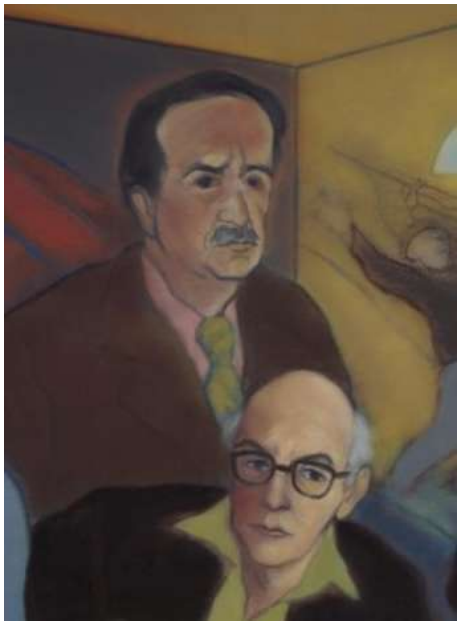
‘The most exhausting of all ways to make a living’: School teaching and Education in the Life and Work of Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith

By Emma Dymock



Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith in “Poets’ Pub” (1980) by Alexander Moffat. National Galleries of Scotland.

In 1945, a Fifth-Year pupil in the Nicolson Institute, Stornoway, received the Gaelic Prize from an ‘unusually enlightened Gaelic teacher.’ The recipient of the prize was the young Iain Crichton Smith, and the book he was given was *Dàin do Eimhir* by Sorley MacLean. Crichton Smith acknowledges that, while he had been studying Gaelic literature in school and admired the love poetry of William Ross, he was searching for the throb of the contemporary and ‘there was little else at that time that seemed to me to be alive with the resonance that a young poet looks for.’ What he found in *Dàin do Eimhir* was ‘an authority which I had not heard often in the Gaelic poetry I was reading at school.’[1] This seemingly small biographical detail from Crichton Smith neatly brings together a number of

educational threads which connect Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith and the wider educational backdrop of Scotland at that time, which both writers continued to be a part of long after their own student days had ended. The Gaelic teacher who bestowed a modernist text like *Dàin do Eimhir* only a few years after its publication was certainly perceptive and farsighted and this recollection of Crichton Smith's speaks of the importance of inspirational teachers in the lives of young people.

Both MacLean and Crichton Smith were members of a Scottish educational lineage – while MacLean is best known as a Gaelic poet and Crichton Smith as a writer of prose and poetry in English and Gaelic, both were also English teachers. Within twentieth century Gaelic literature, poets such as Derick Thomson and Aonghas MacNeacail tackled the subject of education in quite overt ways. MacNeacail's 'oideachadh ceart/ a proper schooling' and Thomson's 'Ceud Blianna sa Sgoil/ A Hundred Years in School'[2] showed how scathing Gaelic poets of the mid-twentieth century could be about an education system which had, for centuries, systematically sought to dismantle and ostracise the Gaelic language. In contrast, despite having a similar experience of Gaelic language and culture within the education system, MacLean and Crichton Smith's writing exhibits another side of the student experience; for example, both have composed beautiful elegies and praise poems to inspirational teachers – Crichton Smith's 'For Angus MacLeod', a former Headmaster of Oban High School, and MacLean's 'Do Uilleam MacMhathain/ To William Matheson', Senior Lecturer in Celtic at the University of Edinburgh.[3] The respect that they had for traditional and academic learning is palpable, and the education system – in their professional and their literary lives – continued to influence the direction of their work in subtle and interesting ways. In fact, their experience of education (and all the myriad forms that education can take) signposted the paths of both men, albeit under slightly different conditions.

Sorley MacLean attended primary school on Raasay from 1918 to 1924, continuing his education at Portree Secondary School. He left Raasay and Skye in the autumn of 1929 to study English at the University of Edinburgh.[4] While MacLean's 'traditional' education from his grandparents, aunts and uncles on both sides of his family is well documented, and he was well-versed in Gaelic poetry from a young age, his choice to study Honours English was, nevertheless,

understandable. By his own admission, despite there being a Celtic Department at Edinburgh University (with which he was closely connected throughout his student years), Celtic was not economically viable as a career. All the positions were filled by young academics and the prospects of obtaining an English teaching job was much more likely.[5] In 1933, he graduated with First Class Honours, and attended Moray House Teachers' Training College during the session 1933–34. In 1934, he taught English at Portree, and then at Tobermory High School in Mull from January to December 1938. His next position was as English teacher (and later, Head of English) at Boroughmuir High School in Edinburgh where he remained until 1956, moving to Plockton Secondary School to become Headmaster until his retirement in 1972.[6] Crichton Smith's career trajectory was quite similar; like MacLean, he was raised in a small Gaelic community – he attended primary school in Bayble, Lewis, before receiving a bursary to go to secondary school at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway. He went to Aberdeen University where he gained a degree in English in 1949, and having trained as a teacher, he worked in Dumbarton and Clydebank High School, and from 1955 to 1977, Oban High School. He took early retirement from teaching in 1977 and became a full-time writer.

