Addressing Devastation in Gaelic Literature of the Clearances

By Petra Johana Poncarová

In Gaelic literature, two periods in particular have become associated with images of large-scale destruction and the obliteration of a world, if not the world. The first of these watersheds was the failed Jacobite rising of 1745, the following Hanoverian repercussions, and the gradual dismantling of some of the most substantial principles and mechanisms of Gaelic society as it existed at that point. In the poem 'Latha Chùil Lodair' (The Day of Culloden), written shortly after the battle, Iain Ruadh Stiùbhart (John Roy Stuart), an officer in Prince Charlie's army, reflected on the extensive human loss and the overall desolation with powerful imagery and formal assuredness.

Mo chreach mhòr! Na cuirp ghlè-gheal Tha nan laigh' air na slèibhtean ud thall, Gun chiste, gun lèintean, Gun adhlacadh fhèin anns na tuill; Chuid tha beò dhiubh 'n dèidh sgaoileadh 'S iad gam fògair le gaothan thar tuinn –	*My great grief, the white bodies* *That lie on the hills over there,* *Without coffin or shroud,* *Or burial even in holes!* *Those that still live have scattered,* *And are now herded close on the ships.*[1]

The vast, empty, haunted landscapes of the Highlands, in which lonely characters dwell while remembering deceased loved-ones and a bygone world, in the Ossianic publications by Seumas Mac a' Phearsain (James Macpherson), who witnessed the post-Culloden ravages close-hand in his native Badenoch, can be also interpreted as a response to the post-Culloden social and cultural devastation and the double marginalisation of Gaelic-speaking areas within Scotland and of Scotland within the United Kingdom in the second half of the eighteenth century.[2]

This was already the beginning of the next critical period in the history of Gaelic Scotland, the complex phenomenon known as the Clearances. As Eric Richards

emphasises, the Clearances constitute 'part of the universal story of rural displacement' and the events, their material traces, and political and cultural responses to them can be profitably explored in relation to similar processes that affected rural communities across the world; however, they also have their own 'particular character, mythology and emotional impact' of which the literary responses constitute an important part.[3]

The heated and politically loaded debates on the Clearances continue even two hundred years later, and they resurface in contemporary affairs of the region, especially when it comes to claims to land and housing policies. While the dimension of ethnic cleansing and racialised cultural prejudice, stressed by some historians, tends to be downplayed in other accounts in favour of socio-economic explanations, it is certain that the Clearances generate images of widespread destruction and the erasure of people, their culture, and a way of life, and they are perceived as one of the biggest ruptures in the history of Gaelic Scotland:[4] Somhairle MacGill-Eain (Sorley MacLean) asserted that they 'constitute one of the saddest tragedies that has ever come on a people.'[5] Literary responses to them thus constitute post-apocalyptic writing in the sense of addressing large-scale human and natural devastation with continuing impact.

Although the subject has acquired the aura of being over-discussed and, in some views, given disproportionate attention, in terms of the substantial and diverse corpus of literary responses, there is no volume comparable to reference works of history, such as Richard's monograph and James Hunter's pivotal *The Making of the Crofting Community* (1976). The non-existence of a comprehensive book-length study devoted to the topic that would encompass these reflections from the eighteenth century to the present, across genres and in both Gaelic and English, and also engage with texts written or set during the time of the Clearances where they are not mentioned or are present obliquely, is one of the many striking conspicuous gaps in research of Gaelic literature and in Scottish literary studies in general.[6] This essay seeks to make a contribution to this debate by discussing some Gaelic poems that address the Clearances, with focus on the way they respond to the devastation, and by sketching out how they continue to be relevant to the region.

As MacLean observes in his seminal essay on Gaelic poetry of the Clearances,

although a number of the evictions took place before the end of the eighteenth century, most of the preserved literary accounts come from the nineteenth century. One of the early responses, likely composed shortly after 1800 but close in mood and style to eighteenth-century verse, is 'Òran nan Cìobairean Gallda' (Song on the Lowland Shepherds) by Ailean Dall Mac Dhùghaill (Ailean MacDougall), which opens with the following verses:

Thàinig oirnn do dh'Albainn crois Tha daoine bochda nochdte ris, Gun bhiadh, gun aodach, gun chluain, Tha 'n àird a tuath air a sgrios.[7]	*There has come on us in Scotland a cross,* *Poor people are naked before it;* *Without food, without clothing, without pasture,* *The Land of the North is utterly destroyed.*

In contrast to a number of other works on the subject, Ailean Dall deals directly with the desolation, and the apocalyptic image of the poor people, naked and starved, is stark and immediate: it is an account of here and now, not a retrospect.

In 'Mo Mhollachd aig na Caoraich Mhòr' (My Curse at the Big Sheep, also known in different versions as 'Dùthaich MhicAoidh', i.e. 'Mackay Country' or 'Sutherland') by Eòghainn MacDhonnchaidh (Ewen Robertson), the people are already absent and Sutherland is depicted as an empty landscape devoid of human presence, while the speaker refers back to the time 'mus robh Dùthaich 'IcAoidh na fàsach' (before the Mackay Country was made a desert), working with the frequent 'before and after' scenario.

