example, MacLean was certainly a poet of genius, but it is perhaps going too far to portray him as a kind of shamanistic machine which absorbed discrete influences at one end of his brain and effortlessly disgorged sublime verses at the other. The case for MacLean as a hard-working poetic craftsman has, I think, yet to be made. 'Hallaig' and the other late poems are, I feel, crucial to this argument; there are those who regard them as shamanistically sublime and those, like myself, who see them as a conscious, slightly laboured attempt to respond to the public's insatiable demand: "Give us more! Give us more!"

Thomson, on the other hand, was undoubtedly a hard-working craftsman, while no one has ever suggested that he was a shamanistic genius. And there are other differences. Thomson may have served for a time in the RAF, but he was a lifelong academic who lived in a bubble of undisturbed peace and tranquillity, penetrated only by the concerns that affected all of us as a community: the Cold War, the decline of Gaelic in its heartland, the flawed ideology of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, the rise of pop culture, the iron grip of religious extremism on Thomson's native island of Lewis, far-off foreign wars or famines, and the slow, agonising steps towards Scottish home rule and independence, of which he was a passionate, inspiring, and sometimes — dare I say it — courageously silly advocate. To judge by his poetry, other than the tragic death of one of his sons,

few great personal challenges ever seem to have faced him: there was a persistent rumour amongst his students, certainly, that he won his very beautiful wife in a running fist-fight with certain other future members of the Scottish establishment, but that is neither here nor there (and Sorley MacLean's wife was also very beautiful).

What we have running through successive collections of Thomson's work, from the first in 1951 to the last in 2007, is a gradually evolving dynamic, teeming with people and shot through with satire and social concern, in which the two main preoccupations are his relationship with his native island and his country. For many, he is at his best in short poems: and certainly he made himself the undisputed master of a fairly economical tripartite structure consisting of statement, development and ringing conclusion. For many, again, he is admired (or disdained) for the accessibility of much of his work, yet MacLean's may be argued to be equally accessible, albeit without the humour. There are, however, two obvious differences. One is MacLean's preference for regular metres, and Thomson's for free verse. The other is Thomson's keen eye for observing people, compared to MacLean's preference for the abstract and the introspective. On the other hand, both enjoyed polemics. And, intriguingly, both gave us numerous poems whose depths have yet to be fully explored. I will devote the rest of this essay to a couple of examples — poems that I do not fully understand, which are similar in some ways, and which have long fascinated me.

MacLean's 'Uamha 'n Òir' ('The Cave of Gold') appears at first to have been one of his late poems.¹ It was written, or at least reworked, in the 1970s. It refers to a very old legend which was found in pretty much every part of the Highlands and Islands where a cave on one side of a hill or mountain was believed to connect with a cave on the other. The legend always has it that a piper marched into the cave at one end, that he could be heard playing his pipes far underground, and that the sound stopped halfway, but that his dog appeared out of the cave at the other end with its hair singed off, revealing that his master had come off the worse in some encounter with evil. In this case the cave is explicitly stated to be in *Dùis MhicLeòid*, 'MacLeod's Land' in Skye, and the people involved are MacCrimmons. There are basically three sections — one which describes the original legend, one which tells how another piper tries his luck in the same way, and one which draws a conclusion. The poem may be approached as history, as biography, as autobiography, or as a combination of these. As history, the first

section presumably describes some early MacCrimmon, and the second describes Dòmhnall Bàn, who was killed in the Rout of Moy in March 1746. As autobiography, the first section presumably describes the poet as a young man, the second the poet in his maturity. In Dòmhnall Bàn's case the cave becomes a metaphor for foretold death, suicide even: *chaidh a' ghalla 'na cheann / 's 'na chridhe*, 'the bitch went into his head / and his heart'.