Crichton Smith and MacLean were both native Gaelic speakers – their first main contact with English was through the school system and both writers have described their English literary influences, which they embraced fully as well as retaining their love for their own Gaelic tradition. It is significant that the main points where MacLean and Crichton Smith's paths diverged in relation to their literary work can be traced both directly and indirectly back to the theme of education. On the more practical level, the most obvious difference was the choices they made within the teaching profession – Crichton Smith was a prolific in his literary output and eventually chose to leave teaching to become a full-time writer. In an interview with William Neill, he was asked if his days as a teacher inhibited his literary work and his reply was indicative of his character and approach:

> *No, I wrote a lot when I was teaching. But there came a time when I had to make a change since I didn't have the energy to both teach and write… I decided I would keep the same hours as I did in teaching. From 9 in the morning I do creative work and in the afternoons reviews, reading and correspondence. I think three or four hours is all one can sustain for creative*

work. I have time for more polishing now than when I was teaching.[7]

Crichton Smith's substantial literary output certainly illustrates how this method (and the choice to retire early from teaching) served him well.

In contrast to Crichton Smith, MacLean remained in his teaching position throughout his whole working life and Aonghas Macneacail, in his article 'Questions of Prestige: Sorley MacLean and the Campaign for Gaelic', describes a rather gruelling and admirable teaching schedule, particularly during MacLean's time as Headmaster at Plockton where, due to it being very much a rural establishment and in order to provide the full range of subjects, MacLean taught for thirty-three periods out of forty, while also performing his administrative role as headmaster. As well as teaching English and History, MacLean acted as Assistant Teacher of Gaelic for sixteen years and for one year he taught almost all the Gaelic classes himself.[8] It is perhaps no wonder that his poetic output was sparse between 1954 and 1970. However, to assume that MacLean martyred his literary life for the cause of education, or on the other side of the coin, that his role in the sphere of education should be viewed as playing second fiddle to his life as a poet, would be to oversimplify the situation and perhaps even misconstrue it completely. Macneacail has pointed out that MacLean himself, when recollecting past achievements, did not refer to his poetry but to the part he played in the campaign for the provision of a Higher Leaving Certificate examination paper specifically designed for learners of Gaelic.[9]

It should be noted that MacLean never imagined himself to be a 'full-time poet'. He writes in 'My Relationship with the Muse' that 'in spite of MacDiarmid, the "full-time" professional poet is not for me and never has been. If I have time to do it, I brood over something until a rhythm comes as a more or less tight rope to cross the abyss of silence.'[10] In the same article, he does attribute his long silences and burning of unpublished poems to 'grinding school-teaching and my addiction to an impossible lyrical ideal'. Perhaps echoing his first difficult choices within the Higher education system, when he took Honours English instead of Gaelic, he concludes:

Some say that the habit of writing grows on one and that, once it is formed, it is not easy to eradicate. That may be true of most writers, but I think its truth

> *depends on the chances of life. The chances are very much against the 20th Century Gael, who has always had to make a living in other ways, and too often he has to do it by what must be one of the most exhausting of all ways, school teaching.*[11]

Wry humour about the teaching profession aside, MacLean's words here highlight the other, more subtle way in which education influenced the diverging literary paths of himself and Crichton Smith – the choice of language in their work. While MacLean, believing that his Gaelic poems were much truer to himself than anything he had written in English, decided to write only in Gaelic as early as 1936 (he describes this as a 'commitment', which is very telling in relation to the strength of his feeling about it),[12] Crichton Smith wrote in Gaelic and English. In fact, within literary criticism, it is only with the recent work of scholars such as Moray Watson, that Crichton Smith's Gaelic writing has been given a more equal footing with his English output[13] – for many years, he was best known as an English language writer by a substantial portion of his readership. It is interesting that two writers with similar experiences of education differed in this respect. Crichton Smith told William Neill that

> *I wrote first of all in Gaelic, mainly short stories, though also some poems. It is quite possible that if the audience had been there for my Gaelic in terms of numbers I might not have written in English at all. Then again I went freelance in 1977 after leaving teaching and found I could only make a living by writing more in English.*[14]

Thus, it is clear that the same economic issues affecting the choices within education for the twentieth-century Gael also affected literary decisions, too.