O mo mhallachd aig an sguad A chuir Clann Mhic Aoidh fo ruaig, On a' mhonadh gus a' chuan, Gun taigh, gun buail', gun chrò ac'.[8]	*O my curse at the lot* *That put Clan Mackay to flight,* *From the moorland to the ocean* *Without house, without folds, without pens.*

In 'Trom Tiamhaidh Mo Chridhe' (Sad and Heavy is My Heart) by An Lighiche Iain MacLachlainn (Dr John MacLachlan), the speaker has their eye fixed 'air an fhàsach, 's n làraichean lom' (the wasteland, and the ruins now bare).[9] The words 'làrach', with its semantic range of 'site, ruin, imprint, mark, scar, place', and 'fàsach', denoting 'desert, wilderness, empty place', are loaded terms strongly

linked with literature of the Clearances, and their presence may bring their associations forward in texts that do not ostensibly deal with them.[10] In the absence of people, sometimes the poets make the ruins themselves or the empty landscape speak out and bear witness. In the poem 'Còmhradh eadar Dùn Bhrusgraig agus Fear-turais' (Conversation between Dun Nosebridge and a Visitor) by Iain Og Mac Còrcadail (John MacCorkindale, Junior), a visitor addresses a hill fort in Islay and asks it about the striking absence of people in the otherwise unchanged landscape. As all human inhabitants have been cleared, the hill is the only source of information. In contrast to Sorley MacLean's poem '"Tha na Beanntan gun Bhruidhinn"' ("The Mountains Are Speechless"), where the landscape falls silent as a result of the Clearances, Dun Nosebridge is very vocal (and even protests about being inspected and gazed at by the visitor).

In some cases, poetry of the Clearances invokes responses to post-Culloden ravages: for instance, as Meek notes, MacLachlan's verse that addresses the evictions involves distinct Ossianic references.[11] Macpherson's publications and literary responses to the Clearances, however implicit, also contributed to the shaping of the rich literary and cultural topos of the heath and the moor which, though associated primarily with the Scottish Highlands themselves, came to influence the perception and descriptions of similar landscapes across Europe, from the heaths of Jutland in the works of Macpherson's Danish admirer Steen Steensen Blicher to Arthur Conan Doyle's Dartmoor.

The notion of the Clearances as the end of a world is emphasised in poems that contrast the situation 'before' and 'after', tapping into the tradition of *caochladh* poems which address an adverse change, often explored through the medium of a place. These contrasting poems range from rather straightforward comparisons of the famous 'An Gleann san Robh Mi Òg' (The Glen Where I Was Young) by Niall MacLeòid (Neil MacLeod) to the more subtle strategies of 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird' (A Message to the Poet) by Uilleam MacDhunLèibhe (William Livingstone), which first dwells extensively on the glorious beauty of Islay to generate more emotional momentum for the devastating descriptions of the effects of the Clearances later in the poem. Again, it underlines the importance of bearing witness to the catastrophe with the variants of the refrain 'mar a fhuair 's a chunnaic mise, / a' toirt an fhios seo chun a' Bhàird' (just as I found and as I saw, / take this message to the Poet).[12]

Poetry of the Clearances frequently intersects with other important trends of Gaelic writing of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, i.e. with poetry of emigration, which was to a large extent prompted by Clearances, either directly or indirectly, and with nature poetry. As MacLean notes, older Gaelic nature poetry, though splendid and vigorous, tends to be to a large extent unconcerned with humanity, which stands in sharp contrast with the 'very humanised nature poetry of the 19th century', and he points out that it often dwells on 'the contrast between unchanging, flourishing nature and human desolation.'[13] One trend is to depict nature flourishing despite, or even because of, the absence of people, the other to equate physical and human desolation of Gaelic Scotland, presenting not only social and cultural devastation but also an ecological catastrophe.

Some plants – especially bracken and nettles, and to a lesser extent heather and moss – and animals, for obvious reasons mostly sheep and sheepdogs, come to function as markers of Clearance, and their presence in the landscape suggests a recent layer hiding the traces of former habitation and cultivation. Livingstone's 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird' shows deft employment of these images:

Tha an nathair bhreac na lùban Air na h-ùrlar far an d'fhàs Na fir mhòr' a chunnaic mise; […] Tha 'n Learga ghlacach ghrianach 'S fuidheall cianail air a taobh; Tha an Gleann na fhiadhair uaine […][14]	*The speckled adder lies coiling* *On the floors where once there grew* *The big men that I saw there; […]* *Sunny Largie with its many hollows* *Has a sorrowful remnant on its slope;* *The Glen is now a green wilderness* *[…]*

The landscape which flourishes despite the human catastrophe is one of the central preoccupations of Livingstone's 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird'. As Meek notes, the 'deceptive beauty of a vacant landscape when observed externally like an oil painting; its picturesque appearance conceals the treacherous nature of improvement, which has destroyed ecological balances',[15] and it serves as a disturbing reminder that one of the main attractions of Highland and Island landscapes to visitors – their supposed wilderness and emptiness – result from historical trauma. This vision of an overgrowing world, of places once shaped by human presence turning into a wilderness, brings some literary responses to the Clearances close to the concerns of post-humanism, and invite connections to

works seemingly distant in both time and focus, such as Brian Aldiss's 1962 speculative fiction novel *Hothouse*, which presents a vision of Earth overrun with exuberant plant life.

