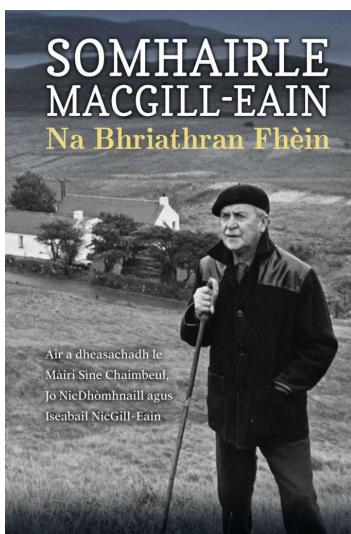


'Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Na Bhriathran Fhèin', ed. by Màiri Sìne Chaimbeul, Jo NicDhòmhnaill and Iseabail NicGill-Eain

Review by Emma Dymock



Sorley MacLean, in his own words - even the title of this book is a thought-provoking concept. MacLean is the most discussed Gaelic poet of the twentieth century and I am aware that I am one of the many scholars who have taken time and effort to analyse his words from many different angles and different theoretical approaches. Therefore, those of us who are in such a position may find this book a refreshing and grounding read. When all is said and done, Sorley MacLean's poetry (and the words of any poet) should stand the test of time and speak for themselves. This book shows that the last word on his work should perhaps always lie with the one who has composed those words in the first place. Others can argue and analyse, but *Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Na Bhriathran Fhèin* presents MacLean on his own terms and the book holds a quiet power in that purpose. It is a reminder that MacLean is a complex poetic voice. The source material for the book is gleaned from interviews with MacLean from the archives of the BBC, STV and the School of Scottish Studies. As well as this, the editors have the unique position of being family members (in the case of Iseabail NicGill-

Eain, who is the poet's eldest daughter) and family friends. Notably, the book opens with MacLean's trip to Hallaig with another of the editors, Jo NicDhòmhnaill, for the BBC in 1986. The reader senses that the editors are sensitive to the nuances of MacLean's work, as well as his place within the wider Gaelic community. Beginning with 'Hallaig', which is arguably MacLean's most famous poem (and the poem which has often most easily reached an English-speaking readership in translation), the emphasis on family, ancestors and place-names is evident from the outset.

The book is divided into chapters with themes of family (with subsections on MacLean's father, grandmother and Aunt Peigi, and MacLean's mother's family), the people of Braes, and his education (including schooling at Portree, the University of Edinburgh, and his early teaching days at Portree and Tobermory). The major historical events, which had an impact on MacLean's personal life and his poetic development form the middle of the book - the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the period in which *Dàin do Eimhir* was formed. Literary figures such as Douglas Young are acknowledged here too for their help in bringing MacLean's earlier work to publication. Perhaps most importantly, especially for a book which is written in Gaelic, the subjects which are firmly rooted in MacLean's life within the Gaidhealtachd are not neglected; religion, history and culture are covered in the latter part of the book, with some beautiful insights into MacLean's storytelling, as well as the importance of Gaelic dialects, tradition-bearers, and folk-collecting e.g. the work of MacLean's brother, Calum, is given due respect here. No area of his life is ignored and it will please many readers to find that MacLean's love of shinty is also well documented.

Sorley MacLean's reception in the wider world, the languages into which his work has been translated and the recognition he received from academic institutions and other poets is explored. The way the book is set out succeeds in showing how this later recognition was a significant part of MacLean's life, but it was not the only aspect of his life which held importance. The years spent as a teacher and supporter of the Gaelic language has its place in MacLean's biographical record too, and the editors show how his innate understanding of the Gaelic world, of which he was an integral part, flows into the MacLean who also operated with ease as a literary figure within Scotland and beyond. There may be two Sorley MacLeans - the MacLean of the Gaelic world and the MacLean who is known in the predominantly English-speaking world, but this division has only been

brought about through discourse about MacLean rather than from the poet himself. Jo NicDhòmhnaill rightly points out that much has been written about MacLean in English, and this book is an attempt to show his life and work through the medium of his own native language. The editors have undoubtedly achieved what they set out to do, and they have gone above and beyond the aim of bringing the specifically Gaelic focus back to MacLean, with detailed notes on other important historical and literary figures mentioned throughout the book, many of whom are Gaels. The reader can sense the richness of the social and literary context - MacLean was never operating in a vacuum.

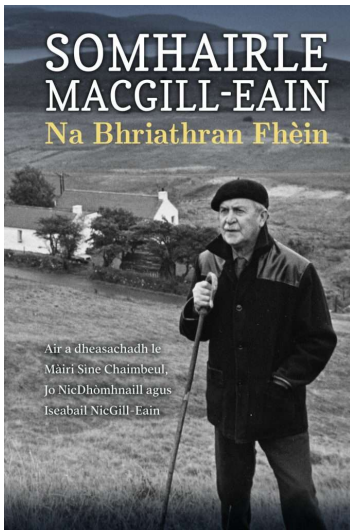
One of the greatest strengths of this publication is the inclusion of photographs of MacLean, his family and friends, as well as landscape photographs. Some images have been previously included on The Sorley MacLean Trust's website but many of these photographs are previously unpublished and will be unfamiliar to the public and, with the poet's own daughter as an editor, the book has an unparalleled advantage in delivering this insight into MacLean's life. There are beautiful images which accompany the poetry excerpts. Particular favourites are the scenes of Raasay life and the photo of a young MacLean with his Aunt Peigi - a woman who is often quoted as a major influence during his early years. Thus, the images succeed in sensitively adding depth to MacLean's own words.

Reinforcing the impression that this book is a 'family affair' in the best possible sense, a short biography of MacLean's late daughter Catriona is included as well as a list of Gaelic songs which were part of the family's repertoire and, most poignantly, the book comes with a CD of these family songs performed by Catriona. This is a delight for the senses and shows how the importance of tradition continued within MacLean's family beyond his own generation. *Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Na Bhriathran Fhèin* covers the written word, as well as the visual and auditory; for a poet who was deeply familiar with orality and the ceilidh tradition, and the value imbued in the singing of the 'old songs' which he believed to be the literary wellspring of Gaelic, the meeting and merging of these aspects of the poetic experience is of utmost importance and the editors have done an excellent job in ensuring all who come into contact with this book will understand the value of the auditory at the heart of the poet's work that is so often kept to the printed page.

Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Na Bhriathran Fhèin may address the deficit of a Gaelic language book on a poet who composed his poems solely in Gaelic, but the book

should also be received as a valuable publication beyond that objective too.

Somhairle MacGill-Eain: Na Bhriathran Fhèin is published by Acair Books



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