Sorley MacLean | Somhairle MacGill-Eain (1911–1996), and Derick Thomson | Ruaraidh MacThòmais (1921–2012), were the two leading Scottish Gaelic poets of the twentieth century. Although the difference in age between them was not great, it is fair to say that MacLean’s era was the second quarter of the century, while Thomson dominated the fifty years that followed. Now, those are bold statements, oversimplifications perhaps, and to interrogate them we have to understand some of the dynamics at work on the language in their day, and (obviously) know a little more about these two men and their poetic output.

The eruption of MacLean in the Thirties and Forties was like a volcano in a quiet wasteland. There had been no truly outstanding Gaelic poets since the death of Duncan Ban Macintyre in 1812. The first quarter of the twentieth century gave us backward-looking romanticism, an officially sponsored preference for words at the expense of meaning, and some good poets who seemed to draw back on reaching the outer edge of innovation, or were cut off on reaching their prime: Father Allan McDonald of Eriskay, Donald Sinclair from Barra, Donald MacDonald (Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùnà) from North Uist. Only in retrospect is it even possible to isolate these three names, because none of them was properly published in his own lifetime, and in Sinclair’s case we were obliged to wait until 2014 for the collected verse that proved his worth. But knowing that some interesting developments were taking place in the first quarter of the century makes MacLean’s achievement only slightly less remarkable.

The elements that gave rise to the poetic volcano are easily listed. They are: MacLean’s upbringing in Raasay by a family steeped in traditional Gaelic song; the intense religious ferment of the day, which provided him with the vocabulary of personal introspection; the anger at social injustice which was inevitable in an island that had been subjected to vicious clearances; his education at Edinburgh University, which opened his eyes to the work of a wide variety of English poets from John Donne to T. S. Eliot; the unexpected rise of the populist right in Spain, Italy and Germany at a time when the left had offered the young the hope of a progressive future; a disastrous love-life; and, finally, service in the British Army in the battle against Rommel’s Afrika Korps. These things merged semi-involuntarily in MacLean’s brain and came out in an extraordinary gush of pure creativity during the years from 1933 to 1943. There is a dreamlike quality to it all, enhanced by a pervasive use of symbolism; it is a hard-edged, vivid dream which often marches methodically from one topic to the next, but just as frequently marries two or three of the above ingredients in endlessly varying thought-patterns, intensely rhythmical and lightly bridled by rhyme.

There are two principal sequences: Dàin do Eimhir (Poems to Eimhir), in which the central preoccupation is the poet himself and his relationships with women, poetry, politics and homeland; and An Cuilithionn (The Cuillin), an objective survey of world politics in the 1930s, in which the persona – the vantage point – is those great jagged mountains of Skye, a more dynamic symbol being provided by another island toponym, the Àigeach or leaping horse. A third and briefer ‘sequence’, if that is the right word, is provided by MacLean’s North Africa poems of the early 40s, which are among the best verse that came out of the Second World War in any language. The sheer drama of these astonishing ten years of creativity was brought to an end, appropriately enough, by an explosion which almost ended MacLean’s life; his collection Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile (Poems to Eimhir and Other Poems) was published just weeks after his final discharge from hospital in Inverness in 1943. It was very correctly said in the 1970s that ‘we all remember exactly where we were on first opening the book’.

As we have seen, in terms of lifespan there is a considerable overlap between MacLean
Thomson, on the other hand, was undoubtedly a hard-working craftsman, while no one has ever suggested that he was a shamanistic genius. And there are other differences. Thomson may have served for a time in the RAF, but he was a lifelong academic who lived in a bubble of undisturbed peace and tranquility, penetrated only by the concerns that affected all of us as a community: the Cold War, the decline of Gaelic in its heartland, the flawed ideology of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, the rise of pop culture, the iron grip of religious extremism on Thomson’s native island of Lewis, far-off foreign wars or famines, and the slow, agonising steps towards Scottish home rule and independence, of which he was a passionate, inspiring, and sometimes – dare I say it – courageously silly advocate. To judge by his poetry, other than the tragic death of one of his sons, few great personal challenges ever seem to have faced him: there was a persistent rumour amongst his students, certainly, that he won his very beautiful wife in a running fist-fight with certain other future members of the Scottish establishment, but that is neither here nor there (and Sorley MacLean’s wife was also very beautiful).

