6. Translation and Scottish Gaelic

By Ellen L. Beard

Unlike the companion articles on translating Scotland to the world, this one addresses translating Scotland to itself, not metaphorically but literally, from English to Gaelic and Gaelic to English. I begin with an illustrative example, follow with a brief history of Gaelic translation practices, and conclude with a few reflections on my own experience as a translator of eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry.

> *'S trom leam an àirigh, 's a ghàir seo a th' innt,*
> *Gun a' phàirtidh a b' àbhaist bhith 'n tràth-s' air mo chinn,*
> *Anna chìoch-chorrach chaol-mhalach, shlìob-cheannach, chruinn,*
> *Is Iseabail a' bheòil mhilis, mhànranach, binn. (Beard 2018, 94)*

> *Oh! sad is the shieling, and gone are its joys!*
> *All harsh and unfeeling to me now its noise,*
> *Since Anna—who warbled as sweet as the merle—*
> *Forsook me—my honey-mouthed, merry-lipped girl! (Pattison 1890, 102)*

If you are appalled by this translation, so am I – but why? Put simply, it is both dated and inaccurate. Beginning with the former – what might be termed cultural obsolescence – we all know that languages and literary styles change over time, even without translation. In this example, the nineteenth-century translation by Thomas Pattison (1828–1865) of an eighteenth-century love song by Robert MacKay (Rob Donn MacAoidh) (1714–1778) displays a cloying sentimentality equally foreign to the poet who composed it and the tastes of the twenty-first-century reader. Social and cultural taboos also change over time, especially those regarding sexuality and the human body, and nineteenth-century editors and translators (like Rob Donn's first editor, Mackintosh Mackay) often employed selective omissions or euphemisms to obscure such references. Rob Donn actually praised Anna for her pointed breasts, narrow brows, shining hair and rounded figure, while praising her companion Isabel as honey-mouthed, melodious and sweet. Finally, a poem or translation may refer to 'things, customs, or concepts' that no longer exist (like shielings), creating what translation studies scholars

term ‘universe of discourse’ problems that produce either puzzlement or copious footnotes (Lefevere 1992, 88). Given the tremendous changes in technology, social organisation, and culture in the three centuries since Rob Donn’s birth, it is unsurprising that communication pitfalls of this sort exist even within a single language.

Aside from these cultural and temporal issues, other purely linguistic pitfalls inevitably complicate the translation of poetry. In particular, it is rarely possible for even a highly skilled translator to reproduce the meaning, metre, and rhyme of a poem equally well in another language (Lefevere 1992, 70–71), especially when their syntax, stress patterns and phonology differ as much as they do between Gaelic and English. In this example the translator sacrificed accuracy, omitting about half the original content (the existence of Isabel and the detailed description of Anna), and substituting rhyming filler words (joys, noise, warbling merles, and merry-lipped girls) that do not appear in the original. Prose, of course, is easier to translate because meaning is generally paramount, and stylistic features of the source language can be represented more flexibly in the target language without the straitjacket of highly structured metrical schemes developed within a language-specific poetic tradition.

History

Despite these challenges, translation into and from Scottish Gaelic has a long history, with practices varying over time in response to factors such as religion, literacy, classical education, and language shift. The Protestant Reformation is generally credited with spurring translation of religious texts into Scottish Gaelic, beginning with *The Book of Common Order* (1567), followed by a series of catechisms, metrical psalms, the New Testament (1767), the Old Testament (1801), and evangelical texts such as Richard Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted* (first translated in 1750) and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (first translated in 1812). Since literacy levels were low in many Gaelic-speaking areas through the eighteenth century, early religious translations were principally intended for ministers and schoolmasters to read aloud to their flocks.

