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Poetry of the Eighteenth Century

GAELIC POETRY IN the eighteenth century reflects clearly the changes that had taken place, and were taking place, in society. That there is a relationship, whether of accord or of reaction or rebellion, between poetry and society, almost goes without saying, but at certain periods the correspondence between changes in society and in poetry strikes us forcibly, and seldom more so than in the present instance. The poetry is in part marked also by that characteristic which we have seen was a strong one in Gaelic—literary conservatism—so that we find the firm evidence of tradition in the work of even the most innovatory poets, and on the other hand find the old ways followed by conservative poets well into the nineteenth century. These are fairly minor qualifications; the central fact is clear: Gaelic poetry breathes a new air in the eighteenth century, and shows a new vigour.

There were changes and influences of a negative kind, especially those associated with the decline in native clan leadership. The notion, and ideal, of patriarchal leader, accompanied by a traditional panoply, had been in decline for some three centuries, and had indeed gone far enough to justify some attempts at artificial revival in the mid-eighteenth century and after. Sir James MacDonald of Sleat made John MacCodrum his bard, in a vain romantic attempt to call back an age that had gone. The patron-employer belonged firmly to the past, and his disappearance made certain types of verse superfluous. He was succeeded, it is true, by what we might term the patron-ideal, and verses continued to be addressed to him as a figurehead, by poets whose concept of poetry required some such target. Donnchadh Bàn, as we shall see, feels this need at times. Gradually, as more and more of the chiefs deserted their race and culture, the credibility gap widened, and the praise-poetry withered.

The changes and influences of a more positive kind are the more interesting ones, and these seem on the whole to be of a literary nature, resulting from contacts with other literatures. Variety of

literary contact and experience was seriously curtailed by those events and trends which had cut Gaelic Scotland off from Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in the same or a similar process, from Latin learning. It was not until the native learning had been almost entirely supplanted, and recourse had to the Lowland Scotland system, and especially the Universities, that contacts were established afresh with other literatures. By this time English literature begins to be a source of influence and of specific models.

It is in the context of these ideas concerning tradition and innovation, the detritus of an old system and the stimulus of external contacts, together with the break-up of the old social system and the painful building of a new one, that we must consider the poetry of Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald), one of the greatest, and certainly the most innovatory, of the eighteenth-century poets. His work comes fairly early in the century, and his innovations have left a deep mark on eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry as a whole.

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was born *c.* 1690. His father, Maighstir Alasdair, was minister of Islandfinnan in Moidart, and came of notable MacDonald stock, being a grandson of Ranald MacDonald of Benbecula and Margaret, daughter of Angus MacDonald of Dùn-naomhaig (Dunnyveg). The poet could therefore claim close connections with the main line of the MacDonalds. The famous Flora MacDonald was his first cousin.[1]* According to tradition he was a student at Glasgow University, but did not complete his course, possibly because of domestic complications. He married a daughter of MacDonald of Dalness; she was of a family that had strong literary interests. Whether the poet was originally intended for the Church or the Law, he eventually became a schoolmaster, but we know nothing of his career until 1729, when he was teacher of a Charity School at Islandfinnan. He appears on record spasmodically as a teacher, at various centres in the west, until 1745, when he "voluntarily deserted" from his post, but already in 1744 his son Ranald had acted as his substitute in the school. He had "deserted" to take up a commission in the Jacobite army of Prince Charles Edward.

By 1745 Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair was a man of middle age, perhaps fifty-five. In the next decade or so he was to compose a series of exhortatory, political poems, and bitter satires, flowing

* For Notes, see pp. 314–16.

from a total involvement with the Jacobite cause. The mainspring of this, however, was not a narrow dynastic loyalty to the House of Stuart, but a dream of Gaelic independence. There are signs that his nationalism was a Scottish as well as a Gaelic one. The union of the Parliaments had taken place in his youth, perhaps in his student days, and left its mark on his thought and attitudes. His poetry, at any rate, is the most overtly nationalist in Gaelic in the eighteenth century. But this political poetry is the work of his middle years and middle period, and the earlier poetry is of quite a different nature.

Probably, however, his poem "In Praise of the Ancient Gaelic Language", which has a strong flavour of Gaelic nationalism, is a relatively early one. The poem is in a sense a *brosnachadh catha*, a battle incitement, but the battle is on behalf of Gaelic. If we accept this premise, the poem can be seen to be well planned and successful. Its enthusiasm is communicated, and the element of exaggeration is best understood in a propagandist context. We can see that the poet is concerned to emphasize the larger Scottish relevance of the language and as a humorous bonus to make still larger claims for it:

> It lived still
> its glory shall not fade
> in spite of guile
> and strangers' bitter hate.
> Scotland spoke it,
> and Lowland carles did too,
> our nobles, princes,
> dukes of high degree.
> In King's Council
> when the court gave its decision
> knotty problems
> were solved with Gaelic precision.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Adam spoke it,
> even in Paradise,
> and Eve's Gaelic
> flowed in its lovely wise.[2]

Gaelic poets have seldom been concerned to give any sort of poetic credo to their public, and it is a measure of Mac Mhaighstir

Alasdair's consciousness of his role as a poet that he does this, at least to some degree, in his "*Guidhe no Urnaigh an Ughdair do'n Cheòlraidh*" ("Entreaty or Prayer of the Author to the Muses"). Like the poem on Gaelic, this has a carefully ordered structure and development. Each of the Muses is addressed in turn, and asked for help in one special particular. The Celtic artist's desire for completeness or exhaustiveness can perhaps be seen in this, but the points made are mostly relevant enough. After this piecemeal consideration of the gifts the poet needs, he goes on to consider the type of end-product he wants, and to reflecting on his own shortcomings as a poet. There is a strong implied criticism of a certain type of Gaelic verse which was already too common, and was to become more so:

> . . . work of rattling sound
> and empty of sense.

And he feels, apparently, that he is not learned enough in his craft, implying probably that he lacked the training of the professional poets. He had in fact taken the trouble to learn to write in the Gaelic script, and seems to have had a knowledge of some Gaelic bardic verse, but he seems to have been impressed by the technical knowledge and skill of the professional poets. He may well have known the last two practising poets of the MacMhuirich dynasty. The poem as a whole is very much an exercise, and the last lines suggest that he is not over-serious, but there is a core of serious intention, especially in the final passage:

> My vigour and range are small enough,
> though ambition's great,
> to build a wall on so large a base,
> lacking chiselled stones;
> I have no polished words, though I tear my will
> I am empty of skill;
> a thing of no substance is art that's unschooled,
> though the subject were sweet.
> My pen is blunt, my lips not sharp,
> my brain does not praise,
> my paper and ink are full of defects,
> a sad lack that.[3]

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's stance as an innovator, and his profound influence on succeeding poets, and on his contemporaries, can be seen vividly in his descriptive verse, in topographical or "Nature" poetry. Three surviving poems in particular, of this kind, belong to the pre-1745 period, and are probably to be dated between 1738 and 1745, and perhaps more narrowly *c.* 1743. These are his songs to Summer and Winter, and his poem "*Allt an t-Siùcair*" ("Sugar Brook"). It has been shown that "*Oran a' Gheamhraidh*" ("Song to Winter") was most probably composed in 1743, as the detailed references to the solstice suggest;[4] a comparison with the song to Summer suggests strongly that it had been written earlier, and the poet lived in the region he describes in "*Allt an t-Siùcair*" from 1741 to 1745. If he wrote songs about Spring and Autumn they have not survived. Several of the eighteenth-century poets took up these subjects and are influenced by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's style and practice, though only one of them, the much later Ewen MacLachlan, has a surviving quartet of seasonal poems to his name.

Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's seasonal poems are the earliest examples in Gaelic, although there was of course much natural description in earlier Gaelic verse, including seasonal vignettes in sixteenth-century verse. Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair may well have been familiar with this earlier tradition. It is, however, no coincidence that James Thomson's *Seasons* had been published between 1726 and 1730. Perhaps it was several years later that these poems came into Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's hands. Thomson, like Vergil to whom in this respect he compares himself,[5] had experienced a deep delight in Nature, and each poet felt an urge to relate Nature to man, and to man's ethics. Not so Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair. He seldom or never moves from the particular to the general, nor does he use Nature to illustrate aspects of man. He does not even relate the works of Nature to a divine principle, nor attempt to show in them any general principles. We can see this difference in approach, for example, in passages where Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and James Thomson write of birds:

(1) Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair:

> These are tunes cleanest cut,
> with most elegant divisions,
> your chanter's note-spread at milking
> sent my mind gaily lilting . . .[6]

(2) James Thomson:

> The blackbird whistles from the thorny brake,
> The mellow bullfinch answers from the grove,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> 'Tis love creates their melody, and all
> This waste of music is the voice of love,
> That even to birds and beasts the tender arts
> Of pleasing teaches.[7]

For the Gaelic poet the experience or scene he is recording is all-important and sufficient; for Thomson it shares the interest with some reflection which it arouses.

We can see a difference in method, and a complete independence of thought, in the two poets' description of bees, to take another instance. Thomson's has some artificiality, and a hint of pompousness:

> Around, athwart,
> Through the soft air, the busy nations fly,
> Cling to the bud, and with inserted tube,
> Suck its pure essence, its ethereal soul.
> And oft with bolder wing they soaring dare
> The purple heath, or where the wild thyme grows,
> And yellow load them with the luscious spoil.[8]

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair has less Border Twilight in his description, and a more direct and unmixed observation:

> Honey-sucking of striped bees,
> with their fierce crooning hum,
> among the clustered, brindled flowers,
> the sunny blossoms on the trees;
> brown viscous drops through straws
> fall from your grasses' breasts;
> they have no livelihood or food
> but the roses' pleasant scent.[9]

This is not to say that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair is never guilty of admitting artificialities and mannerisms into his Nature poetry.

Sometimes his eye wanders from the object, and he writes also without much feeling behind the words, borrowing what he must have considered a fashionable and elegant formula of classical terminology. Some of these stylized elements in his Nature poems can be seen to derive, quite directly, from the poetry of Allan Ramsay, whose *Tea-Table Miscellany* had begun to appear in 1724. There is, indeed, clearer evidence of direct influence in these cases, but a strong case could be made for concluding that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair knew Thomson's *Seasons*, borrowed the general idea, and ideas for sub-themes from it, but had a mind and a method of his own, which was in accord with his own literary tradition.

Of the two seasonal poems the "Song to Summer" is clearly the more original and the more striking. Winter is seen largely as the antithesis of summer, which argues that the poem was written soon after that to Summer. There are some stanzas where the positive qualities of the season are observed, but the poem in general is more laboured than the "Song to Summer". This latter gives a wonderfully vital impression of teeming activity. It is full of movement, sound and colour. Even the adjectival exuberance comes off here. The metre and style are very highly-wrought, the sharp consonantal cut-off of the salient words giving a sense of great precision to the metre, reminiscent of a pipe-tune cleanly played. In an important sense the poem is a pattern in sound, with the emphasis on the consonants (perhaps this is a more intellectual music than the music of vowels). Nature is here described as much in sonic as in visual terms. Unfortunately there is no hope of reproducing all this sound and sense: an approximation must suffice:

The lithe brisk fresh-water salmon,
lively, leaping the stones;
bunched, white-bellied, scaly,
fin-tail-flashing, red-spot;
speckled skin's brilliant hue
lit with flashes of silver;
with curved gob at the ready
catching insects with guile.

May, with soft showers and sunshine,
meadows, grass-fields I love,
milky, whey-white and creamy,
frothing, whisked up in pails,

time for crowdie and milk-curds,
time for firkins and kits,
lambs, goat-kids and roe-deer,
bucks—a rich time for flocks.

. . . . . .

Now the cock leaves the budding
thick blossom of trees,
for the heights of the heath-hills,
with hen short-beaked and brindled;
he's a right courtly wooer
on purple cushions of heather,
and she answers him hoarsely:
"Pi-hu-hù, you vain thing!"

Short-winged cock of the woodlands
with your dark sable cloak,
black and white are commingled
in your feathers most finely;
throat well-groomed and shining,
green and sleek, often bending,
beak that never drips slaver
but melodious notes.