What we have running through successive collections of Thomson’s work, from the first in 1951 to the last in 2007, is a gradually evolving dynamic, teeming with people shot through with satire and social concern, in which the two main preoccupations are his relationship with his native island and his country. For many, he is at his best in short poems: and certainly he made himself the undisputed master of a fairly economical tripartite structure consisting of statement, development and ringing conclusion. For many, again, he is admired (or disdained) for the accessibility of much of his work, yet MacLean’s may be argued to be equally accessible, albeit without the humour. There are, however, two obvious differences. One is MacLean’s preference for regular metres, and Thomson’s for free verse. The other is Thomson’s keen eye for observing people, compared to MacLean’s preference for the abstract and the introspective. On the other hand, both enjoyed polemics. And, intriguingly, both gave us numerous poems whose depths have yet to be fully explored. I will devote the rest of this essay to a couple of examples – poems that I do not fully understand, which are similar in some ways, and which have long fascinated me.
MacLean’s ‘Uamha ’n Òir’ (‘The Cave of Gold’) appears at first to have been one of his late poems. It was written, or at least reworked, in the 1970s. It refers to a very old legend which was found in pretty much every part of the Highlands and Islands where a cave on one side of a hill or mountain was believed to connect with a cave on the other. The legend always has it that a piper marched into the cave at one end, that he could be heard playing his pipes far underground, and that the sound stopped halfway, but that his dog appeared out of the cave at the other end with its hair singed off, revealing that his master had come off the worse in some encounter with evil. In this case the cave is explicitly stated to be in Dùis MhicLeòid, ‘MacLeod’s Land’ in Skye, and the people involved are MacCrimmons. There are basically three sections – one which describes the original legend, one which tells how another piper tries his luck in the same way, and one which draws a conclusion. The poem may be approached as history, as biography, as autobiography, or as a combination of these. As history, the first section presumably describes some early MacCrimmon, and the second describes Dòmhnall Bàn, who was killed in the Rout of Moy in March 1746. As autobiography, the first section presumably describes the poet as a young man, the second the poet in his maturity. In Dòmhnall Bàn’s case the cave becomes a metaphor for foretold death, suicide even: ‘chaidh a’ ghalla ‘na cheann / ‘s ‘na chridhe’ (the bitch went into his head / and his heart).

The poem is extremely difficult, and in this we are not helped by the poet, who was habitually economical with punctuation and whose translations were notoriously over-literal. As an experiment, I will present five stanzas of the poem, all except the fifth in three different forms: first the original, with my own punctuation added; then MacLean’s translation; then my own translation, done in my usual style, which I would describe as offering a modicum of rhythm and explanation. I have chosen these stanzas because they contain almost the only hard evidence for the subject-matter in the form of two references to the blind catechist Donald Munro (1773–1830), a one-time fiddler who not only gave up playing the instrument after his conversion but is said to have gone around making bonfires of bagpipes and fiddles wherever he found them. I begin in the middle of the first section, in which the poet expresses wonder that anyone should wish to leave such a paradise as the old Land of MacLeod, but admits that the motive is greed for the gold rumoured to be in the cave:

Có eile dh’fhàgadh Dùis MhicLeòid
‘s gun e ri cosnadh an diol-déirce,
‘s gun e ga bhioradh leis an àrdan –
ach rathail làidir sona òg,
gun faileadh le uisge na tàinnt
‘s gun badhbh an aithreachais air a thòir?

Who else would leave the Land of MacLeod if free from the poor wretch’s labour, not pierced by a wounded pride, strong, fortunate, happy, young, not flayed with the water of humiliation and not pursued by the Fury of remorse?

Who else would leave the Land of MacLeod if not reduced to beggar’s employment and if not pierced by some wounded pride, but lucky, stalwart, happy and young, not flayed alive by the rain of insult and not haunted by the hag of repentance?

I have kept the poet’s ‘wounded pride’ because I believe that in this case he is telling us something useful. Uisge is both water and rain. MacLean’s ‘water of humiliation’ could refer to a process of steeping that removes hair from skin, but only if the skin is already separate from the body. I cannot make sense of it other than by understanding uisge as rain. In Skye, rain is frequently cold and uncomfortable to the skin, hence the imagery of flaying. Badhbh is one of the evil hags of folklore, by no means an abstraction. MacLean goes on:

Cha robh a Dhall-san air an spiris
eadar a chridhe ‘s eanchainn
a’ maistreadh Nàdair le loinid,
a’ cur a’ bhanne ‘na fhuil
agus na blàthaich ‘na h-eabar
air bruach shleamhainn an t-sluic.

His Blind was not on the perch between his heart and his brain, pounding Nature with a churn-staff, turning the milk to blood and the buttermilk to a slush on the slippery edge of the pit.