Translation of secular works into Gaelic came much later, beginning with word lists such as the *Vocabulary* prepared by Alexander MacDonald (Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair) in 1741 for the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) – itself largely a translation of a Latin-English word list – and

progressing to a series of full-fledged dictionaries by the early nineteenth century. By that time, not only was literacy in Gaelic increasing among the general public, but Scottish grammar schools and universities continued to educate a small number of Gaelic speakers in the Greek and Latin classics. That elite educational background produced scholars like Ewen MacLachlan (1773–1822), who translated several books of the *Iliad* into Gaelic, and the prolific John MacLean (1909–1970), who translated into Gaelic the complete *Odyssey*, other Latin and Greek poetry, popular English hymns, and works from Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, and others. It seems, however, that both MacLachlan and MacLean translated more for pure enjoyment and intellectual challenge than a broad readership, as most of their work was not published until long after their respective deaths.

From the nineteenth century to the present, the direction of translation has largely reversed with universal literacy in English and long-term decline in the number of Gaelic speakers and readers. Although many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry editions and anthologies were published solely in Gaelic (often with English introductions and notes), by the later nineteenth century Gaelic poetry had begun appearing in English translation, produced by editors and translators such as Pattison and Lachlan MacBean (1853–1931). By the twentieth century, Gaelic poetry often appeared in facing English and Gaelic translations, sometimes by the poet himself – including luminaries such as Sorley MacLean (1911–1996) and Derick Thomson (1921–2012) – although some contemporary authors prefer to publish in Gaelic only, and one (Angus Peter Campbell) has even published the same novel separately in Gaelic and English versions. For new editions of older Gaelic works, the most common practice of organisations such as the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society (SGTS) has been facing translations and English notes, although the amount of English utilised depends on the volume and the aims of its editor.

Issues

This brings me to a few reflections on my own work translating Rob Donn into English. The threshold issue for me has always been to identify the purposes (and intended readership) of the translation. When I began I was mostly translating for myself, trying to understand the song texts well enough to analyse their relationship to their melodies (my PhD topic at the University of Edinburgh). My next goal was to produce a songbook with Gaelic texts, translations and music in

staff notation, so that people could sing as well as understand the songs. At that stage, the translations were extremely literal, set out line by line but with no attempt to make them 'sound' like poetry. My current project is to prepare a scholarly edition for the SGTS of the bard's social and political commentary on the Forty-Five, ministers and the church, women, sexual misconduct, and social responsibility. This is a more ambitious undertaking with aims that extend beyond translation to matters such as the historical background and metrical structure of the poems, determining how to approach Gaelic texts composed in a local dialect that was standardised by previous editors, and considering the implications of oral composition and transmission by a nonliterate poet for a largely nonliterate audience. Many of those issues must be addressed in explanatory notes and other scholarly apparatus and need not affect the actual translation. In fact, some SGTS editions of Gaelic poetry provide only prose translations, suitable for readers who already know Gaelic and for non-Gaelic readers consulting the poetry for its historical rather than literary content. For such readers, information content is paramount and literary style is secondary, especially for those who know enough Gaelic to perceive stylistic features in their original language.

On the other hand, some readers (perhaps with little or no Gaelic) may hope to obtain at least a 'feel' for the poetry in translation, and this is where the intractable conflict between substance and style arises. The best translators – often fluent bilinguals who are poets themselves (such as Sorley MacLean, Derick Thomson, Donald Meek, and Meg Bateman) – can sometimes square the circle and produce accurate translations that also faithfully replicate (or at least approximate) in English the original metre and rhyme scheme of a Gaelic poem. Others, such as Thomas Pattison in the example above, probably should not even try, as politely acknowledged by the friend who edited the posthumous edition of his translations quoted at the beginning of this article (Pattison 1890, vi–viii). For me (as a second-career scholar who learned Gaelic as an adult), the principal goal is accuracy, accompanied by some effort to approximate the rhythm of the original poems when feasible to do so without compromising substance. And since no one else seems inclined to translate 225 poems and songs from eighteenth-century Sutherland Gaelic into twenty-first-century English, I will persevere.

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