Poems that combine responses to the Clearances and nature poetry often show remarkable focus on the resulting decrease in diversity, both natural and cultural. In 'Òran nam Balgairean' (Song of the Foxes), Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (Dunan Ban Macintyre) lists in detail what disappeared from the Highlands with the coming of the hated sheep (and the eponymous foxes are praised for hunting them, reflecting the ability of nature to restore the balance by its own means). Dr John MacLachlan, in the aforementioned 'Trom Tiamhaidh Mo Chridhe', powerfully contrasts bustling activity, including seasonal work, social life, and sports, with monotonous emptiness, and a rich soundscape of talk, song, and laughter replaced with the silence of the sheep. This awareness of the precarity and instability of postapocalyptic natural and social systems caused by lack of diversity is one of the insights of the Clearance poetry with broad contemporary reverberations.

Some of the patterns and preoccupations of nineteenth-century Clearance poetry were inventively taken over by modern Gaelic poets. Sorley MacLean discussed the topic in several of his poems, most famously in 'Hallaig' (1954), which was inspired by the eponymous cleared township on MacLean's native Raasay and has become one of the most iconic and anthologised Gaelic poems of the twentieth century, leaving a lasting impact on the place and its perception. In contrast to MacLean's usual radical outspokenness, 'Hallaig', haunted and haunting, makes only covert references to the causes and perpetrators of the Clearances and focuses on personal memory and the power of subjective consciousness to reverse historical trauma by means of creative imagination. In terms of the landscape, it draws on the traditional division of trees into noble and low ones and introduces a political distinction, contrasting native woods with pine forests artificially planted for commercial use, thus adding to the store of symbolically loaded vegetation in Clearance poetry.

MacLean also discussed Clearances in several other works, which have been mostly overshadowed by 'Hallaig', including his long poem 'An Cuilithionn' and shorter compositions 'Am Putan Airgid' (The Silver Button) and the aforementioned '"Tha na Beanntann gun Bhruidhinn."' In terms of apocalyptic imagery and contemporary relevance, perhaps the most intriguing one among

these ‘other Clearance poems’[16] is ‘Sgreapadal’ (Screapadal, 1982), a sister poem to ‘Hallaig’ which takes as its focus another cleared township on the east coast of Raasay. This poem should perhaps be read as a twentieth-century reworking of the earlier Clearance poems – with a broader understanding of what might cause ‘clearance’. Like Robertson, MacLean is very open in identifying the perpetrators of Raasay Clearances and their motivation. Similarly to ‘Fios Chun a’ Bhàird’, ‘Sgreapadal’ opens with a seductive description of the beauty of the place, with the young bracken growing in May, which serves as an early indication to those acquainted with the strategies of Clearance poetry. MacLean leaves the reader a long time to immerse in the sunlit scene before snapping them out of it by the revelation in the third stanza that the lush surface hides the wounds of historical trauma, which exposes the township as a heap of ruins. In a striking move, MacLean follows from nineteenth-century violent removals to present-day threats.

Thogadh ròn a cheann agus cearban a sheòl, ach an-diugh anns an linnidh togaidh long-fo-thuinn a turraid agus a druim dubh sliòm a’ maoidheadh an nì a dhèanadh smùr de choille, de lèanagan ’s de chreagan, a dh’fhàgadh Sgreapadal gun bhòidhche mar a dh’fhàgadh e gun daoine. […] Tha tùir eile air an linnidh a’ fanaid air an tùr a thuit dhe mullach Creag a’ Chaisteil, tùir as miosa na gach tùr a thog ainneart air an t-saoghal: pearasgopan ’s sliosan slìoma dubha luingeas a’ bhàis a mharbh mìltean Nagasaki	*A seal would lift its head* *and a basking-shark its sail,* *but today in the sea-sound* *a submarine lifts its turret* *and its black sleek back* *threatening the thing that would make* *dross of wood, of meadows and of rocks,* *that would leave Screapadal without beauty* *just as it was left without people. […]* *There are other towers on the Sound* *mocking the tower that fell* *from the top of Castle Rock,* *towers worse than every tower* *that violence raised in the world:* *the periscopes and sleek black sides* *of the ships of the death* *that killed the thousands of Nagasaki*

Although the connection between the Clearances and nuclear war may at first

glance give the impression of one of MacLean's typical dizzying leaps from the local to the global, the link has a very real factual basis. The Sound of Raasay, between the east coast of the island and Applecross on the mainland, has been used, as the deepest stretch of sheltered water around the British Isles, for testing of nuclear submarines, and a military base is located on the depopulated island of Rona, north of Raasay. These spatial intersections lead MacLean to consider advanced military technologies and their capacity to do harm on a much greater scale. At the very end of the poem, coming back to the landscape which was emphasised at the beginning, hunger and famine are likened to local rocks and the exuberant young bracken turns poisonous, presenting a truly apocalyptic image of looming nuclear destruction.[17]