His Blind Munro was not on the hen-roost in between his heart and his brain, whisking Nature with his churn-stick,
converting pure milk into blood
and turning buttermilk into mud
on the slippery slope of hell.

_Dall_ in Gaelic is 'a blind man' as well as
the adjective 'blind', but MacLean's use of
'Blind' is not transparent in modern English. A
_loinid_ is a whisk used for making milkshakes
and the like. In his translation, MacLean
seems deliberately to be toning down the
strength of this verse. To the bulk of the Free
Presbyterian community in which he grew
up, Donald Munro was a hero, and question-
ing his destruction of musical instruments
was almost heretical. Yet in Gaelic tradition
_am fear a th’ air an spiris_, 'the man on the
hen-roost', is the devil and the _sloc_ (genitive
_sluic_ or 'pit' is certainly hell. The reason why
the first piper's Blind Munro is none of these
things is that he predated him. So while this
stanza invites us to see Donald Munro as the
devil, it does so negatively, and of course the
name 'Munro' (_Rothach_ is unsta
tated for the
very good reason that the first piper's sight-
less friend (I do not know whom MacLean had
in mind) was presumably not a Munro at all.

I will not quote from the second section. It
clearly refers to Dòmhnall Bàin, who went to
fight in an unpopular war under an unpopular
chief and never returned, or by extension to
the poet himself, who went to war in a simi-
lar mood and did not expect to return. It is
explicitly stated that the Land of MacLeod is
in cultural decline and that the piper’s motive
this time is not greed but the desire to be
remembered as a hero. The cave, then, has
come to symbolise a journey to war, while the
Land of MacLeod stands for something larger –
Skye and Raasay, the Highlands, Scotland,
or the whole of western civilisation. There are
other symbols dependent on these, notably
the pipes: when the allegory is interpreted
autobiographically, they presumably stand for
MacLean's poetry.

The third section speaks much of two men
being in the Cave of Gold, which therefore
brings us down, it seems, to a straight com-
parison between the old days and the new,
between MacCrimmon and MacLean, between
music and poetry. This section is just as dif-
ficult as the first two, however. Towards the
end we have:

_Bh’ an fhàs i tiugh os cionn an fhéidir_
's a cop uaine mun bheul
tron tàinig anail nan ceòl
a' cómhstrì ri bràdair an Doill
anns na loisgeadh miann is dùil
a dh'agair nach b'e 'n bàs 's an fhóill
a bha sa chonnsachadh chiùinn
a mhathaich tairbhe bhith san fhéidir.

Another dog came back without a hair,
it came back with the spirit,
the music that came and did not go
while there were MacLeods in the Dun,
before there seeped out of them the nature
that was in the veins of lord and land
before the bracken had grown.

_Aon fhàthas_ is a key word here: MacLean says
'nature', I say 'habits'. 'Convention' or 'tradi-
tion' would be equally good, as would 'culture'
if it were not such a cliché. There is surely an
echo here of the famous song that contains
the words _an talla am bu gnàth le MacLeòid_.
These are regularly translated 'MacLeod’s
wonted hall', but there is much more to it
than that: it is the hall in which the MacLeod
chief kept up the fame passed on to him by
his forefathers – for hospitality, for even-
handed judgement of disputes, for the care
of the poor, for patronage of all the arts, for
the pursuit of learning. In the fourth line,
the 'Dun' is certainly Dunvegan Castle, and it
may be objected that despite what the poet
says, there are still MacLeods in Dunvegan,
or argued against this that as descent was
ultimately through a female, these so-called
MacLeods are in fact Wolrige-Gordons. But
in any case I think the line is not so much
genealogical as proverbial, meaning 'for a
very long time'. The last three lines express
the very old idea that all good things (in this
case music) result from a symbiosis between
the ruler and the land. The poet goes on:

_Mun d’ fhàs i tiugh os cionn an fhéidir_
's a cop uaine mun bheul
tron tàinig anail nan ceòl
a' cómhstrì ri bràdair an Doill
anns na loisgeadh miann is dùil
a dh'agair nach b'e 'n bàs 's an fhóill
a bha sa chonnsachadh chiùinn
a mhathaich tairbhe bhith san fhéidir.
Before it had grown thick above the grass
with its green froth about the mouth
through which came the breath of the musics
striving with the great fire of the Blind
in which were burned desire and expectation,
that argued that it was not death and deceit
that was in the mild contention
that there was profit in the flesh.