A clean, elegant twittering
with sweetest notes on a knoll
warbling seemly and gentle
on a pleasant May evening:
a group white-skirted, red-breasted,
with strong but finely-arched brows,
white-tailed and high-chested,
sun-burnished, brown-backed.[10]

Only five of the nineteen stanzas are given in translation; the last three are in fact the final stanzas of the poem, which ends sharply on the note of meticulous if amused description.

Though the "Song to Winter" does not have the same brilliance, it has its highlights too. The month he describes in the following stanza is in truth an eighteenth-century Scottish one:

Month of broth, steaming high, and of feasts,
greedy, spendthrift, voracious of pork,
full of porridge, and sowens and kail,
pots and beards that revel in fat;
though we thatch our bodies without
against air that makes merciless holes,
a dram is needed for lining the chest,
to kindle a bonfire within.[11]

Similar techniques are used in the poem which is usually referred to as "*Allt an t-Siùcair*" ("Sugar Brook"), although this is something of a misnomer, and was not the poet's own title. He called it "A Song for a certain village called Coire-Mhuilinn, in Ardnamurchan, and for a burn that flows through that village, namely Sugar Burn", and the poem in fact describes the surrounding countryside, the corrie, the bay, and so on, giving an idyllic picture of plenty. There is some telling selection of detail (as always in this poet's work) as well as some exhaustive treatment of particular aspects. And even in the "exhaustive" passages, language is firmly controlled: each epithet adds to the description. The poem ends with five stanzas in praise of the corrie, and these may have inspired Donnchadh Bàn's choice of subject in his poem "*Coire a' Cheathaich*" ("The Misty Corrie"), which is similar in method and style, though stamped with the younger poet's own individuality also. A short quotation may serve to suggest the mood and style of "*Allt an t-Siùcair*":

Nature's work of graving
is done neatly on your banks,
wild garlic growing freely,
fair nut-gall up above;
shamrock, daisy, red-berry,
freckling your meadow's floor,
like stars through frost the twinkling
of the fresh and lovely flowers.

Trees with their tops like scarlet
with rowan berries there;
and golden nuts in clusters
bursting above your head;
blackcurrants and raspberries

bend their own branches down:
smooth, ripe, sweet and fragrant,
moisture dried off by the sun.[12]

It is typical of the careful, detailed observation of this poetry that there is a comment, in the final line quoted, on the way in which the evaporation of surface moisture on these soft-fruits, in the warm sun, perfects their flavour. Detailed observation is of the essence of this poetry, but at its best it has a loving, fondling quality also.

This Nature poetry is marked, often, by verve, exuberance and fecundity of language, and these qualities show elsewhere in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's work, for example in the Jacobite verse, with its strongly evangelical flavour—a secular evangel of course—which he produced in his middle period, and also in the series of satires which seem to have followed that flow of exhortatory Jacobite poems. It is reported that he went about the Highlands in 1745, stirring up enthusiasm in the Prince's cause, and this is confirmed in the verse exchange between himself and the Mull Herdsman.[13] The latter goes on to suggest that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's conversion to the Church of Rome, which must have taken place at this time, was more of a political than a religious nature. Whatever the truth of this—and it is hard to see the poet in a religious light—there is an almost religious fervour in some of his political verse, the fervour from which the fanatic draws his energy and power. This fervour sings in his "Song to the Prince":

Last night I saw in a vision
Red Charles coming over ocean,
with his pipes and his war-song
and his banners of scarlet.

As I woke in the morning early,
great was my joy and my gladness,
since I heard of the Prince's coming
to the land of Clanranald.

Topmost grain of all kings,
may you come home safe, Charlie;
the true blood, undefiled,
flows in your most modest cheeks.

But before the end of the song his fervour has found another outlet, and appears as hatred of Butcher Cumberland:

> And if I had my desire
> the Duke would be in sad plight:
> the butcher who butchered the meat
> would have hemp round his throat.
>
> And I would make a gift of the Maiden
> as an heirloom to his brother;
> but may you come and reach us well,
> you are welcome here, Charlie.[14]

Much more stirring is the "*Oran nam Fineachan Gaidhealach*" ("Song of the Highland Clans"), which is a lively battle-incitement which has a conscious debt to the Harlaw Brosnachadh.[15] Proposing, in the first stanza, a toast to James Stuart, he says:

> But if there's any fear in your guts
> do not defile the divine cup.[16]

He goes on to list the clans that would rally to the Prince's cause, including some who did not rise in the event. Here is the stanza referring to the MacDonalds of Glencoe:

> The warriors of Glencoe will come
> eager to join your camp,
> like heath-fire on the hill-slopes
> fed by the winds of March;
> like tight-reined horses' riders
> that attack without delay,
> as ready as dry powder
> when it's touched by the spark.[17]

He imagines, with a ferocity that had been equalled only by Iain Lom, the destruction of his enemies in battle:

> A great many will be stripping
> the corpses on the field;
> ravens hoarsely calling,
> flapping wings and hovering;

> kites and vultures ravening
> as they eat and drink their fill;
> ah! faint and sad at sun-rise
> the groans from the slaughter-field.[18]

The series of exhortatory poems did not come to an end when the action of the '45 began. We find, in 1746, the evangelical fervour if anything accentuated, and subtle, singing metres being used to cast a persuasive spell over the mind, to help the fluent, eloquent verse-argument by bringing mesmeric qualities of rhythm to bear:

> Slender the string, O George,
> you played on to three kingdoms;
> guileful the Act and cloak
> with which they made you King;
> there are fifty men and more
> closer in blood and claim
> in Europe than you are;
> remote and weak and devious
> is the female line you came from,
> at the outside of the tree.[19]

And the series continued after the Rising was over, while there still seemed hope of another.

The same verve and exuberance appear again in the series of satires, as of the Oban poetess (who had apparently composed a poem critical of Prince Charles) and of the Campbells. One of the satires of the Oban lady in particular is very fluent and colloquial, drawing generously on Biblical lore and making free use of contemporary historical references.[20] The series of Campbell satires pours scorn on that clan very effectively, suggesting that they were far better trencher-men than fighters, and emphasizing their greed in general, and desire for wealth. He considers in "*Aoir do na Caimbeulaich*" ("Satire of the Campbells") the feast they will make for the Maiden, recalling that it is close on one hundred years since they last fed the Maiden, clearly a reference to the beheading of the Marquis of Argyll in 1661. This helps to date the poem: it is also of interest as showing Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's bookish knowledge of history, for dates do not figure in traditional lore.

He ends this poem with a scathing variant of grave-poetry:

When you get your charters
to your beds that are narrow,
your wills all in order,
and your carcase for beetles,
you will see sums of silver
are exceedingly vain.
The world altogether
and the wealth that is in it,
you must leave these behind you,
save for three planks around you,
and a cold, narrow shroud
sewn under your chin.
The poorest of beggars
who asks for his alms
is as rich in his lands,
with as copious a wardrobe.
That rabble fared ill,
lost before and behind;
till a camel goes through
the eye of a needle,
no joy will ensue
from treachery so vile
as poured on us in floods.[21]

In another satire on the Campbells[22] he paints them as warriors such as that prince of Irish gluttons, MacConglinne, would dream of. There is an element of bitter humour in this, as also in his Ragman's Roll of the Campbells whose conduct during the Rising displeased him: this latter poem is called "*An Airce*" ("The Ark"), and is very interesting from the historical point of view if not from the poetic. He has other scathing poems where the element of bawdiness is much in the ascendant, as the lewd mock-elegy for the poetess known as the Aigeannach,[23] and "*Mìomholadh Mòraig*" ("The Dispraise of Morag").[24]

There was a tradition that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair had composed "The Dispraise of Morag" in the hope of regaining favour with his wife, who was hurt or incensed by his poem "*Moladh Mòraig*" ("Praise of Morag"). We need not concern ourselves with the biographical implications—if there are any—of the poems. "*Moladh Mòraig*" has been judged for long enough simply on these grounds, being denied recognition because it is not *virginibus puerisque*, because the adult public for Gaelic poetry is small. Leaving that controversy aside, what we have in "*Moladh Mòraig*" is a highly-wrought poem (in the technical, not the emotional sense), dealing exhaustively with the subject of an attractive girl's attractions—surely one of the most universal of themes. It has spice added to it in various ways. There are references to the poet's married state (and these in themselves may have started the legend of his wife's resentment), and there are parallels, sometimes involving *double entendre* drawn from piping. These latter match, as it were, the metrical structure of the poem, which is imitative, to some degree, of the structure of *ceòl mór*, or classical pipe music. We might add the spice of ecclesiastical impropriety, in the suggestion that the Pope himself might be tempted by Mòrag's charms. With these ingredients the poet makes a polished, racy, audacious, and sometimes amusing poem, deploying his great gifts of eloquence and technical brilliance. The poem runs to 336 lines, but the following extracts may suggest its mood and movement:

O bravo, bravo,
bravo, Mòrag!
gay, golden-lock'd maiden
red-cheeked and rosy;
her cheeks are aflame,
lit like sparkling jewels,
her teeth white as snow,
cleanly chiselled in order.

As attractive as Venus
for delights of the body,
as lovely as Dido,
surpassingly comely . . .

. . . The like of the lassie,
is not in the wide world—
you have wounded my heart
since I saw your gold tresses,
locks curling and twining
and twisted like cornets,
with ringlets and clusters
and loops that are glorious,
in star-studded circlets

like jewels most graceful,
well-powdered—in fashion—
lit by sunlight, all golden.

. . . . . .

Your counsel do not hide from me,
what else to say or do now
about the girl who played these tunes
so finely on her chanter?
I cannot find the like of her
on Mainland or in Hebrides,
so absolutely beautiful,
so frisky yet so soothing.

There's one thing that I'm certain of,
I'd better not tell Jane of her,
and how I've fallen headlong,
and am going at the knees now;
there isn't enough water
in Loch Shiel, or snow on Cruachan,
to cool and heal the raging fire
that burns away within me.

When I heard the melody
played on Mòrag's chanter,
my spirit danced with merriment,
an answering most joyous:
the stately ground,[25] most elegant,
of her tune, with fingers tapping it,
a music with fine setting,
the rocks providing bass for it.
Ah! the chanter with its grace-notes,
a hard, sharp, clean-cut music,
sedate now, and now quavering,
or smooth, controlled, soft, tender;
a steady, stately march then,
full of vigour, grace and battle-zest,
a brisk and strutting *crunluath*[26]
played by sportive swift-soft fingers.[27]

This piece, in style and mood, is perhaps the closest we get to that masterpiece of Irish eighteenth-century poetry, Brian Merriman's *Midnight Court*. I think one can sense a similar potential in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, but it did not culminate in one large, zestful work as in the case of the Irish poet.

Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's invention shows clearly, however, in the metrical structure of the poem. Based, at least loosely, on the succession of movements in *ceòl mór*, the poem consists of an alternation of movements called *Urlar* and *Siubhal*, or Ground and Variation, with a climactic *Crunluath* at the end. All the movements consist of one or more sixteen-line units, with fairly straightforward rhyme-schemes, but there are marked rhythmical differences from one section to another, and particularly between *ùrlar* and *siubhal*. "*Moladh Mòraig*" is the prototype of this complicated poem structure, though the most famous example is Donnchadh Bàn's "*Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain*" ("Praise of Ben Doran"). The later poet's indebtedness to the earlier model is fairly clear throughout, but is especially noticeable in the opening sections, where Donnchadh Bàn preserves the sixteen-line unit, and virtually the same rhyme scheme. The succession of *ùrlar* and *siubhal* is of course a feature of both poems, but whereas "*Moladh Mòraig*" has an extra pair of these, "*Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain*" makes all the individual sections longer, running to a total of 554 lines, as against "*Moladh Mòraig*'s" 336. Donnchadh Bàn introduces many pleasing variations, of rhythm and rhyme. The difference in regularity is no doubt in part deliberate, and in part to be explained by the fact that Donnchadh Bàn did not *write* his verse down, but composed it in his head.