'S e 'n sannt 's an fhearas-mhòr a dh'fhàg Sgreapadal gun daoine agus bann iarainn nan lagh a chuir grèim-teanchrach air an t-sluagh, a' bagairt togail os an cionn Cùirn Mhòra dhubha 'n acrais is Creagan Meircil na gorta air am fàs an fhraineach phuinnsein on cinn an rocaid mharbhteach, bom idrigin is neodroin.	*Greed and social pride* *left Screapadal without people,* *and the iron band of laws* *that put a vice-like grip on the people,* *threatening to raise above them* *the black Carn-Mors of hunger* *and the Meircil rocks of famine* *on which grow the poisonous bracken* *from which come the deadly rocket, hydrogen and neutron bombs.*

Like a number of works of older Clearance poetry, 'Sgreapadal' also involves a strong religious dimension, contrasting the hypocritical devoutness of the perpetrators of the evictions with the compassion of the champions of the common people.[18] MacLean identified religion as one of the most important factors in terms of passive acceptance of the Clearances, and the link between the evictions and especially the Evangelical movement in the Highlands and Islands is prominent both in scholarly discourse and in literary responses, and brings the figurative understanding of the apocalypse as large-scale catastrophic event together with its eschatological Biblical roots.

These concerns are prominent in the powerful short poem 'Srath Nabhair' (Strathnaver) by Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson), which was published

in his second collection, *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (Between Summer and Autumn, 1967).[19] The title evokes one of the places affected by the Sutherland Clearances which, due to their scale and ruthlessness, came to be perceived as an infamous encapsulation of the whole phenomenon. The opening stanza of the poem includes the word 'sìorraidheachd' (eternity), ushering in a religious undertone and contrasting human suffering with the cosmic perspective of the distant sky and stars. The second stanza refers to an old woman[20] being put out onto the dung-heap, and the pretentious piety of the agents of Clearances is confronted with their blatant lack of compassion by means of a biting reference to Matthew 8:20: while the birds of the air have their nests and, importantly, sheep have their folds, the evicted people, like the Son of Man, have no shelter:

Agus siud a' bhlianna cuideachd a shlaod iad a' chailleach don t-sitig, a shealltainn cho eòlach 's a bha iad air an Fhirinn, oir bha nid aig eunlaith an adhair (agus cròthan aig na caoriach) ged nach robh àit aice-se anns an cuireadh i a ceann fòidhpe.[21]	*And that too was the year* *they hauled the old woman out on to the dung-heap,* *to demonstrate how knowledgeable they were in Scripture,* *for the birds of the air had nests* *(and the sheep had folds)* *though she had no place in which to lay down her* *head.*

The perspective of eternity and religious references run through the poem which closes with an image of an anonymous victim of the Clearances who is transformed into an everywoman: 'mar a chunniac mi uair is uair boireannach cràbhaidh / a dh' fhiosraich dòrainn an t-saoghail-sa / is sìth Dhè 'na sùilean' (just as time and time again I have seen a pious woman / who has suffered the sorrow of this world, / with the peace of God shining from her eyes). Given Thomson's ambiguous relationship with religion,[22] especially with the evangelical churches of Lewis, the equanimity of the pious woman who retains the divine peace in her gaze in spite of her afflictions is both admirable and regrettable, as it takes the edge off possible political and social resistance to suffering caused by human action.

Awareness of the two great desolations that affected Gaelic Scotland and the literary responses to them also resonate in journalistic discourse on topics that

relate to the region and possible threats to it in the twentieth century, including controversial military projects proposed for the Western Isles during the Cold War. Only some of them actually came to pass, but a number of places, including Stornoway and Uig in Lewis, Benbecula, North Uist, South Uist, and St Kilda were at some point threatened by increasing militarisation. One of the first ones was the plan to establish a rocket base in South Uist in 1953, which, as Wilson McLeod notes, meant the arrival of a large number of English-speaking staff with no command of Gaelic to the island which was and still is considered a stronghold of the language.[23] The proposition provoked strong criticism among Gaelic activists and initiatives, including An Comunn Gàidhealach and the Gaelic quarterly magazine *Gairm* (1952–2002), founded by Derick Thomson and Fionnlagh J. Mac Dhòmhnaill (Finlay J. MacDonald).

The editorial to *Gairm* 13 (Autumn 1955) mentions a cloud descending on Uist hills and claims that the rockets pose the greatest danger the Highlands and Islands have faced since the time of the battle of Culloden, enhancing the extent and seriousness of the threat by harking back to the devastation following the 1745 rising. The rocket base plan was again discussed in *Gairm* 17 (Autumn 1956), which includes the apocalyptic prophecy that should the project come to pass, it could bury Gaelic altogether. The editorial concedes that it most likely cannot be stopped by civic resistance, but claims it is necessary to provide the Gaelic communities with energy to defend their heritage, thus presenting the idea of the last defiant stand against the inevitable catastrophe. In *Gairm* 19 (Spring 1957), the editorial notes that the project for the rocket base is going to continue, giving Gaelic the cruellest blow which it ever suffered, surpassing even the post-Culloden repressions and the Clearances and all the related social upheaval, using the combined force of the two phenomena to persuade readers of the gravity of the situation. Although the military projects did not involve, unlike the infamous Welsh case of the Llyn Celyn water reservoir in the 1960s,[24] actual forced removals of people, they were still envisaged as an indirect cultural and linguistic clearance.

