

# The Idea of Island in Gaelic Fiction

By Moray Watson

Homi Bhabha writes about a homogenising attempt to deprive ‘minorities of those marginal, liminal spaces from which they can intervene in the unifying and totalizing myths of the national culture’.<sup>1</sup> While this statement should evidently be taken as (at least partly) figurative, we could also stubbornly read it more literally in the case of Gaelic writing. The Gaels, as an imagined community (to borrow another commentator’s term for a moment) often write about what we could describe as marginal or liminal spaces. I have previously pointed out the line from the Iain Moireach story ‘Am Partaidh’ (‘The Party’)<sup>2</sup>, where his main character claims that Gaels are only at home while travelling *between* places.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, indeed, as well as often writing about the journeys themselves, Gaelic writers also write a great deal about the islands: islands where they themselves live, islands where they grew up, and imagined islands of a fantasy Gàidhealtachd that perhaps never truly existed. If a sense of marginality or liminality has been projected onto even some facets of the Gaelic literary consciousness, this would help to explain why writing about the islands is so prevalent. More prosaically, of course, Gaelic speakers write about islands because many of them are islanders and they write about what they know. Nevertheless, it is a point of some interest that islands have featured so prominently in the literature, even during a century in which the ‘imagined community’ gradually moved in large part away from the islands.

Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, more Gaelic-speakers live in mainland towns than in the Hebrides. And yet, we still see a fascination with what is frequently depicted as a kind of Gaelic ‘first environment’. We may wonder to what extent this writing about islands is an attempt to intervene in the unifying and totalising myths of the ‘national’ culture or if it is, in fact, a rather obvious symbol of a need to isolate the community from such external myths; whether it is, in a way, a process of self-othering’. At different points in the

fiction, both synchronically and perhaps especially diachronically, we see islands being used as metaphors of isolation, with the sea being the barrier that necessitates 'otherness'; but we also see islands being depicted as the confident centres of their own cultural significance, with the sea regarded as a vibrant conduit allowing for the to-ing and fro-ing of intercultural communication, as well as the movement of people, goods and ideas. In other words, the symbolism that attaches to islands in Gaelic writing features a rich and textured plurality. Let us take a few examples from the past century, to explore some of the ways in which writers have addressed the connection with the islands and ways in which they have used them figuratively, to progress towards understanding whether they play a part in any kind of unifying myth.

First, let us turn to the early period in Gaelic fiction writing, from around a century ago, when prominent writers included Iain MacCormaic, Iain MacPhàidein and Henry 'Fionn' Whyte, all of whom left islands at comparatively young ages and moved to the cities. A useful example for our purposes is MacCormaic's 'Troimh Chruadal' ('Through Hardship').<sup>4</sup> 'Troimh Chruadal' has many features typical of MacCormaic's writing, including unsophisticated plotting and shallow characterisation. However, also in common with much of MacCormaic's other work, it excels in the area of descriptive writing. Where MacCormaic really shines is in his description of the natural world, something which is equally true of many of his early twentieth-century contemporaries. In some of MacCormaic's fiction, the depiction of the natural world takes such precedence that it becomes a central interest. This is certainly the case in 'Troimh Chruadal', where the plot is transparently thin and the main character, Calum, has no depth or development and so the reader's interest is held primarily by the description of Calum's journey through the island: MacCormaic tries to make Calum the 'hero' by investing him with almost superhuman determination and ruggedness, which is a mistake he commonly makes in writing his main characters.

Calum must take a letter from his landlord in Mull to the mainland town of Inveraray and return with the response before some kind of financial disaster will befall. The journey through Mull is the main manifestation of the hardship suggested in the title, but several other hardships are suggested in the course of the story, to the extent that we begin to realise that Mull is being used as a metonym for life's struggles in a more general sense. Calum's landlord is

currently struggling with considerable financial difficulty and has survived the terror of a shipwreck, having miraculously swum what appears to have been a great distance to save himself. He has, in this incident, lost both his wife and his fortune, the latter of which means he has trouble paying debts he has inherited on the land. What is notable is that the metaphor MacCormaic uses to describe the landlord's overcoming of his many tribulations is 'Fhuair e rudha an d~~o~~igh rudha chur seachad' ('he managed to get past headland after headland')<sup>5</sup>, a particularly insular figure of speech if ever there was one!