Donnchadh Bàn's work does not lack order, but it is clear that his mind did not have the hardness and intellectual grasp of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's. It may be, of course, that the older poet, with his readier access to the literature and thought of his time, in the neighbouring English speaking territories, was drawn somewhat to the order and temper of the Augustans, despite his tempestuous character. One sees such an Augustan temper in his "*Marbhrann do Pheata Coluim*"[28] ("Lament for a Pet Dove"), where the choice of a classical (Gaelic) precise metre may be a pointer in itself. He has no other elegies to his name, and the existence of one to a dove may suggest that he was almost thumbing his nose at the elegiac tradition he had inherited. But the intellectual qualities show through repeatedly, as in his capacity for ordered

structure in the poem on Gaelic and in the invocation to the Muses; in his ability to develop a verse argument, as in "*Oran mu Bhliadhna Theàrlaich*"[29] ("A Song about 1745–6"); in his ability, and predilection, to put cause before clan, which one can deduce from his restrained handling of clan poems like "*Moladh an Leóghainn*"[30] ("Praise of the Lion"); in his method of tackling the subject in "*Cuachag an Fhàsaich*",[31] which is a song to a milkmaid, where the milkmaid is not so much a particular girl as the representative of a genus; and most markedly in his "*Birlinn Chlann Raghnaill*" ("Clanranald's Galley"). In this latter poem, which must be regarded as his major single poem, we get vivid glimpses of the other side of his nature too, the emotional, explosive, expansive side. We must look, finally, at this poem, sampling it rather than attempting to savour it in its entirety.

The "*Birlinn*" was not included in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's book *Ais-eiridh*, which was published in 1751. This makes it likely that it was not written until after that date. There are traditions that it was composed in Canna, where the poet was Bailie from 1749–52, and also that it was composed in South Uist. The truth may be that parts of it were written in each of these places. It runs to some 566 lines in the first printed version, the Eigg Collection of 1776, an anthology summarily edited by the poet's son Ranald.[32] A poem of this length, falling into sections as this one does, may well have occupied the poet, intermittently, for a year or two.

The poem is concerned with a voyage made by Clanranald's galley from South Uist to Ireland, with the preparations of the galley and the choosing of the crew as well as with the actual voyage. There is no need to suppose that the poem describes an actual voyage, although it may be based in part on one. Some of the characters appear to be historical persons, probably of both Canna and Uist origin, and even those not named may have been recognizable to contemporaries. Clearly, however, parts of the poem are drawn from the imagination, and it is not particularly profitable to speculate further concerning these aspects of the poem.

It contains a great deal of technical detail, including close observation of the parts of the galley and of the functions of the various members of the crew. One of its most interesting features is the vivid description of the physical appearance of the crew members, and the connections that are established between appearance and character. There is, in fact, much human observation in the poem,

although this may at times be obscured by the technical detail. This is a human drama, and this helps to give the poem its power and fascination. There are hints of humour, but humour is not one of the obvious qualities of the poem.

Despite its considerable detail, the poem is compact, with visual clarity, and a sense of tense excitement which carries it forward, reaching its climax very near the end, and subsiding rhythmically as its action subsides to a calm. The storm which the galley encounters is described in extravagant terms, but the poet is in complete control of his subject all the time: the words do not run away with him, even at the height of the storm. There is no slackness or flabbiness of thought or expression here. The verse is hard, terse and business-like, the clean rhythm of the lines like the movement of cold sea-water along the side of a boat. This poem is the ultimate demonstration of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's hard, exact intellectual power.

Occasionally it borrows ideas or phrases or short passages from earlier Gaelic work. The "Ship Blessing" takes a traditional form, attested for example in Carswell's translation of the liturgy in 1567. The lines referring to the hoisting of the sails borrow directly from a "run" used in traditional stories,[33] and the poet was almost certainly familiar with Iain Lom's poem "*Iorram do Bhàta Mhic Dhòmhnaill*" ("An Oar-song for MacDonald's Boat").[34] These are minor, episodic influences. The "*Birlinn*" is a new work, forged in the imagination, and plunged into the cold, sharp, setting liquid of the poet's intellect, with his technical skill ready to shape it as we see it.

The poem begins with a Blessing of the Ship, followed by a Blessing of the Arms. Then comes an Incitement to Rowing to the Sailing Point. By this time the pace is being stepped up in anticipation (for the voyage has not yet begun) with blisters appearing on rowers' hands, and washers beginning to fly off the nails in the galley's planks. The sixteen men are seated at their oars, and in Section 4 Calum Garbh, at the bow-oar, sets the boat-song going. Here are a few of the stanzas of the boat-song:

> And now that you have been chosen,
> and bid fair to be champions,
> let your rowing be strenuous, fearless.
>
> . . . . . .

Wood dust showered on the thole-pins,
palms peeling and blistered,
oars engaging in high billows' arm-pits.

Let your cheeks flame with action,
your palms shed their whole skin,
sweat from your brow swiftly rain down.

. . . . . .

A bank of oars on each side then
mashing ocean with effort,
flashing into the face of the billows.[35]

. . . . . .

A short transitional section brings them to the sailing point, and there follow a series of sections giving sketches of individual crew-members and their functions. The first of these is of the helmsman:

Let there sit at the helm a thick-set hero,
loose-limbed, powerful,
whom neither top nor base of billow
will rive from rudder;

A solid, squat, pithy fellow,
sturdy, broad-beamed,
of delicate touch, alert, careful,
very wary;

Stocky, large, calm and weighty,
lithe and lusty,
sure and patient, without flurry
when seas pour in;

When he sees the shaggy billows
coming roaring,
he keeps her bow trained trimly
on curved breakers;

Keeps her on course quite steady,
with no heaving,
sheet and tack adjusted keenly,
eye to windward;

He does not deviate an inch
from his right course
in spite of surging crests of sea
that come bounding;

He tacks to windward, if he has to,
so resolute
that every rove and peg that's in her
takes to squealing;

He must not weaken, must not panic
however fearful
the grey sea seems in its swelling
to his eyeballs:
it may not shake the strong stalwart,
no nor move him

From where he sits like a hero,
tiller in arm-pit,
awaiting the grey ancient seas,
deep-troughed, hostile.

. . . . . .

In section 12 there is a description of the man who is to give warning of particularly heavy seas, thus giving the helmsman time to take evasive action. The helmsman speaks at this point:

Let the man who warns of high seas sit
right beside me,
and let him keep his eye sharply
straight to windward.

Choose a man who is half-frightened,
shrewd but fearful;
I don't want him to be a coward
absolutely.

Let him be on his guard when he sees
squall-before-shower,
as to whether the breeze comes astern
or on the bowsprit.

Let him give me due warning,
a quick alerting;
he must never, when danger looms,
keep his silence.

If he sees an engulfing sea
coming lowing,
he will shout to point the prow
quickly at it.

Let him be loud-voiced but prudent
as he tells the rollers,
not hiding it from the helmsman
if he sees danger.

Let there be no teller of high seas
except that one:
flurry, chatter and babble
make for confusion.

After fifteen preparatory sections, many of them quite short, we come to the final climactic section, which contains in fact the whole voyage. Two-thirds of the section is translated here:

Sun bursting goldenly
from its meshing;
the sky became scorched and gloomy,
awe-inspiring.

The waves grew dark, thick, dun-bellied,
angry and sallow;
the sky had every single hue
you find in tartan.

A dog's tooth* appeared in the west,
a storm threatened;

* A partial rainbow seen in stormy conditions.

swift-moving clouds by wind shredded,
squally showers too.

They hoisted the sails—speckled,
towering, close-woven;
they stretched the ropes—stiff,
tough and taut,
to the long, tall masts,
red-resined, pointed.

They were tied in trusty knots,
efficiently,
through the eyes of iron hooks
and round ring-bolts.

They adjusted every bit of gear,
smartly, neatly,
each man sat ready to watch
his own portion.

The windows of the heavens opened,
dark-grey, spotted,
to let the rough wind blow through them,
in fierce anger.

The ocean then donned completely
its black-grey cloak,
its rough, shaggy sable mantle
of horrid surging.

It swelled into glens and mountains,
rough and ragged,
the matted head of ocean spouted
up in hillocks.

The blue sea opened its jaws,
horned, capacious,
each pouring into the other
in deadly combat.

It was man's work to look in the face
of the fiery torrents,

phosphorous sparks of flame
on each mountain.

The waves in the lead, high, grey-haired,
with their harsh roaring,
the following waves in their troughs rumbling
and loud-lowing.

When we rose proudly up to
the tops of these waves,
we had to strike sail then
with quick precision.

When we fell, almost engulfed,
down in the wave-troughs,
every inch of sail that she had
came off her masts then.

. . . . . .

When we fell down from the tops
of the shaggy billows,
the heel of the ship just about gored
the shelly sea-floor.

The ocean was churned and dashed
against itself;
the seals and other great creatures
were in dire straits.

The roaring and rage of the ocean,
the ship in its movement
dashing the white of their brains
through the billows;

As they howled in horror and dread,
and bitter sorrow,
"We are the under-dogs here,
let us aboard you."

All the small fish in the sea had
their white bellies upwards,

killed by the raging storm
in their thousands.

Surfacing stones and shell-fish
from the sea bed,
were torn up by the pounding
of haughty ocean.

The whole sea turned to porridge,
foul and turbid,
with the blood and filth of splayed sea-beasts
turned red and horrid.

Creatures with horns and talons,
flippers, splay-feet,
many-headed, howling from wide jaws,
their mouths gaping.

The deep all full of goblins,
with paws weaving,
a-crawl with claws and tails
of great monsters.

. . . . . .

But when the ocean failed to win
from us surrender,
she took pity and smiled wanly,
making peace with us.

There was not a mast unbent,
a sail not tattered,
a yard-arm fast, a yard-ring whole,
an oar undamaged.

. . . . . .

The tiller was split badly,
the rudder shattered,
every plank groaned and creaked,
being cracked and split.

. . . . . .

The ocean made its peace with us
in the Sound of Islay;
the rough wind, raucous-voiced,
lay down by order.

It went away to the upper regions
of the sky,
and the sea grew smooth and white
after that barking.

We offered thanks to the High King,
shaper of Nature,
that the Clanranald were safe
from a death that was brutal.

Then we struck the thin sails
of spotted canvas,
and laid the mast, fine and smooth-red,
on the decking.

We put out oars, slim and sweet-tuned,
smooth and tinted,
of the pine MacVarish cut
in Islandfinnan.

We rowed with a smooth rocking
never missing,
and found a haven at the head
of Carrickfergus.

We cast our anchors quietly
in that roadstead;
had food and drink unstinted,
and stayed there.

Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir (Duncan Bàn Macintyre) was Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's junior by more than thirty years, being born in 1724, but their names have been so commonly linked that many have thought of them as almost twin-poets of the eighteenth century. This is far from being the case. Yet there are connections and contrasts that make it attractive to turn now to

Donnchadh Bàn's work, while that of the older poet is fresh in our minds. There was perhaps a sufficient gap in age to make a discipleship possible, but it is a discipleship that is not made explicit except by internal evidence, and there is a marked individuality also in part of Donnchadh Bàn's work which makes an interesting contrast with Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair.

The situation is complicated, and given an odd twist, by the fact that Donnchadh Bàn was not literate. We may be prepared to come to terms with the idea of non-literacy among the heroic ancients: it is more difficult to make such mental adjustments for comparatively recent times. Non-literacy is however a relative term, and I use it to avoid the pejorative overtones of "illiteracy". It is known, and it is clear from the poetry, that Donnchadh Bàn had a wide knowledge of his own poetic tradition, and a teeming, varied vocabulary which he could wield with expert ease. Nor was he the only significant Gaelic poet to be non-literate in this century of uneasy transition from one system to another. In addition, Donnchadh Bàn had literate mentors, so that his disability was to some extent mitigated. At an important period of his life he lived only a few miles away from the Manse of Killin, in which the New Testament was then being translated into Gaelic, and he belonged to the same parish as that notable minister of Lismore, the Rev. Donald MacNicol, who is said to have written down his poems for Donnchadh Bàn. We can scarcely escape the conclusion that he had become closely familiar, probably through these friends in particular, with at least that part of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's work which was published in 1751. When Donnchadh Bàn came to publish the first edition of his poems, in 1768, the book was seen through the press by the Killin minister's son, John Stuart, then a young man of twenty-five.