Before it grew thickly above the grass
with its pale green foam around the mouth
which breathed the breath into all the musics
that strove with the bonfire of Blind Munro,
the fire that consumed all desire and hope –
musics which claimed that the calm contention
that fertilised increase to be in the flesh
was more than simply death and deceit.

The 'it' of the first two lines is the bracken,
rendered in Gaelic by feminine pronouns.
Cattle do not allow bracken to grow, but
sheep do. This then is a reference to the
nineteenth-century clearances that made
way for sheep. The 'mouth' is surely that of
the people, threatened simultaneously by the
'green foam' of clearance and the 'bonfire'
of evangelicalism. What comes out of the
mouth is plural – bagpipe music, song and
poetry. Lines 7–8 of MacLean's original and
translation appear in lines 6–7 of my transla-
tion as 'the calm contention / that fertilised
increase to be in the flesh'. The reader may
laugh, but I cannot think what MacLean
could mean by this except sex. His transla-
tion is deliberately unhelpful, even coy: he
omits to translate mhathaich, which means
'manured, cultivated, fertilised'. Until modern
times it was conventional to clothe sex in the
vocabulary of violence, and the oxymoron
connachadh ciùin, 'calm (or mild) conten-
tion', is an example of this. So MacLean
speaks of the evangelicals' equation of for-
ication with death and deceit' and the
message of art that there is a good deal more
to it than that. Which brings him on to his
conclusion:

Dithis ann an Uamha 'n Òir
a' dol an coinneamh a' bhàis:
fear nach cual a mun chù,
neart aineolas nan òg;
an dàrna fear le barrachd lùiths
agus an laigh thar gach laigh
's fhios aige gu robh an cù
de choth uamhaich 'bhàis
's gu robh a fiaclan cheart cho fada.

That is MacLean's translation, and I cannot
better it. Although the path to this conclusion
has been tortuous, uncertain and littered with
ambiguities, it seems clear enough in itself.
The Cave of Gold is now a woman's body, or
rather the bodies of two women. The two men
are the poet when young and when a little
older. In terms of the original legend, the dog
is not the piper's innocent companion but his
diabolical foe. The 'weakness above all weak-
ness' is the desire to succumb to the charms
of a known temptress. The last line is unfin-
ished: the poet means that the fangs of the
second dog are as long as those of the first.
An cù 'the dog' is masculine, but is referred
to in the last line as feminine, both in the
original and in the translation. These are the
personnal concerns of the poet in the 1930s,
but the poem was not published until the
1970s. In fact, there are two more sections,
both short and both described as fragmen-
tary. Obviously 'Uamha 'n Òir' was never
really finished.

The equivalent Thomson poem whose
depths have yet to be fully explored is
'Gormshuil', published in 1991.2 It has 175
lines and is therefore only half as long as
'Uamha 'n Òir', which has 352. Again it is
based upon a legend, if that is the right word.
Down to Thomson's generation Gormshuil was
a popular girl's name in Lewis. In that spell-
ing it means 'Blue-Eye', and it was anglicised
as Gormelia. In origin, however, it is Gormla
or Gormfhlaith, which means 'Blue Aristocrat'
or 'Noble Princess', blue being the colour of
nobility (indeed we still speak of 'blue blood').
The most celebrated Gormla in medieval
Gaelic tradition was a daughter of Flann
Sinna (Flann of the Shannon), a high king of
Ireland who died in AD 916. She was mar-
rried to three kings in a row – Cormac, who
was both king and bishop of Cashel and died
in 916, his conqueror Cerball mac Muirecáin
who died in 909, and Niall Glúndub (Niall the
Black-Kneed), who fell in battle against the
Vikings in 919. After that she died in poverty.
She had been quick to transfer her affections to Cerball when he defeated her first husband in battle, and she is the assumed author of a sequence of poems about her husbands, her riches and her poverty. One of them begins (in translation): ‘I’ve loved three times thirty, / I’ve loved nine times nine; / I could have loved twenty men, / But that would not attract a woman – / I forsook them all for Niall, / For what I wanted was his love’. And another ends (again in translation): ‘Cerball of the sword gave me three hundred cows and two hundred horses. Cormac gave twice as many as Cerball, and that was no mean act. But why should I hide from God the wealth I got from Niall? In one month Niall gave me three times as much as all that put together.’ Gormla’s name (and reputation) were picked up by Geoffrey of Monmouth as Goneril, and passed on into Shakespeare’s King Lear. It is perhaps no surprise that in later Scottish Gaelic tradition she was known as a famous witch, Gormshuil Mhòr na Mòighe whose home was at Moy in Lochaber. If we add to all this the very distinctive possibility that when Thomson wrote the poem he was remembering a Gormshuil that had been known to him, we have, once again, a case of multiple identity. How is it handled?