References to the military projects in the Highlands and Islands recurred in *Gairm* editorials until the early 1990s. The editorial to Issue 109 (Winter 1979) reports that the people of Lewis have lost their battle with the Ministry of Defence, like South Uist did in the past, and that part of the island will be under the power of NATO soon. However, it proposes that the adverse developments

can be reversed, and suggests there may be potatoes growing again in places where rockets used to be, providing an interesting adverse image of renewed life, where natural growth and food production replaces technology of war, but that these changes will not happen under the feeble management of the Labour Party, suggesting the only way forward is Scottish independence. The editorials provide a remarkable insight into the impact of Cold War politics in the Highlands and Islands, and also into the lasting resonance of Culloden and the Clearances and visions of cultural and physical desolation.

The landscapes devoid of human presence, extolled for their 'untouched' emptiness, created by Clearances, and the physical and cultural legacy of the evictions, continue to shape the images and discourses of the Highlands and Islands, from art to advertising, and also the ways in which people, both inhabitants and visitors, relate to them. Some of the cleared township sites in the Highlands and Islands have become, as Richards notes, 'well-signposted heritage' spots and even 'places of pilgrimage'; Hallaig is one of them, due to the impact of MacLean's poem, which invites considerations on how to negotiate commemoration and commercial needs of the region. Gaelic literature of the Clearances, especially those works that do not shy away from the desolation and that manage, as Meek puts it, 'to condemn purposefully or react constructively',[25] remain relevant for finding ways to approach the sites and the material relics of the Clearances, envisaging a future for the places affected by them and for the people who live there, whether with familial ties to them or without them, and for reconnecting with them in a meaningful manner. On a more general level, Gaelic writing of the Clearances invites considerations on how to write ethically about large-scale injustice and trauma from a distance of two hundred years, while the events in question still have social, economic, and political impact.In Gaelic literature, two periods in particular have become associated with images of large-scale destruction and the obliteration of a world, if not the world. The first of these watersheds was the failed Jacobite rising of 1745, the following Hanoverian repercussions, and the gradual dismantling of some of the most substantial principles and mechanisms of Gaelic society as it existed at that point. In the poem 'Latha Chùil Lodair' (The Day of Culloden), written shortly after the battle, Iain Ruadh Stiùbhart (John Roy Stuart), an officer in Prince Charlie's army, reflected on the extensive human loss and the overall desolation with powerful imagery and formal assuredness.

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In ‘Trom Tiamhaidh Mo Chridhe’ (Sad and Heavy is My Heart) by An Lighiche Iain MacLachlainn (Dr John MacLachlan), the speaker has their eye fixed ‘air an fhàsach, ’s n làraichean lom’ (the wasteland, and the ruins now bare).[34] The words ‘làrach’, with its semantic range of ‘site, ruin, imprint, mark, scar, place’, and ‘fàsach’, denoting ‘desert, wilderness, empty place’, are loaded terms strongly linked with literature of the Clearances, and their presence may bring their associations forward in texts that do not ostensibly deal with them.[35] In the absence of people, sometimes the poets make the ruins themselves or the empty landscape speak out and bear witness. In the poem ‘Còmhradh eadar Dùn Bhrusgraig agus Fear-turais’ (Conversation between Dun Nosebridge and a Visitor) by Iain Og Mac Còrcadail (John MacCorkindale, Junior), a visitor addresses a hill fort in Islay and asks it about the striking absence of people in the otherwise unchanged landscape. As all human inhabitants have been cleared, the hill is the only source of information. In contrast to Sorley MacLean’s poem ‘“Tha na Beanntan gun Bhruidhinn”’ (“The Mountains Are Speechless”), where the landscape falls silent as a result of the Clearances, Dun Nosebridge is very vocal (and even protests about being inspected and gazed at by the visitor).

In some cases, poetry of the Clearances invokes responses to post-Culloden ravages: for instance, as Meek notes, MacLachlan’s verse that addresses the evictions involves distinct Ossianic references.[36] Macpherson’s publications and

literary responses to the Clearances, however implicit, also contributed to the shaping of the rich literary and cultural topos of the heath and the moor which, though associated primarily with the Scottish Highlands themselves, came to influence the perception and descriptions of similar landscapes across Europe, from the heaths of Jutland in the works of Macpherson's Danish admirer Steen Steensen Blicher to Arthur Conan Doyle's Dartmoor.