In such ways the influence of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's poetry on Donnchadh Bàn can be explained. It is there to see in the poetry itself. It has been stated already that Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair set the fashion in Gaelic for composing poems about the seasons. There can be no reasonable doubt that Donnchadh Bàn followed his lead, but it is instructive to observe what he did. One might deduce that he had proposed to himself to go one better: to produce a poem which would have more and fuller detail in it, and which would deploy a more impressive vocabulary. Perhaps similar ambitions made him opt for a longer line, a graver rhythm. His most recent editor thought his ambitions had been realized: ". . . the

poem is a noble structure, not excelled in style by any of the Gaelic poems on Summer."[36] I cannot agree with this estimate. It is not summer one scents here, but competition. In Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's poem the joy and freedom and brightness of summer come through to us, carried on the light, tripping rhythm, but Donnchadh Bàn's poem is for the most part "words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart". This might seem a curious way in which to contrast two poets, one of whom had a strong intellectual strain, the other a more emotional one, but the contrast applies rather to themes in which Donnchadh Bàn is too consciously trying to follow a set pattern. He has other poems in which he comes into his own as a descriptive Nature poet. But here, hoping to imitate, or excel Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, he has a passage about birds in which these summery creatures all have leaden pellets tied to their legs; the wren laboriously tunes his chanter, but does not seem to be able to keep time. Clearly birds do not move him. But already in this poem there is a hint of his true genius, where he begins to deal with the deer. I give a translation of part of the song; it was made many years ago, and I would not now choose to make it in this style, but perhaps it gives some idea of the formality of the poem. The last line of the second stanza in particular takes some liberties with Donnchadh Bàn's text:

Summer Song

When branching summer turns the sky
from surly grey to blue,
mild airs, and warmth, and lightsomeness
draw green-ness from the dew;
the sun suffuses all the land,
bringing its power to bear
on growing things, as it begins
from its hot side to rear.

The seed, sown in its due time,
draws sap from its own soil,
the upward thrust from plain to point
fills every granary full:
the dappled crop grows lush, secure,
thick-stalked and heavy-eared,
the large grain with its brindled husk
comes surging from the braird.

Sweet scents and gleaming sprays now fill
the jewelled orchard air,
the warmth glows as rosy gems
lay their mild beauty bare:
apples and pears and figs
modestly peeping out
in the green lovely lanes
that compass them about.

. . . . . .

Each hind is lying with her calf
as Nature has decreed,
for stags and fawns must frolick
when November sows its seed;
it were a lease of life for one
who loved them and their ways
to listen to the belling stags
and closely watch their ploys.

. . . . . .

The rising sap beneath the bark
moistens the birch's veins,
till shoot and wand, and branch and bough
are clothed with leaves again;
the sultry heat sucks from the mould
the fecund birch-top's food,
no snuff's aroma can excel
this flowering of the wood.[37]

Before returning to Donnchadh Bàn's more congenial and more mature nature poetry, which was his chief contribution to Gaelic poetry, we may look briefly at his other work. He had assimilated the traditional style of praise-poetry thoroughly. Although it was as a forester or gamekeeper he was employed by members of the Campbell aristocracy, he thought it proper that he should use his poetic gifts to praise them in the traditional way. Seven poems of this kind are extant, with such titles as "A Song to Lord Glenorchy", "Lament for Colin of Glenure" (the victim of the Appin Murder), and "Lament for the Earl of Breadalbane". There are

many parts of these poems that give the impression of being very central to their tradition: they hardly needed thought, for the thoughts and phrases were ready to hand. Two of the praise-songs have a much stronger individuality: the "*Oran do Iain Caimbeul a' Bhanca*" ("Song for John Campbell, Banker"),[38] which has a fine sprightly rhythm and a most robust use of language, and "*Cumha Chailein Ghlinn Iubhair*" ("Lament for Colin of Glenure"),[39] which lies in style and mood mid-way between the formal praise-poems and the folksongs: the poet's personal involvement in his subject shows. In view of the interest which the problem of the Appin Murder has retained over the years since 1752, a short extract from this poem is given:

Hard the message that came,
sad what happened just now,
if you could have avoided
the place where death struck you first!
Up above the wall gate-way
you were hit by the bullet—
my pain—no one near you
when they came from your back;
on your side, without talking,
the breath of life left you,
your fair, coursing red blood
outpouring in spate:
the act of a madman,
unknowing and stupid,
his soul sold for lucre,
with no mercy in view.

. . . . . .

Your sleep is eternal
and my spirits are mournful;
often futile reflections
come rushing anew;
anguish presses upon me,
your death sorer than fever,
my handsome, fine foster-brother
has been cut to the heart.
A thousand curses on him

who by ambush surprised you,
who let go the volley
from the Spanish gun aimed.
Cheerful news that would please me
were the public announcement
of his climbing the ladder
to the gallows' worse plight.[40]

Donnchadh Bàn also composed three love-songs, one of which, "*A Mhàiri Bhàn Og*" ("O fair young Mary") is very well known. It was composed to his wife. The song is too long, and it is not too clear why the verses occur in the sequence that they do occur in. It is in a well-defined tradition of literary love-songs (for example that of Lachlann Mac Theàrlaich Oig for Nighean Fir Gheambail)[41] being too detailed and itemizing, but it is retrieved to some extent by the imagery of these stanzas:

I went to the wood where grew trees and saplings,
a radiant sight all around,
and my eyes' desire was a peerless branchling,
in the dense growth of twiglets above:
a bough from trunk to tip in blossom
which I tenderly bent down—
it was hard for others ever to cut it,
this shoot I was destined to win.

I set a net on fresh limpid water,
and hauled it hard to the bank,
and brought with a sweep to land the sea-trout,
lustrous as swan on the sea;
the share I won at that time has left me
contented in spirit and mind:
my dear spouse, the star of the early morning,
my partner with me in sleep.[42]

Donnchadh Bàn composed songs of drinking and conviviality, competition songs about the bagpipes, and nostalgic recollections of the countryside and society of his youth. He moved from the Argyll–Perthshire borders, and settled in Edinburgh, in 1767, becoming a member of the City Guard (a policeman in modern parlance), and serving late in life in the Breadalbane Fencibles.

His output of verse seems to have kept up in Edinburgh, but there is reason to think that his poetry died when he left the countryside he belonged to. His greatest poetry, at any rate, had been written by the time his first collection appeared in 1768.

The poetic gift which Donnchadh Bàn was perhaps best endowed with was that of observation. His observation was not confined to one field, but there is no doubt that it was in the deer-forest, in those varied hills and mountains of the Perthshire–Argyllshire border, that it was exercised most lovingly. The highly factual nature of much of the description need not entirely obscure the emotion that underlies it, but perhaps it is when we contrast the poetry of his rural period with that of the later years that we realize most clearly that he needed this physical background of Nature to sustain his poetry. There might well be other, more prosaic explanations of the change of tone and talent, but this one is also supported by those few poems of his later period in which he returns, in person or in imagination, to the scenes of his youth. And above all his eye and his imagination open when he is within sight of the deer. There is not a hint of sentimentality in his attitude: he describes in an equally loving way the antics of the hind or the fawn, and the process of stalking or taking aim at or shooting the stag. Nor is there any attempt to philosophize. He does not question the workings of Nature, nor attempt to draw from them lessons for Man. There is no overt intellectual curiosity displayed at all. The close and detailed observation implies a strong and effective concentration, evidenced again in the transfer of that observation to verse that is tightly constructed metrically. But it may leave us with the impression of an artefact to be admired for the moment, rather than a work of art whose reverberations are unpredictable.

His two most famous Nature poems are "*Oran Coire a' Cheathaich*" ("The Song of the Misty Corrie")[43] and "*Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain*" ("Praise of Ben Dorain"). In the former he deals, in catalogue-style almost, with the natural description of the corrie, describing the kinds of grasses that grow in it, mantling the ground; the berries, flowers and herbs; and via a description of water-cress, the stream and the salmon in it; the birds, the bees; nuts and trees; and throughout the whole song, moving deer, for the deer have the power of motion, and motion is of their essence. It is very noticeable too that the birds in this poem come alive, as though they were birds he knew personally: not the birds of summer, of any

summer, but the birds of the Misty Corrie. It is in such ways that we can detect the lyricism of Donnchadh Bàn's poetic nature.

We do not know when his longest and most remarkable poem, "The Praise of Ben Dorain", was composed. It has already been suggested that its metre and form were strongly influenced by Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's "*Moladh Mòraig*", and that this model was probably brought to Donnchadh Bàn's attention by his literary friends, after the publication of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's book in 1751. The internal evidence suggests that the logical sequence of composition was "The Song to Summer", followed by "The Song of the Misty Corrie", followed by "The Praise of Ben Dorain". It would be hard to imagine a poet troubling to make "The Song of Summer" after composing so successful a poem as that on the Corrie, and surely "The Praise of Ben Dorain" is the last word in this series.

The connections between the Coire Cheathaich and the Beinn Dòbhrain poems are clear. In the latter, all the individual sub-themes are taken up again and greatly expanded: the mantle of the Ben, flowers and other plants, birds, burns, fish, and the deer moving throughout the poem. The theme of the deer is developed in remarkable detail, with many sub-themes such as hunting techniques; the appearance and construction and operation of the gun; the different ages and stages of hind and stag, their way of life, food, and whimsically, their feelings. In truth, this is a song in praise of the deer, and in a sense we can say that it is the foremost praise-song in Gaelic—an ironic reflection, when we consider the generations of bards trained to praise human chiefs and patrons.

The poem moves with great rhythmic vitality and verve. The flood of words is controlled with no appearance of strain or effort, and seems as light and happy as a dance-song. There can be no doubt that this poem was Donnchadh Bàn's greatest achievement, and it must rank very high in Gaelic literature as a whole.

As a sample of this remarkable poem, one movement is quoted from Iain Crichton Smith's verse translation.[44] This is the third movement, in which we see the deer moving gracefully in their closely observed habitat:

> Pleasant to me rising
> at morning
> to see them the horizon
> adorning.

Seeing them so clear,
my simple-headed deer
modestly appear
in their joyousness.

They freely exercise
their sweet and level cries.
From bodies trim and terse,
hear their bellowing.

A badger of a hind
wallows in a pond.
Her capricious mind
has such vagaries!

How they fill the parish
with their chorus
sweeter than fine Irish
tunes glorious.

More tuneful than all art
the music of the hart
eloquent, alert,
on Ben Dorain.

The stag with his own call
struck from his breast wall—
you'll hear him mile on mile
at his scale-making.

The sweet harmonious hind—
with her calf behind—
elaborates the wind
with her music.

Palpitant bright eye
without squint in it.
Lash below the brow,
guide and regulant.

Walker, quick and grave,
so elegant to move

ahead of that great drove
when accelerant.

There's no flaw in your step,
there's all law in your leap,
there's no rust or sleep
in your motion there.

Lengthening your stride,
intent on what's ahead,
who of live or dead
could outrace you?

The hind is on the heath
where she ought to be.
Her delicate sweet mouth
feeding tenderly.

Stool-bent and sweet grass
the finest food there is
that puts fat and grease
on her flanks and sides.

Transparent springs that nurse
the modest water cress—
no foreign wines surpass
these as drink for her.

Sorrel grass and sedge
that grow on heath and ridge,
these are what you judge
as hors d'oeuvres for you.

Luxuries for does
between grasses,
St. John's wort, the primrose,
and daisies.

The spotted water-cress
with forked and spiky gloss;

water where it grows
so abundantly.

This is the good food
that animates their blood
and circulates as bread
in hard famine-time.

That would fatten their
bodies to a clear
shimmer, rich and rare,
without clumsiness.

That was the neat herd
in the twilight,
suave and trim, unblurred
in that violet!

However long the night
you would be safe and right
snug at the hill's foot
till the morning came.

The herds of the neat deer
are where they always were
on the wide kind moor
and the heathland.

When colour changed their skins
my love was most intense,
they came not by mischance
to Ben Dorain.