It is significant that the journey from Oban to Inveraray and back (perhaps close to eighty miles of walking in all) is glossed over in a few lines, whereas the bulk of the narration focuses on the walk from Knockvologan to Grasspoint, a similar total distance. What we see here, therefore, is part of what becomes in the story as a whole a localisation of significance: only the journey through Mull matters in this adventure, and the rest of the journey is irrelevant. Throughout the story, there are numerous references to local lore and the perceptions of the people of the area, including the importance placed on weather knowledge. For instance, it is expected that a local will understand the signs of coming weather and respond accordingly. The island comes to stand for its own kind of totality of human experience:

B' e meadhon a' gheamhraidh a bh' ann, agus geamhradh eile cho doineannach  
cha robh cuimhne aig an neach bu shine 'san Ros uile.<sup>6</sup>  
(It was the middle of winter and not even the oldest person in the whole Ross  
could remember such a stormy winter)

And:

Cha do sheas air leathrach mairt am Muile riamh a chothaicheadh a leithid de  
shìd<sup>7</sup>  
(There was not a cow on Mull that could ever battle such weather)

This localisation of significance is augmented by the way that the characters in the story are known primarily by their connections to places. Their identities are tied to the island. And, ultimately, even their salvation comes in the form of an island, albeit a different one.

A good deal of the depiction of scenery is highly poetic, with little lyrical runs that

are reminiscent of the folktales, using devices similar to what we would hear in those tales, including alliteration and hyperbole, such as in: ‘Bha ‘n dùthaich air a còmhdach le sneachd bho mhullach beinne gu srath, ‘s gach lòn is lochan fo bhratach tiugh de dheigh’<sup>8</sup> (‘The country was covered in snow from the top of the mountain to the valley, and every pool and loch was under a thick banner of ice’). The hyperbole encompasses both the island and its inhabitants; this is a common device in MacCormaic’s writing and can be traced back into nineteenth century fiction and beyond that, again, into the folktales. This style of writing also extends to personification of the island, which is depicted as wearing satin banners of snow, whistling, and:

Bha ‘n Gleann-mór roimhe ‘s a chraos dorcha fosgaile<sup>9</sup>  
(The great glen was before him with its dark [laughing] maw open)

The ineluctable connection between the island and its inhabitants is also figured with the opposite device to personification, which is known as chremamorphism: the figurative reification of the human. We see several examples of chremamorphism in the story, and especially at the moment when Calum somehow struggles his way through the terrible storm to arrive at Grasspoint. His friend Eachann, the ferryman, exclaims:

“‘s ann a shaoileas mi gur h-e tom fraoich a th’ annad, neo creag chrotalach”<sup>10</sup>  
(I could swear you were a mound of heather, or a lichen-covered rock)

Islands retain a prominent position throughout the twentieth-century literature, in the various modes, from Somhairle MacGill-Eain’s (Sorley McLean’s) major poem ‘An Cuilthionn’ (‘The Cuillin’) to Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn’s final volume of Gaelic poems *An t-Eilean agus An Cànan* (The Island and the Language), and from various of Iain MacPhàidein’s cèilidh-house tales to Aonghas Pàdraig Caimbeul’s *An Oidhche Mus do Sheòl Sinn*<sup>11</sup> (*The Night Before We Sailed*, 2003). ‘The island’ becomes a symbol of Gaelicness, with the language (slightly inaccurately, but inextricably) linked with the Hebrides in many people’s minds. The island is thus appropriated in an almost-Derridan way as a central trope of *différance*, standing for both the potential isolation and differentness of Gaelic culture and, at the same time, the deferred meaning of Gaelic culture in a complex and multifaceted context that keeps changing over time. Thus, in Tormod Caimbeul’s *Deireadh an Fhoghair*<sup>12</sup> (*The End of Autumn*), the island community is

dying because its population is ageing, but there is also an ironic self-awareness in Caimbeul's writing, an awareness that the island community he is writing is already something of a cliché, and that the island as a cultural space is far more robust than it might seem at first sight.

We can appreciate the incomers to the island in two ways, both in *Deireadh an Fhoghair* and in Caimbeul's other fiction. Caimbeul depicts the incomers' interaction with the native Gaels as having a hybridising effect on the local culture. It would be easy to interpret this as meaning that they are suffocating the local culture. But, in stories such as 'an naidheachd bhon taigh ('the news from home'), for instance, Caimbeul *defers* this meaning, quite deliberately and carefully, leaving the ultimate effect of the hybridising process open.