The notion of the Clearances as the end of a world is emphasised in poems that contrast the situation 'before' and 'after', tapping into the tradition of *caochladh* poems which address an adverse change, often explored through the medium of a place. These contrasting poems range from rather straightforward comparisons of the famous 'An Gleann san Robh Mi Òg' (The Glen Where I Was Young) by Niall MacLeòid (Neil MacLeod) to the more subtle strategies of 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird' (A Message to the Poet) by Uilleam MacDhunLèibhe (William Livingstone), which first dwells extensively on the glorious beauty of Islay to generate more emotional momentum for the devastating descriptions of the effects of the Clearances later in the poem. Again, it underlines the importance of bearing witness to the catastrophe with the variants of the refrain 'mar a fhuair 's a chunnaic mise, / a' toirt an fhios seo chun a' Bhàird' (just as I found and as I saw, / take this message to the Poet).[37]

Poetry of the Clearances frequently intersects with other important trends of Gaelic writing of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, i.e. with poetry of emigration, which was to a large extent prompted by Clearances, either directly or indirectly, and with nature poetry. As MacLean notes, older Gaelic nature poetry, though splendid and vigorous, tends to be to a large extent unconcerned with humanity, which stands in sharp contrast with the 'very humanised nature poetry of the 19th century', and he points out that it often dwells on 'the contrast between unchanging, flourishing nature and human desolation.'[38] One trend is to depict nature flourishing despite, or even because of, the absence of people, the other to equate physical and human desolation of Gaelic Scotland, presenting not only social and cultural devastation but also an ecological catastrophe.

Some plants – especially bracken and nettles, and to a lesser extent heather and moss – and animals, for obvious reasons mostly sheep and sheepdogs, come to function as markers of Clearance, and their presence in the landscape suggests a

recent layer hiding the traces of former habitation and cultivation. Livingstone's 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird' shows deft employment of these images:

Tha an nathair bhreac na lùban Air na h-ùrlar far an d'fhàs Na fir mhòr' a chunnaic mise; […] Tha 'n Learga ghlacach ghrianach 'S fuidheall cianail air a taobh; Tha an Gleann na fhiadhair uaine […][39]	*The speckled adder lies coiling* *On the floors where once there grew* *The big men that I saw there; […]* *Sunny Largie with its many hollows* *Has a sorrowful remnant on its slope;* *The Glen is now a green wilderness* *[…]*

The landscape which flourishes despite the human catastrophe is one of the central preoccupations of Livingstone's 'Fios Chun a' Bhàird'. As Meek notes, the 'deceptive beauty of a vacant landscape when observed externally like an oil painting; its picturesque appearance conceals the treacherous nature of improvement, which has destroyed ecological balances',[40] and it serves as a disturbing reminder that one of the main attractions of Highland and Island landscapes to visitors – their supposed wilderness and emptiness – result from historical trauma. This vision of an overgrowing world, of places once shaped by human presence turning into a wilderness, brings some literary responses to the Clearances close to the concerns of post-humanism, and invite connections to works seemingly distant in both time and focus, such as Brian Aldiss's 1962 speculative fiction novel *Hothouse*, which presents a vision of Earth overrun with exuberant plant life.

Poems that combine responses to the Clearances and nature poetry often show remarkable focus on the resulting decrease in diversity, both natural and cultural. In 'Òran nam Balgairean' (Song of the Foxes), Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (Dunan Ban Macintyre) lists in detail what disappeared from the Highlands with the coming of the hated sheep (and the eponymous foxes are praised for hunting them, reflecting the ability of nature to restore the balance by its own means). Dr John MacLachlan, in the aforementioned 'Trom Tiamhaidh Mo Chridhe', powerfully contrasts bustling activity, including seasonal work, social life, and sports, with monotonous emptiness, and a rich soundscape of talk, song, and laughter replaced with the silence of the sheep. This awareness of the precarity and instability of postapocalyptic natural and social systems caused by lack of diversity is one of the insights of the Clearance poetry with broad contemporary

reverberations.

Some of the patterns and preoccupations of nineteenth-century Clearance poetry were inventively taken over by modern Gaelic poets. Sorley MacLean discussed the topic in several of his poems, most famously in ‘Hallaig’ (1954), which was inspired by the eponymous cleared township on MacLean’s native Raasay and has become one of the most iconic and anthologised Gaelic poems of the twentieth century, leaving a lasting impact on the place and its perception. In contrast to MacLean’s usual radical outspokenness, ‘Hallaig’, haunted and haunting, makes only covert references to the causes and perpetrators of the Clearances and focuses on personal memory and the power of subjective consciousness to reverse historical trauma by means of creative imagination. In terms of the landscape, it draws on the traditional division of trees into noble and low ones and introduces a political distinction, contrasting native woods with pine forests artificially planted for commercial use, thus adding to the store of symbolically loaded vegetation in Clearance poetry.