Donnchadh Bàn made a brief appearance at the Battle of Falkirk in 1746, fighting without enthusiasm on the Hanoverian side, but the Rising and politics play very little part in his poetry. There were a number of Jacobite poets at this time, and their work has been collected and translated by John Lorne Campbell.[45] One of the most interesting of these was John Roy Stewart, a professional soldier who had fought against Britain at Fontenoy, and came home to take part in the whole of the '45 campaign. His poems on

Culloden make some interesting comments on the battle and on the issues at stake:

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.
The Whigs got their own way,
and "Rebels" is what we are called.[46]

Stewart himself escaped to France, dying in the early 1750s.

Other poets of the time, such as Rob Donn and Iain MacCodrum, composed poems on Jacobite or related themes, such as the Disclothing Act, which forbade the wearing of the kilt, and Uilleam Ros wrote an elegy for Prince Charlie on hearing of his death in Rome. But we do not associate these poets closely with either the '45 or with Jacobitism.

Iain MacCodrum (John MacCodrum) was born about 1700, but seems to have reached middle-age before composing much verse. Even later, he came in contact with the MacMhuirichs of South Uist, and in 1763 was appointed as bard to Sir James MacDonald of Sleat. This was an appointment of an antiquarian nature, but it seems to have stimulated MacCodrum. His output falls into two main sections: official poems flowing from his honorary office, and poems of local interest. It is all public poetry, having some sort of communal function. MacCodrum is one of the earliest of the "village" poets for whom we have a sizeable body of extant work. We have seen glimpses of such poetry in the seventeenth century, and it is hard to imagine that it was new then. Clearly by MacCodrum's time the tradition is a well-established one, and its links with present-day village poetry are clear also.

It is on this verse that MacCodrum's reputation should truly rest. It is eloquent, using a rich vocabulary and idiom, though with only occasional flashes of creative originality. There is wit and humour in generous measure, and some evidence of comic imagination, as in the Dispraise of Donald Bàn's Pipes, and in "*Oran do'n Teasaich*" ("Song to Fever"). In the former of these he describes Dòmhnall Bàn, a third-rate artist on the pipes, who has to content himself with a sooty kiln as his concert-hall, and sits

there resting against a bundle of straw, blowing his dissonant and evil-smelling pipes:

That mockery's-butt will
have no joyous hall
but a kiln that is choked
with burnt straw and soot;
there's no chair for Donald
and he cannot stand straight—
he must sit at the hearth
with straw at his back;
with a hell of a tune
and a roar of bad drones,
smell of body's decay:
a music as loathsome
as screeching of rooks,
or young growing chicks
sore for lack of their food.[47]

In "Song to Fever" we see again MacCodrum's descriptive gifts and his wit, and (at least in a restricted sense) his comic imagination:

Song to Fever

I came off worse in the wrestling round
I held with the hag, for I'll be bound
she sapped my strength, though I thought it sound,
and laid me flat on my back on the ground.
    My flesh and blood she drained away
    and sent a wheeze in my chest to stay;
    a luckless tryst we had that day;
    God's vengeance smite her without delay.

She planted confusion in my head;
a host of men, both alive and dead,
like those whom the Trojan Hector led,
and Roman warriors, thronged my bed;
    that dismal, dark and hunch-backed crone,
    to scandal and lying tales too prone,

    reduced my speech to delirious moan
    and left me stripped of sense, alone.

What a wretched autumn you've given me,
the harvest's lost, as all can see;
I'm bruised and ill, as here I lie,
with tired bones, and head awry:
    My bones were weary to the core,
    lopped off they'd hardly have hurt more;
    a raging thirst had tried me sore
    I'd have drained a river from shore to shore.

The fever bed is a wretched place,
you grow lanky and grizzled apace,
shaky and weak, without a trace
of hair on your head, but too much on your face:
    The loathsome beard that you have to wear
    makes your mouth unsavoury; if you dare
    to eat or drink, the lion's share
    of the victuals comes a cropper there.

Your coat has grown too big, and throws
into relief your wrinkled hose,
your splayed, pathetic ankle shows,
long as wild-cat's the nails of your toes,
    Bandy legs that fever has made
    pithless, and strengthless thighs—I'm afraid
    they're less like the oar-shaft than the blade—
    if grass but touched them they'd bend and fade.

Your scraggy neck is long; you feel
your ribs protrude like the ribs of a creel;
your strengthless hams make it hard to kneel;
your wobbly knees begin to peel
    with rubbing together; the knee-cap's sharp
    and the skin of the knees is as black as bark;
    frightened of cold as a cat—a mark
    that it's time death folded you in its sark.

Your bonnet seems to have doubled its size,
and it sits on your wig in unsightly wise;

your sprouting ears would win a prize;
what cruel friend could thus devise
A pate as bald as the palm of the hand
and a body as thin as a willow wand—
there's nothing like it in this land:
death has enrolled you in its band.

You lurch and sway like a wicket gate;
the one knee hardly knows its mate;
you're starved of food but easy to sate;
though you haven't taken a drop, your fate
is to look like a drunkard, a poor mite
preaching peace since you can't fight,
in action taking no delight,
sickly and wan, a sorry sight.[48]

The County of Sutherland, in the extreme north-west of the mainland of Scotland, is sparsely populated, but still retains a small number of native Gaelic speakers. This was the county most savagely affected by the early nineteenth-century clearances, especially on the estates of the Gordon dukes of Sutherland, a family of non-Gaelic origin, employing Lowland factors. We are fortunate in having a considerable body of Gaelic verse, composed by a poet of great stature, dating from the eighteenth century, the century before that in which sheep and money talked in that unhappy region of Scotland. The work of Rob Donn unfortunately has been much neglected, although his reputation is in the ascendant again. It is sometimes suggested that the neglect is to be explained by the dialectal strangeness of his Gaelic, but it seems to me that this is not the true explanation. It might be truer to say that he was an innovator, but in a sense quite different from his contemporaries, whose innovations caught the public eye; at the same time there was a strongly localized bias in his choice of themes, and so his verse came to be regarded as remote and non-central. In fact it has strong affinities with the witty, satirical strain of local or village poetry which we have seen surfacing at various times from the late seventeenth century, and which we will find enjoying a robust health in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As though to add further spice to this tradition, and to the subtle, oblique intelligence of Rob Donn himself, there is reason to think that he was influenced at least marginally by the poetry of

Alexander Pope, as mediated to him by the Rev. Murdoch MacDonald, minister of Durness in Rob Donn's time.[49]

Rob Donn (Robert Mackay) was born about the time of the '15 Rising, and died in 1778. He seems to have been non-literate, but fortunate in having literary patrons. Apart from a period of service in the Sutherland Highlanders (starting in 1759) he spent his life mainly in north and north-west Sutherland, herding and droving and dealing in cattle, hunting and in the service of Lord Reay. His verse is mainly a commentary on the episodes of that life and on the people he lived among. It is a lively, amusing commentary often enough, but it is also a critical and at times satirical one, quite unsparing of rank or class, once the thin veil of ambiguity or obliquity is penetrated.

Apart from these poems of commentary, to which we shall return, he composed some love-songs, some poems of natural description, and about a score of elegies. As a curiosity it is interesting to refer to his poem on Winter.[50] This is clearly based on Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's poem on Summer, with the appropriate inversions being made. It is cleverly done throughout, implying quite a feat of memory for a person who did not read. In "*Cead Fhir Bhìoguis do'n Fhrìth*" ("Bighouse's Farewell to the Forest") he recalls nostalgically his days of hunting the deer, and the good companionship of that time.[51] Rob Donn's employers and patrons were on the Hanoverian rather than the Jacobite side, but this did not prevent him from giving views which are indistinguishable from those of the Jacobites, or perhaps more particularly the Gaelic patriots whom we have already seen speaking out. A quotation from his poem on the act proscribing Highland dress, in 1747, "*Na Casagan Dubha*" ("The Black Cassocks") illustrates this attitude clearly:

I am saddened by Scotland!
You've shown clearly your motives;
your mind is divided,
which has spoilt every venture.
The Government read
greed in those who had turned to them,
and gave avarice bait
till you tore at each other.

Englishmen took the chance
of weakening you further,

lest you still might be counted
among those who opposed them.
But when you have surrendered
your swords, and your firearms,
you'll get a charge in your belly,
a very swift penance.[52]

He goes on to say that he recognized the sad plight in which his countrymen are, with the finest of their hawks chained to a kite, and he shows his sympathy for Prince Charlie's cause quite plainly. It would seem that by the circumstances of his life and locality Gaelic lost in Rob Donn a political poet of some vigour and originality. But political poetry's loss was social poetry's and satire's gain, and indeed there are many sidelights on aspects of politics in his most domestic verse.

His attitude to the relationship between tacksman and tenant, with its specific praise on the one hand, and its implied criticism of people who observe another code, comes through clearly in his "Lament for Iain Mac Eachainn", who died in 1757. Rob Donn was capable of composing fairly conventional elegies. This is not surprising. Much more remarkable is his ability to compose a low-key lament for a patron and friend, in which he is constantly on his guard against surrendering his own integrity, and in which he develops, quietly and firmly, a telling indictment of those who cannot match Iain Mac Eachainn's nobility of character. I give the poem in a translation published many years ago by Iain Crichton Smith, who suggested at that time that "the influence of Pope is [noticeable] in some of its balanced statements."[53]

Lament for John MacKay

Iain Mhic Eachainn since your dying
where now will we find
your equal in knowing
how to gather and how to spend?
The plain truth is that no one
of your own age does know it,
and if the gift's being grown
few living will see it.

How different your life from many
of those who still alive hoard

every acre, every penny
for their own children to discard:
who will endure dreary days;
who'll have no friends who can be named;
whose only elegy this praise:
"Look at the acres he reclaimed."

These are legal to the letter:
to some, hard debtors, though they pay
their own friends without bitter
recrimination or delay.
But all the rest of their resources
is speedily put in store;
while both their pity and their purses
are shut equally to the poor.

In such half-honour deeply rooted
they think it neither wrong nor odd
to spend their lifetimes thus indebted
less to men than they are to God;
but when their last judgment is ready
they must listen to this arraignment:
"Why did you never help the needy
with food or drink or proper raiment?"

I would wish if I were able
to fix your deeds in clear letters,
that youth might from them learn a noble
emulation of their betters;
for your whole life's so full of use
to those who will consent to study,
as your charity was profuse
and prompt for the weak and needy.

O you who have the means and power,
if you'd pursue the purest fame,
now is your exact hour,
O do not waste this precious time;
you also are in the midst of death
which took this hero to his doom.
Let each of you emulate his worth,
assume his burdens at his tomb.

For though many scorn these rare
and generous givers, I'd rather hear
instead of mockery this pure
petition and this passionate prayer:
"May the generations as they fade
at length making us wise in tears,
teach our late wisdom not to trade
an eternity for sixty years."

Many a man did you enrich,
and many a silly lad might gather
knowledge from the experience which
you could interpret to another.
Indeed there's not a man here
(but the dolts of cowherds) who wasn't
indebted to you, either for
your wisdom or a lesser present.

You never ate your food with pleasure
if you knew of any who was without;
nor would you ever pass a beggar
without responding to his plight.
Much rather would you give a pound
than suffer an ounce of late remorse,
and what you gave so freely round
renewed itself within your purse.

Today I see the prodigal
walking in sorrow and weariness;
the inn is warm but he is chill,
dispirited and penniless.
I see the poor widow forsaken,
I see the needy full of hunger,
I see the orphan stark naked,
having helper no longer.

I see the poet neglected
with rusting skills he's not using;
I see men strayed and infected
with loss of trade and of vision.
Should I ask why this grieving,

why this sorrow and sadness,
they'll say to me weeping:
"It's because of Mac Eachainn."

I see this multitude stricken
by the death that removed you;
yet a gain may be reckoned
to the wealthy who loved you;
since this year has now shown me
unknown patrons who've risen
like stars in the gloaming
when the sun's left our vision.

In the elegies that are made here
we find an impure flattery dropping,
the corrupting gleam of a false tear
that turns the truth to worse than nothing.
But though I should be on holiest oath
to the one God who can sustain,
I have spoken only clear truth
and what I knew of this good man.