The poem is in free verse, in fourteen parts, and again the poet has translated it himself (very helpfully this time). First we have the early medieval Gormshuil in her own words, moving quickly through her life from pride in her beguiling eyes to regret at her downfall. Then section two begins:

“Cha robh tè a Sasainn a dhannsadh rithe”
arsa tusa ‘na do sheann chòta drògaid

(“No Englishwoman could dance like her”, / you said, but your own music / has slipped away from my memory, / I cannot hear / whether it was high or low that night / though I see your lips moving.) What the poet means by ‘high or low’ I do not know – sacred or secular, perhaps? And he speaks of her eyes (bha teine a’ lasadh ‘na do shuílean, ‘fire shone in your eyes’), which makes us think, no, Gormshuil is the woman speaking, not the woman spoken of, and the ‘Englishwoman’ remarks are fragments of speech randomly recollected: a trick used by Thomson elsewhere.

Section three is a quick sketch of the environment in which Gormshuil lived: the single window of her black house, the chickens, the potatoes, and not many of those. In section four the description of the woman becomes subtly confused with the imagery of death: although hands are a’ slòbadh an aoidhch, ‘stroking the cloth’ as aged hands are wont to do, and breath is a’ plathcadaich fo na plaid-eachan, ‘coming in gusts under the blankets’, the bed is growing narrow le bruthadh na h-ùrach ‘with the pressing-in of earth’. There is logical continuity, it seems, between the bed and the grave.

In section five the imagery switches to the going out of a fire, reminding us of Gormshuil’s eyes:

dith cheap air an doras-iadht,
dith grèine air sruth na fala

(“No Englishwoman could dance like her”, / you said, dressed in your old drugget skirt) On the face of it this seems to be a memory of a woman speaking about a woman called Gormshuil. And the ‘Englishwoman’ reference is clear to anyone familiar with the recent history of Lewis. Around 1900, countess girls were leaving the island every year to go as gutters of herring to fishing ports all around the United Kingdom, especially Great Yarmouth. They worked hard, were well paid, had money, enjoyed their nights out, and loved competing for the men’s attention. But the poet’s memory is fixed not on the dancer but on the woman who is talking about her. He goes on:
The communion sounds to me like a Catholic one, but the ensuing starburst of themes and symbols seems to embrace the life and death of every Gormla or Gormshuil who ever lived, thus emphasising their common humanity.

The rest of the poem is related in the first person singular, and we appear to have reached a synthesis between Gormla and Gormshuil. In section nine she lies in the heather, but the coverlet on her face is purple. In section ten a bit of Lewis pop song comes into her head: Cha b’ ann dubh a bha mo leannan, ‘He wasn’t dark, my sweet-heart’. She prays to Christ not to be sent dhan a’ chlais, ‘to the pit’; then section eleven begins in inverted commas ‘Ach bha mi uair ‘na mo bhàn-righ’ (‘But once I was a queen’), as if to make it suffice for both (or all) women, and moves into reflections on lost beauty, wealth and happiness.

Section twelve is a little like Gormshuil’s response to Gormla: here the memory is not of a queen but of a night in the barn. Section thirteen is something of a surprise, as the narrator confesses that she will come barren and childless before her maker on Judgement Day. And in section fourteen the poem ends with Gormshuil’s defiance of sermons and neighbours’ talk:

(I am still / as I was, / my ember’s flame shivering / in the self-same hearth, / my bonfire unquenched.) This is, we conclude, a real woman whom the poet knew, whose spirit he admired, and whom he wishes to honour by comparing her to the famous queen of long ago.

These two long poems of MacLean’s and Thomson’s are typical of their authors. One is subjective, the other objective. Both employ legend and symbolism. Both are challenging, MacLean’s more so than Thomson’s. MacLean’s work was made for himself as some sort of confused catharsis, then patchily revised many years later. Thomson’s was made in a controlled way for others to read and enjoy.

And in the end, for all their multiple personas, these poems offer a wonderfully contrasting view of the type of woman who is most dangerous to men.


Notes
2 ‘Gormshuil’ is taken from Smeur an Dòchais, Bramble of Hope: Dàin le Ruaraidh MacThòmais, Poems by Derrick Thomson (Canongate, 1991).