The poem is extremely difficult, and in this we are not helped by the poet, who was habitually economical with punctuation and whose translations were notoriously over-literal. As an experiment, I will present five stanzas of the poem, all except the fifth in three different forms: first the original, with my own punctuation added; then MacLean's translation; then my own translation, done in my usual style, which I would describe as offering a modicum of rhythm and explanation. I have chosen these stanzas because they contain almost the only hard evidence for the subject-matter in the form of two references to the blind catechist Donald Munro (1773–1830), a one-time fiddler who not only gave up playing the instrument after his conversion but is said to have gone around making bonfires of bagpipes and fiddles wherever he found them. I begin in the middle of the first section, in which the poet expresses wonder that anyone should wish to leave such a paradise as the old Land of MacLeod, but admits that the motive is greed for the gold rumoured to be in the cave:

*Có eile dh'fhàgadh Dùis MhicLeòid
's gun e ri cosnadh an dìol-déirce,
's gun e ga bhioradh leis an àrdan —
ach rathail làidir sona òg,
gun fhaileadh le uisge na tàmailt
's gun bhadhbh an aithreachais air a thòir?*

*Who else would leave the Land of MacLeod
if free from the poor wretch's labour,
not pierced by a wounded pride,
strong, fortunate, happy, young,
not flayed with the water of humiliation
and not pursued by the Fury of remorse?*

*Who else would leave the Land of MacLeod
if not reduced to beggar's employment*

*and if not pierced by some wounded pride,
but lucky, stalwart, happy and young,
not flayed alive by the rain of insult
and not haunted by the hag of repentance?*

■ I have kept the poet's 'wounded pride' because I believe that in this case he is telling us something useful. *Uisge* is both water and rain. MacLean's 'water of humiliation' could refer to a process of steeping that removes hair from skin, but only if the skin is already separate from the body. I cannot make sense of it other than by understanding *uisge* as rain. In Skye, rain is frequently cold and uncomfortable to the skin, hence the imagery of flaying. *Badhbh* is one of the evil hags of folklore, by no means an abstraction. MacLean goes on:

*Cha robh a Dhall-san air an spiris
eadar a chridhe 's eanchainn
a' maistreadh Nàdair le loinid,
a' cur a' bhainne 'na fhuil
agus na blàthaich 'na h-eabar
air bruaich shleamhainn an t-sluic.*

*His Blind was not on the perch
between his heart and his brain,
pounding Nature with a churn-staff,
turning the milk to blood
and the buttermilk to a slush
on the slippery edge of the pit.*

*His Blind Munro was not on the hen-roost
in between his heart and his brain,
whisking Nature with his churn-stick,
converting pure milk into blood
and turning buttermilk into mud
on the slippery slope of hell.*

■ *Dall* in Gaelic is 'a blind man' as well as the adjective 'blind', but MacLean's use of 'Blind' is not transparent in modern English. A *loinid* is a whisk used for

making milkshakes and the like. In his translation, MacLean seems deliberately to be toning down the strength of this verse. To the bulk of the Free Presbyterian community in which he grew up, Donald Munro was a hero, and questioning his destruction of musical instruments was almost heretical. Yet in Gaelic tradition *am fear a th' air an spiris*, 'the man on the hen-roost', is the devil and the *sloc* (genitive *sluic*) or 'pit' is certainly hell. The reason why the first piper's Blind Munro is none of these things is that he predated him. So while this stanza invites us to see Donald Munro as the devil, it does so negatively, and of course the name 'Munro' (*Rothach*) is unstated for the very good reason that the first piper's sightless friend (I do not know whom MacLean had in mind) was presumably not a Munro at all.

I will not quote from the second section. It clearly refers to Dòmhnall Bàn, who went to fight in an unpopular war under an unpopular chief and never returned, or by extension to the poet himself, who went to war in a similar mood and did not expect to return. It is explicitly stated that the Land of MacLeod is in cultural decline and that the piper's motive this time is not greed but the desire to be remembered as a hero. The cave, then, has come to symbolise a journey to war, while the Land of MacLeod stands for something larger — Skye and Raasay, the Highlands, Scotland, or the whole of western civilisation. There are other symbols dependent on these, notably the pipes: when the allegory is interpreted autobiographically, they presumably stand for MacLean's poetry.