MacLean also discussed Clearances in several other works, which have been mostly overshadowed by ‘Hallaig’, including his long poem ‘An Cuilithionn’ and shorter compositions ‘Am Putan Airgid’ (The Silver Button) and the aforementioned ‘“Tha na Beanntann gun Bhruidhinn.”’ In terms of apocalyptic imagery and contemporary relevance, perhaps the most intriguing one among these ‘other Clearance poems’[41] is ‘Sgreapadal’ (Screapadal, 1982), a sister poem to ‘Hallaig’ which takes as its focus another cleared township on the east coast of Raasay. This poem should perhaps be read as a twentieth-century reworking of the earlier Clearance poems – with a broader understanding of what might cause ‘clearance’. Like Robertson, MacLean is very open in identifying the perpetrators of Raasay Clearances and their motivation. Similarly to ‘Fios Chun a’ Bhàird’, ‘Sgreapadal’ opens with a seductive description of the beauty of the place, with the young bracken growing in May, which serves as an early indication to those acquainted with the strategies of Clearance poetry. MacLean leaves the reader a long time to immerse in the sunlit scene before snapping them out of it by the revelation in the third stanza that the lush surface hides the wounds of historical trauma, which exposes the township as a heap of ruins. In a striking move, MacLean follows from nineteenth-century violent removals to present-day threats.

Thogadh ròn a cheann agus cearban a sheòl, ach an-diugh anns an linnidh togaidh long-fo-thuinn a turraid agus a druim dubh sliòm a’ maoidheadh an nì a dhèanadh smùr de choille, de lèanagan ’s de chreagan, a dh’fhàgadh Sgreapadal gun bhòidhche mar a dh’fhàgadh e gun daoine. […] Tha tùir eile air an linnidh a’ fanaid air an tùr a thuit dhe mullach Creag a’ Chaisteil, tùir as miosa na gach tùr a thog ainneart air an t-saoghal: pearasgopan ’s sliosan slìoma dubha luingeas a’ bhàis a mharbh mìltean Nagasaki	*A seal would lift its head* *and a basking-shark its sail,* *but today in the sea-sound* *a submarine lifts its turret* *and its black sleek back* *threatening the thing that would make* *dross of wood, of meadows and of rocks,* *that would leave Screapadal without beauty* *just as it was left without people. […]* *There are other towers on the Sound* *mocking the tower that fell* *from the top of Castle Rock,* *towers worse than every tower* *that violence raised in the world:* *the periscopes and sleek black sides* *of the ships of the death* *that killed the thousands of Nagasaki*

Although the connection between the Clearances and nuclear war may at first glance give the impression of one of MacLean’s typical dizzying leaps from the local to the global, the link has a very real factual basis. The Sound of Raasay, between the east coast of the island and Applecross on the mainland, has been used, as the deepest stretch of sheltered water around the British Isles, for testing of nuclear submarines, and a military base is located on the depopulated island of Rona, north of Raasay. These spatial intersections lead MacLean to consider advanced military technologies and their capacity to do harm on a much greater scale. At the very end of the poem, coming back to the landscape which was emphasised at the beginning, hunger and famine are likened to local rocks and the exuberant young bracken turns poisonous, presenting a truly apocalyptic image of looming nuclear destruction.[42]

’S e ’n sannt ’s an fhearas-mhòr a dh’fhàg Sgreapadal gun daoine agus bann iarainn nan lagh a chuir grèim-teanchrach air an t-sluagh, a’ bagairt togail os an cionn Cùirn Mhòra dhubha ’n acrais is Creagan Meircil na gorta air am fàs an fhraineach phuinnsein on cinn an rocaid mharbhteach, bom idrigin is neodroin.	*Greed and social pride* *left Screapadal without people,* *and the iron band of laws* *that put a vice-like grip on the people,* *threatening to raise above them* *the black Carn-Mors of hunger* *and the Meircil rocks of famine* *on which grow the poisonous bracken* *from which come the deadly rocket,* *hydrogen and neutron bombs.*

Like a number of works of older Clearance poetry, ‘Sgreapadal’ also involves a strong religious dimension, contrasting the hypocritical devoutness of the perpetrators of the evictions with the compassion of the champions of the common people.[43] MacLean identified religion as one of the most important factors in terms of passive acceptance of the Clearances, and the link between the evictions and especially the Evangelical movement in the Highlands and Islands is prominent both in scholarly discourse and in literary responses, and brings the figurative understanding of the apocalypse as large-scale catastrophic event together with its eschatological Biblical roots.

These concerns are prominent in the powerful short poem ‘Srath Nabhair’ (Strathnaver) by Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson), which was published in his second collection, *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (Between Summer and Autumn, 1967).[44] The title evokes one of the places affected by the Sutherland Clearances which, due to their scale and ruthlessness, came to be perceived as an infamous encapsulation of the whole phenomenon. The opening stanza of the poem includes the word ‘sìorraidheachd’ (eternity), ushering in a religious undertone and contrasting human suffering with the cosmic perspective of the distant sky and stars. The second stanza refers to an old woman[45] being put out onto the dung-heap, and the pretentious piety of the agents of Clearances is confronted with their blatant lack of compassion by means of a biting reference to Matthew 8:20: while the birds of the air have their nests and, importantly, sheep have their folds, the evicted people, like the Son of Man, have no shelter:

Agus siud a’ bhlianna cuideachd a shlaod iad a’ chailleach don t-sitig, a shealltainn cho eòlach ’s a bha iad air an Fhirinn, oir bha nid aig eunlaith an adhair (agus cròthan aig na caoriach) ged nach robh àit aice-se anns an cuireadh i a ceann fòidhpe.[46]	*And that too was the year* *they hauled the old woman out on to the dung-heap,* *to demonstrate how knowledgeable they were in Scripture,* *for the birds of the air had nests* *(and the sheep had folds)* *though she had no place in which to lay down her* *head.*

The perspective of eternity and religious references run through the poem which closes with an image of an anonymous victim of the Clearances who is transformed into an everywoman: ‘mar a chunniac mi uair is uair boireannach cràbhaidh / a dh’ fhiosraich dòrainn an t-saoghail-sa / is sìth Dhè ’na sùilean’ (just as time and time again I have seen a pious woman / who has suffered the sorrow of this world, / with the peace of God shining from her eyes). Given Thomson’s ambiguous relationship with religion,[47] especially with the evangelical churches of Lewis, the equanimity of the pious woman who retains the divine peace in her gaze in spite of her afflictions is both admirable and regrettable, as it takes the edge off possible political and social resistance to suffering caused by human action.

Awareness of the two great desolations that affected Gaelic Scotland and the literary responses to them also resonate in journalistic discourse on topics that relate to the region and possible threats to it in the twentieth century, including controversial military projects proposed for the Western Isles during the Cold War. Only some of them actually came to pass, but a number of places, including Stornoway and Uig in Lewis, Benbecula, North Uist, South Uist, and St Kilda were at some point threatened by increasing militarisation. One of the first ones was the plan to establish a rocket base in South Uist in 1953, which, as Wilson McLeod notes, meant the arrival of a large number of English-speaking staff with no command of Gaelic to the island which was and still is considered a stronghold of the language.[48] The proposition provoked strong criticism among Gaelic activists and initiatives, including An Comunn Gàidhealach and the Gaelic quarterly magazine *Gairm* (1952–2002), founded by Derick Thomson and Fionnlagh J. Mac Dhòmhnaill (Finlay J. MacDonald).

The editorial to *Gairm* 13 (Autumn 1955) mentions a cloud descending on Uist hills and claims that the rockets pose the greatest danger the Highlands and Islands have faced since the time of the battle of Culloden, enhancing the extent and seriousness of the threat by harking back to the devastation following the 1745 rising. The rocket base plan was again discussed in *Gairm* 17 (Autumn 1956), which includes the apocalyptic prophecy that should the project come to pass, it could bury Gaelic altogether. The editorial concedes that it most likely cannot be stopped by civic resistance, but claims it is necessary to provide the Gaelic communities with energy to defend their heritage, thus presenting the idea of the last defiant stand against the inevitable catastrophe. In *Gairm* 19 (Spring 1957), the editorial notes that the project for the rocket base is going to continue, giving Gaelic the cruellest blow which it ever suffered, surpassing even the post-Culloden repressions and the Clearances and all the related social upheaval, using the combined force of the two phenomena to persuade readers of the gravity of the situation. Although the military projects did not involve, unlike the infamous Welsh case of the Llyn Celyn water reservoir in the 1960s,[49] actual forced removals of people, they were still envisaged as an indirect cultural and linguistic clearance.

References to the military projects in the Highlands and Islands recurred in *Gairm* editorials until the early 1990s. The editorial to Issue 109 (Winter 1979) reports that the people of Lewis have lost their battle with the Ministry of Defence, like South Uist did in the past, and that part of the island will be under the power of NATO soon. However, it proposes that the adverse developments can be reversed, and suggests there may be potatoes growing again in places where rockets used to be, providing an interesting adverse image of renewed life, where natural growth and food production replaces technology of war, but that these changes will not happen under the feeble management of the Labour Party, suggesting the only way forward is Scottish independence. The editorials provide a remarkable insight into the impact of Cold War politics in the Highlands and Islands, and also into the lasting resonance of Culloden and the Clearances and visions of cultural and physical desolation.

The landscapes devoid of human presence, extolled for their ‘untouched’ emptiness, created by Clearances, and the physical and cultural legacy of the evictions, continue to shape the images and discourses of the Highlands and Islands, from art to advertising, and also the ways in which people, both

inhabitants and visitors, relate to them. Some of the cleared township sites in the Highlands and Islands have become, as Richards notes, ‘well-signposted heritage’ spots and even ‘places of pilgrimage’; Hallaig is one of them, due to the impact of MacLean’s poem, which invites considerations on how to negotiate commemoration and commercial needs of the region. Gaelic literature of the Clearances, especially those works that do not shy away from the desolation and that manage, as Meek puts it, ‘to condemn purposefully or react constructively’,[50] remain relevant for finding ways to approach the sites and the material relics of the Clearances, envisaging a future for the places affected by them and for the people who live there, whether with familial ties to them or without them, and for reconnecting with them in a meaningful manner. On a more general level, Gaelic writing of the Clearances invites considerations on how to write ethically about large-scale injustice and trauma from a distance of two hundred years, while the events in question still have social, economic, and political impact.

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