Rob Donn's elegies in general are more reflective and more concerned with spiritual values than were the elegies of tradition. A strong strain of evangelical Protestantism had taken root in the North in the seventeenth century, as evidenced for example in the hymns of Alexander Munro of Strathnaver. This tradition, reinforced by the preaching of his own day, may account for the cast of Rob Donn's thought, and his weaning from the conventional style of elegy, which was more material and heroic in tone. We see this influence even in the elegy for the Earl of Sutherland who died in 1766, although this is more conventional than others of his elegies. The break with the old conventions would have made it easier for him to develop an idiosyncratic approach to elegy. This has bequeathed to us two elegies in particular which have an amusing twist. The first is, if not a mock-elegy at least a premature one. The story is that Rob Donn, while hunting, took shelter for the night in the cottage of an old man Ewen, in a lonely place called Polla, at the head of Loch Eribol. Ewen was very ill and troubled with asthma, and appeared to be about to take leave of the world. The poet had just heard that Prime Minister Pelham had died,

which dates the poem[54] to 1754, and he reflects on the way Death visits high and low, and all between, without distinction. The thought is not specially profound, but its expression is interesting, with the added piquancy that Ewen had to listen to the completed elegy, and evidently took exception to it. Rob Donn refers to Death

with its leap from the Court
to Ewen's poor cranny.

Addressing Death he says:

I conclude this is true,
your view takes in high and low:
you snatched Pelham from greatness,
and Ewen from Polla.

The poem ends in this way:

Ah, my dearly loved friends,
do these two not give fright to us!
We're like candle in lantern
with both the ends wasting;
where on earth was one lowlier
than the son of your father?
There was none above *him*
but the King on his throne.

The best-known of Rob Donn's reflective elegies is that on the Rispond Misers. These were two brothers who were born within a year of each other, and lived a miserly existence, looked after by an old housekeeper. All three are said to have died within a week, having turned a poor person away from their door only a few days earlier:

The Rispond Misers

Lying in their lowly state
are three we buried here,
though they were strong and healthy,
and lively at New Year;

ten days only have gone by
since then—who can be sure
that our dread Summoner is not,
unknown to us, as near?

Within one year a pair of them
had come from the one womb,
and they had been close comrades
since their childhood in one room;
their fellowship is still intact,
unsevered by the tomb—
within two days Eternity
has plucked them from Time's loom.

These brothers now departed
came from one man and wife,
their clothes were made from the one fleece,
each lived the self-same life;
their deaths came close together,
their natures were alike,
the one procession bore their dust
and laid it out of sight.

These men broke no commandments,
as far as we can trace,
nor did their deeds show anything
of what the world calls grace;
they were conceived and brought to birth,
were nursed, and grew apace,
a swatch of life passed by them
and Death put them in their place.

Surely this sounds a warning
to each one of us alive,
especially old bachelors,
unlearned in married love:
men who will not spend on food
the cash to which they cleave,
saving for a funeral feast
the gold that they must leave.

They'll never spend what they have made,
and make no heirs besides;
their treasures on the hillsides
are food for dogs and birds;
they stand condemned—though I can plead
"not guilty" in assize—
of hoarding darklier their gold
than ever did the mines.

The High King in His providence
wisely left some men short,
to test the sense and charity
of those who have a lot;
these should surely give a part
of all the wealth they've got
to poor folk who are ready
to increase their meagre stock?

In spite of this straight talking—
and I feel it's only right—
and all the words of truth I've put
directly in your sight,
I fear you will not listen,
or give the poor a bite,
any more than these did
a week ago tonight.[55]

We have spent long enough over the elegies of a poet who above all Gaelic poets in his century clearly revelled in company, and observed the nuances of character and behaviour as carefully as Donnchadh Bàn observed his deer on Ben Dòrain. We must at least sample this human observation, bearing in mind that we can choose only a few examples from a great many, for Rob Donn left over two hundred poems, many of them of this kind.

Refreshing critical asides occur frequently in poems dealing with "persons of quality" in his northern world. There was ample contact between what would in other contexts be called different "classes" in that world, and Rob Donn seems to have moved freely in the tacksman society of the time. This society impinged at some points on that of the native and alien "aristocracy", for both the Mackay chiefs and the Sutherland earls had each their own

nexus, with some points of contact. Lord Reay had married, as his second wife, a daughter of Sutherland of Proncy, who was not too popular to begin with, but she seems to have commended herself to Rob Donn in one or two ways. He makes a sarcastic reference, however, in a poem to Lady Reay,[56] to her new circle:

. . . . . .

The fashion of that party
in whose set you find yourself,
is to boost their name and fame
at expense of their own friends.

One of Lady Reay's popular actions was to rescue a local lad who had run away from his regiment and was subsequently arrested. She entertained his captors so well with liquor that the boy was smuggled out, in a fashion which Rob Donn describes with obvious enjoyment:

There was a lady on the threshold
who stood largely, stoutly there;
I couldn't tell the password
that he used, though I were killed;
but in between a woman's legs—
he wore no arms or hat—
close to where he saw the light
he was whisked away like that!

A good example of Rob Donn's serious and moral attitude, which led him to use poetry as a moral sanction in his community, is the poem in which he describes, in oblique terms, Lady Reay's stratagem in seeking to marry off a servant-girl who had been made pregnant by someone "above her station". He had ignored the request to sing dumb about the incident:

With sharp order and counsel
the gag was spiked in my mouth,
regarding the mishap,
much liker to hunting than love.
Well, I pity the couple
whose happiness rests on deceit;

though I wish it, I doubt whether
joy will remain in your house.

. . . . . .

Not for fear nor for favour
did I wait without making my way,
giving special obedience
to the ruler most great and most high;
but for that I would tell them
that what won for you gear, was not sense
but a hauteur degrading
you now it is lodged in your breast.

It's my view of you, hauteur,
you're contentious and dangerous too;
you proposed many shifts
to encompass your evil intent;
when persons of worth
cleanse you out of the nooks of their minds
you are sure of a welcome
in poor little brains without sense.[57]

Perhaps enough has been said and quoted to establish the point that in Rob Donn's work a new dimension had been added to Gaelic poetry in the eighteenth century. Probably the first person to demonstrate in detail the deep interest of his work was Ian Grimble, more especially in his Aberdeen University Ph.D. thesis (1963), and in published writings. He refers to the poems about Iain Mac Eachainn and his family as "the most graphic delineation of a tacksman's family in the whole of Scottish Gaelic literature".[58] Certainly there is no earlier body of Gaelic verse from which we can get so many-sided a picture of people in a community, with the tensions and sanctions that affect their lives. This picture has much trivial detail as well as bolder features, and undoubtedly some of the verse that carries this detail is trivial too. But it has the sterling quality of being rooted in actuality. There can be little doubt that it represents an important peak of achievement in Gaelic poetry.

A close contemporary of Rob Donn's was Dùghall Bochanan (Dugald Buchanan) born in 1716 in Perthshire. Only a handful of

his poems survive, and these are all on religious or moral subjects, even his "Song to Winter" carrying a strong moral. It is likely that he had a body of early secular verse which was destroyed. There is evidence in his *Diary* or Confessions that he had early obsessive experiences: he says that between the ages of six and nine "the Lord began to visit me with terrible visions, dreams in the night, which greatly frightened me: I always dreamed that the day of judgement was come . . .".[59] His mother had died when he was six. And he recalls hearing, at the age of twelve (by which time he had already become a private tutor!) graphic descriptions of how the Day of Judgement would break upon the world, with thunder and lightning and hail.[60] He experienced a secular reaction, which took the form of a craving for company, and at this time he learned all the ballads and songs he could get, "which was but a bad cure for a wounded and festered conscience",[61] though perhaps a useful preparation for a poet! He tells too of his examination of a horse's skull, saying that this was one of the proofs he found of God's wisdom and power;[62] one of his own poems was to be called "The Skull". He came under the influence of the English evangelical preacher George Whitefield during his second visit to Scotland, in the year 1742.[63]

As with the other eighteenth-century poets, the influence of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair shows in his work, marginally at least. Besides the "Song to Winter" which is much less detailed than the seasonal poems usually are, and which has a moral turn to the argument, he may well be reacting to Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's glorification of heroic and savage qualities, in writing such a poem as "*An Gaisgeach*" ("The Hero"), where he portrays the Christian warrior. It is true, though the blessing was a mixed one, that "Buchanan and his fellow Evangelicals won the battle for the soul of the Highland people. In the generations that followed, the Christian warrior rather than the pagan hero became the accepted ideal."[64] He was influenced to some extent by northern Gaelic religious poets, such as John MacKay, and by various English writers. He was probably more widely read in English than any of his contemporary Gaelic poets, and it is clear that in subject-matter he responded to the interests and fashions of his time, with his somewhat macabre interest in the grave and in skulls.

In his poem "*Fulangas Chriosd*" ("Christ's Suffering") he is emotionally involved in the suffering, and the poem has remarkable simplicity and clarity. "*An Claigeann*" ("The Skull") is clever and

persuasive, terse in language but marred by exhaustive categorization. "*Am Bruadar*" ("The Vision") has a restrained simplicity of statement and a kind of proverbial wisdom, as in these stanzas:

The thing most greatly you desired,
did not its winning turn it sour?
There's more joy to be had in hope
than in possession of a crown.

Just like the garden rose whose bloom
soon withers after it is cut;
you've scarcely caught it in your hand
but it has lost its scent and hue.

. . . . . .

Smoke hangs above each burning peat,
good often co-exists with pain;
the roses grow on pointed thorns;
honey and sting are side by side.

Though one man may enjoy great wealth,
do not suppose his joy as great;
the cleanest spring your eye can see
has sediment upon its floor.

And if you take a sudden draught,
swirling the water with your breath,
the red deposit rises up
and specks of sand befoul your teeth.[65]

Dugald Buchanan's longest poem is "*Là a' Bhreitheanais*" ("The Day of Judgement"), running to over 500 lines. It is also his most powerful and imaginative. The emphasis is undoubtedly on the pains of Hell, the aspect of the matter which had most vividly struck the poet's imagination. The kindly rewards that the righteous win seem scarcely to interest him at all; he glosses over them in a few lines, eager to come to grips with the penalties of the damned. The obsession of his immature youth had become a permanent sickness of the imagination. But if we set aside questions of humanity or Christianity, the exercise is brilliantly conducted. One sequence from it is quoted here:

A redness then glows in the sky,
like morning light arising red,
and tells us then that Christ himself
comes in its wake with a rough day.

The clouds come suddenly apart,
an opening to the High King's room,
and the great Judge is then revealed
in endless joy and glory clad.

A rainbow placed around his head,
his voice's sound like glens in flood;
like lightning, glances from his eyes
come spouting from the darkling clouds.

The sun, high lantern of the skies,
bows down before his glorious form;
his countenance's radiant sheen
smothers entirely the sun's light.

It puts the clothes of sorrow on;
the moon seems to be bathed in blood;
and heaven's powers are shaken sore,
wrenching the stars out from their roots.

They waver weakly in the skies,
like fruit on branches tossed by storm,
falling like drops of water fast,
their glory that of dead men's eyes.

On fiery chariot he sits,
with roars and thunder all around,
calling to Heaven's outmost bounds,
and ripping clouds tempestuously.

From out his chariot's wheels there comes
a stream of fire aflame with wrath,
and that flood spreads on every side,
until the world is flaming red.

The elements all melt with heat,
just as a fire can melt down wax;

the hills and moors are all aflame,
and all the oceans boil and seethe.

. . . . . .

The blue drape spread out from the sun,
and round the universe, a cloak,
is wrinkled up by that red flame
like birch-tree bark in living fire.[66]

The poem turns shortly after this to deal with the cases of Biblical characters who will now repent of their actions—Judas and Herod and Pilate—and goes on to consider other types of person, such as the greedy person, the blasphemer, liar, envious person and so on. There is an interlude in which the righteous come briefly into the picture again. Returning to Hell, he lets the suffering damned speak:

From nothingness, wherein I stayed,
why did the Lord lift up my head?
A thousand curses on the day
my mother took me in her womb.