The third section speaks much of two men being in the Cave of Gold, which therefore brings us down, it seems, to a straight comparison between the old days and the new, between MacCrimmon and MacLean, between music and poetry. This section is just as difficult as the first two, however. Towards the end we have:

*Thill cù eile 's e air fhaileadh,
thill e còmh' ris an spiorad,
an ceòl a thàinig 's nach d' fhalbh
fhad 's a bha Leòdaich san Dùn,
mun do shìolaidh asta 'n gnàths
a bha 'n cuislean triatha 's Dùis
mun robh an fhraineach air fàs.*

*Another dog came back without a hair,
it came back with the spirit,*

*the music that came and did not go
while there were MacLeods in the Dun,
before there seeped out of them the nature
that was in the veins of lord and land
before the bracken had grown.*

*Another dog returned singed and hairless,
it came back home along with the spirit —
the music that came and went not away
as long as MacLeods were in Dunvegan,
until there drained from the laird and the land
the habits that used to run through their veins
until the bracken started to grow.*

■
Gnàths is a key word here: MacLean says ‘nature’, I say ‘habits’. ‘Convention’ or ‘tradition’ would be equally good, as would ‘culture’ if it were not such a cliché. There is surely an echo here of the famous song that contains the words *an talla am bu ghnàth le MacLeòid*. These are regularly translated ‘MacLeod’s wonted hall’, but there is much more to it than that: it is the hall in which the MacLeod chief kept up the fame passed on to him by his forefathers — for hospitality, for even-handed judgement of disputes, for the care of the poor, for patronage of all the arts, for the pursuit of learning. In the fourth line, the ‘Dun’ is certainly Dunvegan Castle, and it may be objected that despite what the poet says, there are still MacLeods in Dunvegan, or argued against this that as descent was ultimately through a female, these so-called MacLeods are in fact Wolrige-Gordons. But in any case I think the line is not so much genealogical as proverbial, meaning ‘for a very long time’. The last three lines express the very old idea that all good things (in this case music) result from a symbiosis between the ruler and the land. The poet goes on:

*Mun d’ fhàs i tiugh os cionn an fheòir
's a cop uaine mun bheul
tron tàinig anail nan ceòl
a’ còmhstri ri bràdair an Doill
anns na loisgeadh miann is dùil
a dh’agair nach b’e ’m bàs ’s an fhoill
a bha sa chonnsachadh chiùin*

a mhathaich tairbhe bhith san fheòil.

*Before it had grown thick above the grass
with its green froth about the mouth
through which came the breath of the musics
striving with the great fire of the Blind
in which were burned desire and expectation,
that argued that it was not death and deceit
that was in the mild contention
that there was profit in the flesh.*

*Before it grew thickly above the grass
with its pale green foam around the mouth
which breathed the breath into all the musics
that strove with the bonfire of Blind Munro,
the fire that consumed all desire and hope —
musics which claimed that the calm contention
that fertilised increase to be in the flesh
was more than simply death and deceit.*

■ The 'it' of the first two lines is the bracken, rendered in Gaelic by feminine pronouns. Cattle do not allow bracken to grow, but sheep do. This then is a reference to the nineteenth-century clearances that made way for sheep. The 'mouth' is surely that of the people, threatened simultaneously by the 'green foam' of clearance and the 'bonfire' of evangelicalism. What comes out of the mouth is plural — bagpipe music, song and poetry. Lines 7-8 of MacLean's original and translation appear in lines 6-7 of my translation as 'the calm contention / that fertilised increase to be in the flesh'. The reader may laugh, but I cannot think what MacLean could mean by this except sex. His translation is deliberately unhelpful, even coy: he omits to translate *mhathaich*, which means 'manured, cultivated, fertilised'. Until modern times it was conventional to clothe sex in the vocabulary of violence, and the oxymoron *connsachadh ciùin*, 'calm (or mild) contention', is an example of this. So MacLean speaks of the evangelicals' equation of fornication with 'death and deceit' and the message of art that there is a good deal more to it than that. Which brings him on to his conclusion:

Dithis ann an Uamha 'n Òir

*a' dol an coinneamh a' bhàis:
fear nach cuala mun chù,
a neart aineolas nan òg;
an dàrna fear le barrachd lùiths
agus an laige thar gach laige
's fhios aige gu robh an cù
de choin uamhalta 'bhàis
's gu robh a fiaclan cheart cho fada.*

*Two men in the Cave of Gold
going to meet death:
one who had not heard of the dog,
his strength the ignorance of the young;
the second with greater strength
and with the weakness above all weakness,
knowing that the dog was
of the eerie dogs of death
and that her fangs were quite as long.*

■ That is MacLean's translation, and I cannot better it. Although the path to this conclusion has been tortuous, uncertain and littered with ambiguities, it seems clear enough in itself. The Cave of Gold is now a woman's body, or rather the bodies of two women. The two men are the poet when young and when a little older. In terms of the original legend, the dog is not the piper's innocent companion but his diabolical foe. The 'weakness above all weakness' is the desire to succumb to the charms of a known temptress. The last line is unfinished: the poet means that the fangs of the second dog are as long as those of the first. An cù 'the dog' is masculine, but is referred to in the last line as feminine, both in the original and in the translation. These are the personal concerns of the poet in the 1930s, but the poem was not published until the 1970s. In fact, there are two more sections, both short and both described as fragmentary. Obviously 'Uamha 'n Òir' was never really finished.