Nestled between the early century fiction of the likes of MacCormaic and the more modern style of writing of the likes of Caimbeul and Mac a' Ghobhainn, we can find 'Am Prìosan Sàile'<sup>13</sup> by Cailein T. MacCoinnich. 'Am Prìosan Sàile' is an adventure yarn. The main character effectively challenges the landlord to devise a prison he cannot escape. When the landlord imprisons him on an island, it at first appears he has met his match. However, the focal character befriends a local community and makes himself an integral part of their lives. This would have been a satisfying end to the story and a figurative 'escape', but MacCoinnich cannot resist a final twist in which the main character does indeed smuggle himself off the island. What is interesting here is that the island, initially seen as an inescapable prison, is then seen as a world in its own right, a place that the main character finally only escapes simply because he wants to prove he can.

A good deal of Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn's writing is linked to his connection with the island of his own early life. The relationship is complex and evolving over time, and it is not at all simply a nostalgic or sentimental bond. In one very short story of his that appeared only in the Stornoway Gazette, 'Air an Eilean'<sup>14</sup> ('On the Island'), we see the island symbolising hope and aspiration. However, the same island also stands for people's deep-seated fear of hope and aspiration. These are unusual associations in Gaelic writing for the most part, but the multivalent attitude towards his first environment is typical in Mac a' Ghobhainn's writing.

Mac a' Ghobhainn wrote a novel in English (as Iain Crichton Smith) called *On the Island*<sup>15</sup>, which had similar themes to those in Caimbeul's *Deireadh an Fhoghair*,

despite being an extremely different book. In Gaelic, he wrote several stories that feature characters returning to 'the island' after a lengthy period and having to come to terms with the nature of this return. Mac a' Ghobhainn's characters thus wrestle with what might be regarded by some critics as *unheimlich*. A classic example is 'An Coigreach' ('The Stranger'), in which the lead character returns to the place of his youth and pretends to be a stranger, because, effectively, that is what he feels he has become. Another of these stories about returning to the island is 'Turas Dhachaigh 1' ('A Journey Home'), which appears along with a completely separate 'Turas Dhachaigh 2' in Mac a' Ghobhainn's second collection *An Dubh is An Gorm*.<sup>16</sup> This story links the return theme with the trope of hope and aspiration mentioned above, in that here again the island represents the denial of such things or even their outright abnegation. Only by leaving, we might conclude from this story, could the islander succeed in life. The twist is that this success has led not to happiness but to a lack of fulfilment. The character realises at last that he can never be happy because he left the island and the woman he loved in his youth. At last, he realises he must try to go back, which forces him to try to reconcile the different parts of his life and identity. Again, though, we see a manifestation of what could be regarded as *unheimlich*: the island he returns to is not the one he remembers, but is eerily similar. Indeed, his entire reason for returning is not what he thought it was. He recognises that he is drawn back not by the woman he lost but by what he identifies as: 'ròp-cheangail dhomh ri bacan m' eilean' ('a rope tying me to my island tether').

A story even more clearly imbued with a sense of the uncanny and an inexplicable connection with the island is Mac a' Ghobhainn's 'An t-Adhar Ameireaganach'<sup>17</sup> ('The American Sky'), which is not to be confused with the similarly-titled English story 'An American Sky' (1993), by the same author. The two are significantly different, despite the fact that both of them deal with exiles returning to 'the island' (which we may understand as being Lewis). In 'An t-Adhar Ameireaganach', the main character undergoes a peculiar synaesthetic sensation of *cianalas* (a particularly Gaelic version of homesickness). On the other hand, the same writer's story 'A' Chroit' ('The Croft', 1980) portrays the island in terms of comfortable familiarity and normality, where its opportunities are weighed up against the different kinds of opportunities presented by being 'away'.

In fact, we could take any number of Mac a' Ghobhainn's stories and see in them

various kinds of significance related to islands, and we could do the same thing with other important Gaelic writers of the past generation, such as Alasdair Caimbeul (brother of Tormod), Iain Moireach and Fionnlagh MacLeòid. Our purpose here is not to enumerate, however, but to illustrate that there still exists such a strong connection with the *idea* of 'island' in recent Gaelic fiction. At the beginning of this piece, I posed the question of whether we can regard this idea as part of a totalising or unifying myth of the culture. The examples presented here may not be enough in and of themselves to give any kind of satisfactory answer to that question. The diversity and plurality of the kinds of figurative associations with islands in the writing mentioned here might argue against notions of totalising or unifying cultural myths. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of islands in the figurative language and, most importantly, their central cultural significance in much of the literature could hint in the other direction. In other words, I have failed to find a convincing argument either for or against the hypothesis and must opt for the easy escape route of suggesting that further study will be worthwhile!

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