Why was I ever given sense,
or understanding as my guide?
Why did you not make me a fly,
or a mean worm in the earth?

Must I be here world without end,
and will I ever die or change?
Am I now in Eternity,
swimming a sea that has no shore?

Though I should count all Heaven's stars,
all leaves and grass that ever grew,
and every drop that's in the sea,
and grain of sand that's on the shore;

Though I should spend a thousand years
for each and every one of these,
the march of great Eternity
were as one started yesterday.[67]

The final part of the poem is concerned with the traditional appeal to the reader to repent and to accept the means of grace.

Dugald Buchanan's poetry is not ornate metrically, but he makes a freer, more imaginative use of imagery than most of his contemporaries do, and he has a fine feeling for language. Despite the religious obsession one can sense a keen, orderly and even a hard intellect behind some of the poetry.

He saw his own poems through the press in 1767, and in the same year helped to see through the press the Gaelic translation of the New Testament. In 1768 he died of fever.

Uilleam Ros (William Ross), the last of the group of major poets whose work falls entirely within the eighteenth century, was born in 1762, and died in 1791. Born in Skye, though he lived most of his life in Wester Ross, he was however schooled at Forres, where he learned something of the Classics. He was clearly schooled also in the tradition of Gaelic verse, composing praise-songs, both of people and of his home district, and adding his offering to the growing tally of songs in praise of whisky. There is precision and wit in the language of his whisky song; this is the gist of one of the verses:

You would make old men merry
and get hunchbacks, wrinkled, wretched,
to rise to the dance, quite sprightly,
cocking a snook at old age.[68]

He was born too late to take more than an antiquarian interest in the '45. He wrote a lament on hearing of the death of Prince Charlie in 1788, but in it one feels strongly that Rome is very far away, as is Charlie's Year and the fervour it aroused. He followed tradition also in composing a "Song to Summer". This has a light, airy mood, and he has fine touches, absolutely in tune with the mood of summer, as in his description of birds:

their wings pointed, unresting,
on the high twigs of great trees;[69]

We get a sense of pulsing movement, warmth and movement of sap. His Song has more people in it than the seasonal songs usually have, and is more subjective: there are girls driving cattle to pasture (with the grace of love "swimming", *à la* James Macpherson, in

their faces), and we catch a glimpse of the poet himself reclining on a clump of fragrant heather. The poem is less adjectival than its earlier models, but for all that it belongs securely to its tradition.

The legend of William Ross says that he died of love, and we shall look at the poetry, some of it his best, associated with that legend. But there was a strong representation of humorous, witty and bawdy verse in his work. The two aspects are not incompatible, and there is enough evidence to show that he was fully conscious of the duality of his feeling, and conscious too of the legend which was already taking shape in his brief life-time. Perhaps there were times when he played a part, within the framework of the growing legend. But he wrote courting songs of a quite different kind, and tradition, like the "*Oran do Chailin àraidh*" ("Song to a certain Girl"):[70]

I went to woo a lassie
yellow, fair-haired, lovely,
but I turned me home again
like a bald old man.

A dun-dark night, a Sunday—
Paul wouldn't have prescribed it—
I sallied over moorland
for kisses and for love.

Seeking love and kisses
from the lovely lassie,
comliest in Europe
though she lives up here.

It had to be a duke at least
to win her with approval;
we made nothing of it,
the venture went awry.

I set out feeling sprightly,
in the early twilight,
striding long and lithely
not hunched like a carle.

I fell in many a bog,
had my fill of mud,

with my cassock flapping
against heath and rocks.

But I had a guide there,
mountain-bred MacDonald,
of swan and geese the hunter,
of the bailiff's merry kin.

When I heard her statement
I threw the halter at her,
Roger started barking
but, the bissom, she kept mum.

There was nothing for it
but go home, a poltroon,
like one who lacked the gear
to give a girl a ride.

When I go and lie down
I can't sleep a wink now,
with my merry member
rising by my side.[71]

The song is reminiscent in tone of some of the songs of the great fourteenth-century Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, both poets no doubt drawing ultimately on a medieval European tradition which had been carried far and wide by the troubadours, the *clerici vagantes*, and in Gaelic lands by the Cliar Sheanchain, or strolling bards and entertainers.

Ross, however, has one poem in particular in which it appears clearly that he had reflected on the duality of his nature and his poetry. This is the "*Oran eadar am Bàrd agus Cailleach-mhilleadh-nan-dàn*" ("Song between the Poet and the Hag-who-spoils-songs").[72] This takes the form of a debate which the Hag wins hands down. He seems to be making fun of himself—in a remarkably healthy way—and of that love-poetry which shows too little understanding of life and its complexity, which does not recognize the co-existence of ugliness and beauty, asperity and sweetness, meanness and maidenliness. Perhaps the poem is coloured by Ross's personal experience in the matter of his love for Marion Ross. It seems, at any rate, to fall late in the series of his poems about women.

Three poems of his surviving output[73] are concerned with the short unhappy affair with Mòr Ros (Marion Ross), a young lady from Stornoway, in Lewis, which William Ross had visited, probably along with his father, who went there as a travelling pack-man. We know that she married in 1782, and went to live in Liverpool with her husband, who was the captain of a sailing-ship. The affair was therefore over by the time Ross was twenty, though it may be that the obsession lasted for some time.

John Mackenzie, Ross's fellow-countryman and first editor, is responsible for the story that "*Feasgar Luain*" ("Monday Evening") was composed by Ross on seeing Marion Ross at a ball in Stornoway. Mackenzie's first draft of this legend is cautious, but by 1841, when he published his famous anthology of Gaelic poetry, *Sàr Obair nam Bard Gaelach*, its outlines had become quite firm. He says of the song, "Its history like that of its author, is one of love and brevity—it was composed in a few hours to a young lady, whom he accidentally met at a convivial party—and sung, with all its richness of ideality and mellowness of expression, before they broke up."[74] The internal evidence of the song, however, in specific detail as well as in tone, shows that this was not the case, but that it was composed on the mainland and very probably after Mòr Ros's marriage. It was the sound of dance music that "ferried his thoughts over" [to Lewis] and he proceeds to reconstruct the detail of his first meeting with Mòr Ros. He sees her sedately turning in time to the music, on the dance-floor, and describes her, comparing her to Diana and Venus, and then hinting at her noble and heroic ancestry, and that of her clan, which was his own clan also. The poem ends:

Sad my sighing, hard my fortune
no means of rest, no hearty joy,
as I think of my beloved
who took my love without return.
The Powers imposed a double penance
to humble me without delay.
I was enticed to drowse by Cupid
but I wakened bruised and weak.

Take farewell greetings to the maiden,
of great clan and noble ways,
bring to her my warm good wishes—

I love her fair and yellow hair.
It was no dream that moved my spirit—
would that it would give me peace—
whether on near or distant voyage
I will for ever think of you.[75]

The poem does not in fact give the impression of uncontrollable emotion. It is carefully ordered, rather formal in its images and its progression, and has time and inclination to nod courteously in the direction of these formal literary traditions, both Classical and native, which Ross knew. It is a controlled reconstruction of a situation, and only the reference to the "double penance" strikes really deep in emotional soil. Indeed, somewhat contrary to the legend, Ross's poetry is generally tightly controlled. His experience with Mòr Ros seems, however, to break surface in poems which are not ostensibly concerned with her, as in this verse:

That was no sign of wisdom
in me that I fell then in love
with a girl who has left me
and airily sets me at naught.
If I thought of it coolly
that flame would burn low in my breast,
I would drown it completely,
not letting it gnaw me again.[76]

The emotional drive behind the lines finds its expression in a simplicity of words and thoughts but the urgency shows in the rhythm.

Another love-song attributed to Uilleam Ros, the "*Oran Cumhaidh*" ("Song of Lament"), has verses that may belong to an earlier love-song, but whether they were composed by Ross or merely retouched by him, they seem characteristic of one side of his poetic personality:

I find your converse sweeter
than the mavis in the trees,
than cuckoo in May morning,
or than harp with its strings,
than the Bishop on a Sunday

when he preaches to the crowd,
I'd have it before Hanover
with all its riches strewn.

Why was I not born sightless,
dumb, without power to see,
before I saw your modest face
that dimmed a hundred's light;
since first I ever saw you
your virtues were renowned,
and death to me were easier
than to live now you are gone.[77]

The barest, most desolate of his love-songs, the one most firmly pruned of extraneous ornament, is the "*Oran Eile*" ("Another Song" [on the same theme]). This has no elaborate analogy, such as mars the "Song of Lament", nor classical and fashionable adornment such as we find in "*Feasgar Luain*". It is a song without bravado either. It is short, and tightly reined, so that the emotion which sets it in motion is kept compact and compressed. The emotion declares itself in the use that is made of language, which is disturbed and pressed into unusual shapes, as happens when the imagination's temperature rises. There is a telling example of this in the third line of the first verse, where he refers to a maggot or grub hatching its eggs within him: these eggs from which disease comes. In one sense the word he uses for hatching, *gur*, is a homely, everyday word which would be used of a hen hatching its eggs, but it is used here in a dark threatening, macabre sense, as of bacteria multiplying in a diseased body. Ross died of TB, and perhaps knew he was dying. The image, however, is one which has the power to expand, to fill and jolt the imagination. He plays elsewhere in the poem with the double meanings of words, in a more obvious but still a very effective way, as where he refers to Mòr Ros's journey over sea *fo bhréid*, which means (1) under sail and (2) under kerch, the headgear that was the badge of the married woman. Again, he plays with the senses of *dàn*, (1) poem and (2) destiny. People say of him that he is a mere poet, and that no poem/destiny that is worth while will come his way. And throughout he is drawn to images and thoughts that suggest to us that things which were alive and in motion are now proceeding to dumbness, immobility and death. I give the poem in Iain Smith's verse translation:

Another Song on the Same Theme

I am lonely here and depressed.
No more can I drink and be gay.
The worm that feeds on my breast
is giving my secret away.
Nor do I see, walking past,
the girl of the tenderest gaze.
It is this which has brought me to waste
like the leaf in the autumn days.

O girl of the ringletted hair,
how much I deplore you, and miss.
In spite of the riches you wear
I shall never curse you, but bless.
What can I do but despair
like the wounded soldier whose pain
cries out from the field of the war
he'll never join battle again?

I'm a stray who is far from the herd
or a man to whom love is dead.
The voyage you took as a bride
wrung the hot tears from my head.
Better not to have stored
your beauty and fame in my mind
or the affable grace of your word,
a language to music refined.

Ill-wishers who hear of my plight
call me a coward and worse.
They say that I'm only a poet
whose fate is as dead as my verse.
(His father's a packman. You know it.
His father, in turn, couldn't boast.)
They'd take a good field and plough it.
I cut better poems than most.

My spirit is dulled by your loss,
the song of my mouth is dumb.
I moan with the sea's distress

when the mist lies over the foam.
It's the lack of your talk and your grace
which has clouded the sun from my eyes
and has sunk it deep in the place
from which light will never arise.

I shall never praise beauty again.
I shall never design a song.
I shall never take pleasure in tune,
nor hear the clear laugh of the young.
I shall never climb hill with the vain
youthful arrogant joy that I had.
But I'll sleep in a hall of stone
with the great bards who are dead.[78]

William Ross died in 1791, a long time indeed after Mòr Ros's marriage in 1782, too long no doubt to give credence to the legend that he died for love of her. Yet the legend has its own truth, or so it seems when we consider the ways in which his poetry differs from that of his fellow Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century. His personality seems the most vulnerable, and he either wears his heart on his sleeve or pretends he hasn't got one: two reflexes of the same emotional disturbance. This subjective element, and more especially the conscious manipulation of it, was new in the poetry of the century, though perhaps not entirely original.[79]

We have seen, momentarily, that James Macpherson's writing of the years around 1760 had left a slight mark on Ross's sensibility.[80] No doubt they both responded to the atmosphere of their time, though Macpherson did something to create that atmosphere too. There are some superficial resemblances between Ross and Burns also, although these cannot be pressed hard. James Macpherson had some influence on subsequent Gaelic writing, almost always a pernicious or trivial influence. This produced poems like "*Miann a' Bhàird Aosda*" ("The Aged Poet's Wish"), John Smith's *Sean Dàna* (*Ancient Lays*) and archaized poems such as "*Mordubh*" and "*Collath*". These have some place in a history of Gaelic poetry, but need not detain us here.