The need for Gaelic and Scottish writers to retain another job such as teaching has undoubtedly benefitted many school pupils over the years – countless children have had, within their experience of education, the advantage of being taught by passionate teachers who have a personal connection and stake in the literature of their country. Edwin Morgan has praised Crichton Smith's quality of imagination as a teacher –

> *he would turn an English class into a vehement discussion of the rights and*

> *wrongs of the wonderful story of Dido and Aeneas in Virgil's Aeneid: the pupils might never learn Latin, but they would learn something about human nature, about love, about ambition, about destiny, about high ideals: in other words, education for life.*[15]

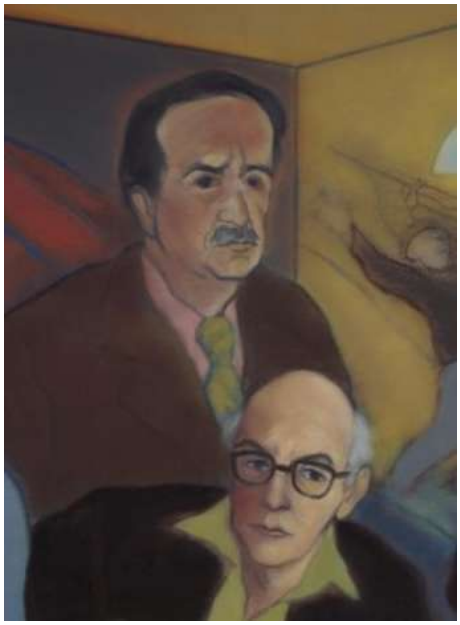
Perhaps writers who are also teachers are also in the best position to highlight the failings of the education system and campaign for change. Crichton Smith voiced the opinion, which has been reinforced by many to this day, that more Scottish and Gaelic texts should be available to be taught in schools. His sense of injustice in relation to education was acute. In 'Real People in a Real Place', Crichton Smith highlights the feeling of uncertainty for a Gaelic-speaking child entering the period of education – 'no sooner does he begin to use his intellect than what he learns begins to undermine, to weaken, and to harass his emotional nature.'[16]

The dispute between intellect and emotion brought about by education is something which Crichton Smith clearly wrestled with throughout his life. He states that education was respected, 'not as a method of climbing out of one's class but… for its own sake.'[17] There can be detected an underlying sense of guilt at leaving certain aspects of his own community behind when he entered the world of education. His choice to also write in English can therefore always be traced back to these mixed feelings. He has written about leaving his village community to attend secondary school in Stornoway and how difficult that choice was for him – 'I have forsaken the community in order to individualise myself'.[18] The language dilemma is part of this same experience, which he has described as 'schizophrenic'. He admits to being taken in by 'the propaganda which made foreign writing more serious, more interesting, more advanced' and the fact that there were no children's books in Gaelic which he might have read is cited as one of the reasons for this.[19] The landscape of Gaelic and English language (and the accompanying discomfort that this brought him) was always being traversed by Crichton Smith so it is perhaps no surprise that this dilemma also emerges in his own writing. While he may not have viewed it as such, given the feelings he harboured about language loyalty in his student days, the decision to write in Gaelic and in English was a brave personal act, particularly in the face of his fear of hybridisation. Crichton Smith's literary work is often at its strongest

when exploring the ‘between place’ of language and location in which he finds himself.[20]

MacLean’s poetic persona appears more stable[21] – while he wrestled with many issues in his poetry, postcolonial discourse relating to language and education did not enter into his work in any significant way. Crucially, while Crichton Smith, in his poetry, stories and critical writing, was reacting to the educational imperialism of English within his country, even while operating within this sphere, MacLean’s linguistic confidence manifested a different sort of approach within the education system of which he was a part. His passion for ensuring Gaelic was taught in schools developed further; MacLean’s personal experience during his own schooldays may have been as a native Gaelic speaker within an English language-centric school system, but by the late 1960s he had turned to the issues faced by Gaelic learners, commending parents who were non-Gaelic speakers and yet supportive of the language, and campaigning for Gaelic learners to be given the same chances as native speakers, with their own Learners Higher exam paper. He argued that pupils ‘whose environment makes it impossible that they should be Native Speakers ought not to be put at such disadvantage.’[22] In the landscape of language policy and education, this was a big step forward in a relatively short space of time and shows a generosity of spirit centring on the belief that while the earlier Scottish education system may have failed many native speakers of Gaelic, future generations of non-native speakers and learners should not suffer the same difficulties.

This brief look at Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith’s involvement in the education system tentatively suggests the ways in which education influenced the choices and direction of both writers. It is evident that the different personalities of these writers also played a part and perhaps explains the varying approaches in their work, despite their similar experiences of education. It also shows the benefits that can come from individuals with a foot in both the literary and educational worlds; they are not alone in this role – countless teachers and literary figures throughout the twentieth century and beyond have been our best advocates, campaigners, and passionate voices. Long may the tradition of the meeting of these two worlds continue.



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