The equivalent Thomson poem whose depths have yet to be fully explored is 'Gormshuil', published in 1991.² It has 175 lines and is therefore only half as long as 'Uamha 'n Òir', which has 352. Again it is based upon a legend, if that is the

right word. Down to Thomson's generation Gormshuil was a popular girl's name in Lewis. In that spelling it means 'Blue-Eye', and it was anglicised as Gormelia. In origin, however, it is Gormla or Gormfhlaith, which means 'Blue Aristocrat' or 'Noble Princess', blue being the colour of nobility (indeed we still speak of 'blue blood').

The most celebrated Gormla in medieval Gaelic tradition was a daughter of Flann Sinna (Flann of the Shannon), a high king of Ireland who died in AD 916. She was married to three kings in a row — Cormac, who was both king and bishop of Cashel and died in 916, his conqueror Cerball mac Muirecáin who died in 909, and Niall Glúndub (Niall the Black-Kneed), who fell in battle against the Vikings in 919. After that she died in poverty. She had been quick to transfer her affections to Cerball when he defeated her first husband in battle, and she is the assumed author of a sequence of poems about her husbands, her riches and her poverty. One of them begins (in translation): 'I've loved three times thirty, / I've loved nine times nine; / I could have loved twenty men, / But that would not attract a woman — / I forsook them all for Niall, / For what I wanted was his love'. And another ends (again in translation): 'Cerball of the sword gave me three hundred cows and two hundred horses. Cormac gave twice as many as Cerball, and that was no mean act. But why should I hide from God the wealth I got from Niall? In one month Niall gave me three times as much as all that put together.' Gormla's name (and reputation) were picked up by Geoffrey of Monmouth as Goneril, and passed on into Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is perhaps no surprise that in later Scottish Gaelic tradition she was known as a famous witch, *Gormshuil Mhór na Mòighe* whose home was at Moy in Lochaber. If we add to all this the very distinct possibility that when Thomson wrote the poem he was remembering a Gormshuil that had been known to him, we have, once again, a case of multiple identity. How is it handled?

The poem is in free verse, in fourteen parts, and again the poet has translated it himself (very helpfully this time). First we have the early medieval Gormshuil in her own words, moving quickly through her life from pride in her beguiling eyes to regret at her downfall. Then section two begins:

'Cha robh tè a Sasainn a dhannasadh rithe'
arsa tusa 'na do sheann chòta drògaid

"No Englishwoman could dance like her"

you said, dressed in your old drugget skirt

On the face of it this seems to be a memory of a woman speaking about a woman called Gormshuil. And the ‘Englishwoman’ reference is clear to anyone familiar with the recent history of Lewis. Around 1900, countless girls were leaving the island every year to go as gutters of herring to fishing ports all around the United Kingdom, especially Great Yarmouth. They worked hard, were well paid, had money, enjoyed their nights out, and loved competing for the men’s attention. But the poet’s memory is fixed not on the dancer but on the woman who is talking about her. He goes on:

*‘Cha robh tè a Sasainn a sheinneadh rithe’,
arsa tusa, ach tha do cheòl fhèin
air falbh às mo chuimhne,
cha chluinn mi
an ann àrd no ìosal a bha e ‘n oidhch’ ud,
ged a chì mi do bhilean a’ gluasad.*

*“No Englishwoman could sing like her”,
you said, but your own music
has slipped away from my memory,
I cannot hear
whether it was high or low that night,
though I see your lips moving.*

■ What the poet means by ‘high or low’ I do not know — sacred or secular, perhaps? And he speaks of her eyes (*bha teine a’ lasadh ‘na do shùilean*, ‘fire shone in your eyes’), which makes us think, no, Gormshuil is the woman speaking, not the woman spoken of, and the ‘Englishwoman’ remarks are fragments of speech randomly recollected: a trick used by Thomson elsewhere.

Section three is a quick sketch of the environment in which Gormshuil lived: the single window of her black house, the chickens, the potatoes, and not many of those. In section four the description of the woman becomes subtly confused with the imagery of death: although hands are *a’ slìobadh an aodaich*, ‘stroking the cloth’ as aged hands are wont to do, and breath is *a’ plathcadaich fo na plaideachan*, ‘coming in gusts under the blankets’, the bed is growing narrow *le*

bruthadh na h-ùrach ‘with the pressing-in of earth’. There is logical continuity, it seems, between the bed and the grave.

In section five the imagery switches to the going out of a fire, reminding us of Gormshuil’s eyes:

dìth cheap air an doras-iadht’,
dìth grèine air sruth na fala

(‘shortage of turfs for the closing-door, / lack of sun in the blood-stream’). The *doras-iadht’*, literally ‘door of surrounding’, is I think the little box-like structure of peats that traps the fire and keeps it alive until morning. Sections six and seven, which are short, continue this image, while adding to it what looks like another memory of the woman herself, a detailed, painterly description of her hand resting on the table and *a’ stobadh meur ann an imleag tìm’*, ‘jabbing a finger in time’s navel’. Section eight begins with this imagery of hands, but marks an extraordinary departure; here it is in full:

Le làmhan paisgte
a’ tighinn bhon a’ chomanachadh:
pasgadh na h-àbhaist,
is àbhaist na Càisge,
's an comann, an co-chomann,
an dlùthadh, an sgaradh,
a’ chuimhne, an dìochuimhn’,
an deuchainn, an t-socair,
an locair, a’ chnuimh,
a’ chuing, an laoidh,
an Gàrradh, an salm,
an t-òran, an iodhlainn,
an iollach, an t-slabhraidh,
an teine, an gràdh,
an gràs, an teine-dè,
an t-ubhal, Àdhamh,
an leabaidh-phòsda,
an eileatrom.

(‘Hands clasped / coming from communion: / customary clasping, / custom of Easter, / and the company, the companionship, / the nearing, the parting, /

memory, forgetfulness, / hardship, ease, / the plane, the maggot, / the yoke, the hymn, / the Garden, the psalm, / the song, the cornyard, / the cry, the chain, / the fire, love, / grace, St Anthony's fire, / the apple, Adam, / the bridal bed, / the bier.') The communion sounds to me like a Catholic one, but the ensuing starburst of themes and symbols seems to embrace the life and death of every Gormla or Gormshuil who ever lived, thus emphasising their common humanity.

The rest of the poem is related in the first person singular, and we appear to have reached a synthesis between Gormla and Gormshuil. In section nine she lies in the heather, but the coverlet on her face is purple. In section ten a bit of Lewis pop song comes into her head: *Cha b' ann dubh a bha mo leannan*, 'He wasn't dark, my sweetheart'. She prays to Christ not to be sent back *dhan a' chlais*, 'to the pit'; then section eleven begins in inverted commas '*Ach bha mi uair 'na mo bhàn-rìgh*' ("But once I was a queen"), as if to make it suffice for both (or all) women, and moves into reflections on lost beauty, wealth and happiness.

Section twelve is a little like Gormshuil's response to Gormla: here the memory is not of a queen but of a night in the barn. Section thirteen is something of a surprise, as the narrator confesses that she will come barren and childless before her maker on Judgement Day. And in section fourteen the poem ends with Gormshuil's defiance of sermons and neighbours' talk:

tha mise fhathast
mar a bhà mi,
lasair m' èibhleig air chrith
anns a' chagailt chiand,
mo thein'-aigheir gun smàladh.

('I am still / as I was, / my ember's flame shivering / in the self-same hearth, / my bonfire unquenched.') This is, we conclude, a real woman whom the poet knew, whose spirit he admired, and whom he wishes to honour by comparing her to the famous queen of long ago.

These two long poems of MacLean's and Thomson's are typical of their authors. One is subjective, the other objective. Both employ legend and symbolism. Both are challenging, MacLean's more so than Thomson's. MacLean's work was made for himself as some sort of confused catharsis, then patchily revised many years later. Thomson's was made in a controlled way for others to read and enjoy.

And in the end, for all their multiple personae, these poems offer a wonderfully contrasting view of the type of woman who is most dangerous to men.

(c) The Bottle Imp