As the century drew to a close, the last of the eighteenth-century poets, Ewen MacLachlan, had just begun to publish. He was the most learned of the group, and served as Headmaster of Aberdeen Grammar School and as Librarian to King's College. He is the

only one of these poets who has to his name a poem on each of the four seasons. He also wrote a short pibroch-type poem, after the manner of Donnchadh Bàn. His verse lacks the strong individuality which marks that of all the others, in their various ways, and he is chiefly remembered nowadays as the translator of seven books and a fragment of the eighth, of the *Iliad*.[81] The *Odyssey* had to await its translator for another 150 years, being translated by the late John Maclean, Headmaster of Oban High School, in the 1960s.[82]

The century had opened with the old age of Niall MacMhuirich, one of the last of the literate bards of the old school. By 1800 the representative of the MacMhuirichs, Lachlann, was not able to read or write, but the poets had nevertheless got their second wind, and were in command again in their own house. Much of the old society lay in tatters around them, but the pen is at the end of the day mightier than the sword, and a nation's spirit can be stronger than either.

6

Gaelic Poets in Lowlands and Highlands

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY is above all others the century of the Gaelic diaspora. It was chiefly in this period that people of Gaelic descent and language became distributed throughout the Scottish population, but especially the population of the Lowland industrial belt, and also went further afield, in particular to the Americas, where in company with Lowland Scots they proved to be hardy and capable settlers. The language and music and life-style they took with them survived for varying periods and with varying intensity where they went, or influenced the texture of the life around them, and that influence can still be traced from Milngavie to Milwaukee. There is room for a serious historical study of this diaspora.

This dispersal of the Gaelic people had begun, in a significant way, in the second half of the eighteenth century. The magnets were those that were to work so effectively in the nineteenth century—the industrial Lowlands and the undeveloped spaces of the New World—but these magnets were to grow enormously in strength and attraction. The movement had indeed begun earlier. We may note, for example, the settlement of a group of 350 people from Argyllshire in North Carolina in 1739, and subsequent grants of land to persons with Highland names in 1740 and spasmodically for several years thereafter.[1]* A large number of pardoned Jacobite "rebels", to use the official description, had been transported to America as "indentured servants", which is sometimes a polite circumlocution for "slaves", and this movement had begun before the '45 Rising. We have seen already that Donnchadh Bàn, the poet, had moved to Edinburgh in the 1760s, becoming one of a growing Highland community in the city. Around the year 1770 there were considerable migrations to America, led by tacksmen, the middlemen of the land-leasing system in the Highlands. These

* For Notes, see pp. 316–18.

tacksmen had lost their military function with the collapse of the '45, and the subsequent repression, and as their rents were steeply increased a number of them made arrangements to go abroad, with their tenants, to areas where land was plentiful and cheap. The famous Flora MacDonald and her husband Allan MacDonald of Kingsburgh, settled in North Carolina, having sailed from Campbeltown in 1774. She, however, returned to Skye after five years in America.[2] Some 2,055 Highlanders are listed as arriving off emigrant ships in North Carolina alone, between 1739 and 1775, most of these coming from Argyllshire and Skye.[3] There was migration abroad to other places also, for example Jamaica, where two of the poet Ewen MacLachlan's brothers were settled, the elder having gone there about 1793.[4]

In addition to the social and political changes which had produced the revolt of the tacksmen, there were powerful economic changes beginning to make themselves felt, notably the development of sheep-rearing in the Highlands, with consequent enclosures and evictions, and in some areas a population explosion which current land-use and employment patterns could not accommodate. These pressures begin to become noticeable in the southern Highlands first of all. Already by 1760 Lowland sheep-farmers were leasing hill grass-lands, and by the end of the century sheep-rearing on a large scale had penetrated the Northern Highlands, eventually leading to large-scale evictions: the infamous Highland Clearances which blotch the face of Highland history in the nineteenth century.

Also, the demand for labour, in the rapidly growing industrial economy of the Central Belt of Scotland, was a powerful positive attraction for Highlanders in the nineteenth century, and led to the growth of very large Gaelic-speaking populations in that region, and to the growth of a literature which reflected the circumstances and sentiments of this body of Gaelic immigrants to the Lowlands. The lines of connection and tension between the various old and new Gaelic communities, and between these and the new host-communities, help to make new patterns in the Gaelic poetry of this period. Much of the poetry of the century is connected, in one way or another, with these matters that have been briefly summarized.

Though there had been earlier poets, such as Iain MacMhurchaidh of Kintail and North Carolina, it was mainly in the nineteenth century that the tradition of New World Gaelic verse was

established. The Rev. James MacGregor is the earliest Gaelic poet to have left any considerable body of verse composed in Nova Scotia. He held a charge in Pictou County, and his verse consisted mainly of hymns. Iain MacGhillEathain (John Maclean) is usually regarded as the main patriarch of Nova Scotia Gaelic verse. He had acted as bard to Maclean of Coll before leaving Scotland in 1819, and had published a collection of poetry in the previous year. His Scottish verse is very much in the panegyrist style of the eighteenth century. More interest attaches to what he wrote in Canada, and particularly to his poem "*Am Bàrd an Canada*" ("The Poet in Canada"), in which he gives his early reactions to his new country (contrasting it with his windswept native Tiree) and castigates the emigration agents whose picture of life in Canada was evidently too rosy. A few stanzas of this will be sufficient to give its flavour:

It's little wonder that I am gloomy,
where I live now behind the hills,
in a wilderness by Barney's River,
bare potatoes my only food.
Before I fell all these lowering trees,
and till the soil, and produce a crop,
my arms' strength will have tired and failed
before my children have come of age.

This is a country where hardship's common,
although the immigrants don't know of that;
we were hard done by those enticers
who brought us here with their glowing tales.
If they prosper, their wealth won't last long,
they'll reap no comfort—I'm not surprised—
pursued by wretched people's curses
as they are driven from place to place.

They make their promises strong and steadfast,
praising the new land to the skies;
they will say that your relations
are happy, wealthy, and do not lack.
They tell you all these enticing stories
to make you desperately keen to go;
if you come safely, when you see them
the "states" are no better off than you.[5]

He goes on with his anti-immigration propaganda, referring to the emigration agents in Scotland as cattle drovers, and saying that one sees little of the famous green dollars, and that barter is still prevalent. It is an interesting enough testimony of disillusionment, and must have been composed very early in MacGhillEathain's sojourn in Canada. He survived there until 1848, composing some other songs in a similar vein, but in the main reverting to what must have been his natural bent in verse: a miscellany of panegyric (for persons in Scotland and in Canada) and of occasional village-verse.

It was a grandson of his, the Rev. Alexander Maclean Sinclair, who edited a large number of anthologies of Gaelic verse, including Nova Scotian verse, in the latter years of the nineteenth century. The family MSS., some of which Iain MacGhillEathain had brought over from Scotland, include some important items, especially Dr Hector Maclean's MS. collection of verse, partly compiled before the '45.

Nova Scotia continued to produce Gaelic poets throughout the century, and well into the twentieth century also. Representatives of the MacMhuirich bardic family had emigrated there early in the nineteenth century, and continued to produce versifiers. Donnchadh Blàr (the Rev. Duncan Blair) composed a poem in praise of the Niagara Falls,[6] Malcolm Gillis of Cape Breton composed many "homeland" songs which were very popular, Vincent MacLellan published a collection of songs in 1891, and much verse appeared in Nova Scotian publications, especially in the weekly (later fortnightly) Gaelic paper *Mac-Talla*, which was published in Sydney from 1892 to 1904.[7] The links with the Scottish tradition were closely kept; there were occasional new themes suggested by the new environment, but no new voice or style.

At home in Scotland there were some more adventurous developments, together with much verse of an unambitious nature. A great deal of religious verse was composed in a century which saw many collections of sermons published, and many translations made of religious and pious prose. The work of Pàdraig Grannd (Peter Grant) and Iain Gobha na Hearadh (John Morrison) is the most famous in this field. Pàdraig Grannd (1783–1867) was strongly influenced by the English hymn-writer Isaac Watts. His rhythms are flowing and evangelical, his thought is not very demanding, and his clear exposition and relatively lively turn of phrase make his verse easy and pleasant to read. It became very popular, appearing in many editions throughout the century.

Iain Gobha na Hearadh (1790–1852) is, however, a much more original and forceful poet. He handles his themes at times with great freshness, robustness of language, and on occasion with dramatic power, as in this extract from his long poem "*An Nuadh Bhreith, no Gleachd an t-Seann Duine agus an Duin' Oig*" ("The New Birth, or the Struggle of the 'old' and the 'new' Man"), which is a dialogue between the converted Christian and his unregenerate self:

> I am drowned in the "old" man's sea,
> in sharp cold dew and winter's coldness,
> the glorious "new" man comes to his temple
> and he sets my feet a-dancing.
> It is the "old" man who made me gloomy,
> the "new" man is my blazing lantern.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The "old" man set me in the miry clay,
> and made me wallow in eternal mud,
> the "new" has raised me up to safety,
> and rescued me from that mud's choking:
> the "old" man is licking the dust,
> the "new" man is pleading his case.[8]

Some of his verse is highly evangelical, but his thought and expression remain robust and agile, unweakened by sentimentality:

> But O! how great our need is
> now of believing,
> that we find ourselves
> with that sun bedizened:
> the righteousness of Christ
> a garb to give us beauty,
> making us clean, pure-white—
> no spot or wrinkle:
> if that were our garment,
> though the world should mock us,
> we would be like heroes,
> above the world and steadfast.[9]

The third-last line shows the resilience of the poet's mind.

The commonest theme of Gaelic verse in the nineteenth century is that of "homeland". This was no doubt to be expected in a period of upheaval and uprooting, much of it of an involuntary nature, whether people were forced to migrate by physical action or by economic circumstances. The homeland is seen primarily in a nostalgic light: a place of youthful associations, family and community warmth, a Paradise lost. But this in itself is not sufficient to explain the simple and unambitious nature of so much of the verse of this period on such themes. It should be recalled that the condition of the Highlands was very unsettled, with periodic pounces being made by landlords and factors, villages uprooted, and new communities set up to take the displaced persons. Schooling must have suffered severely. The introduction of English, first of all to the southerly and eastern communities, introduced Gaels, not to the glories of English literature but to the simpler ephemera of the elementary schoolroom, to the chapbook and to the models of semi-literate taste. All this is reflected in the "new" Gaelic verse of the nineteenth century, which largely turns its back on its own relatively learned, aristocratic tradition, and grovels contentedly in its novel surroundings.

As always, there were survivals from the older order, individuals who made an effort to cling to the tradition. Thus we find, for example, Gilleasbuig Grannda (Archibald Grant) of Glenmoriston, a poet who was born in 1785 but whose verse was not published until 1863, producing praise-poetry and local verse written against a strong background of knowledge of language, clan and legendary history, and traditional versification, using robust rhythms, and handling with assurance and skill the strophic verse paragraph which was so popular in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In one of his poems in particular, "*Beannachadh Bàird do Luing ùir*" ("Poet's Blessing for a new Ship"),[10] there is an interesting seam of fantasy based on the old Fenian and other legendary lore which is slightly reminiscent of Iain MacAilein's work.

But the staple verse of the nineteenth century is that of poets such as Iain MacLachlainn (John Maclachlan, of Rahoy), Eóghan MacColla (Evan MacColl, of Lochfyneside), Iain Caimbeul (John Campbell, of Ledaig in Benderloch), Dòmhnall MacEacharn (Donald MacKechnie, of Jura), Calum MacPhàrlain (Malcolm MacFarlane, of Lochaweside and Paisley), Niall MacLeòid (Neil

MacLeod, of Skye), and Iain MacPhaidein (John MacFadyen, of Mull). With the exception of Niall MacLeòid, all these were Argyllshire poets. The earlier nineteenth-century pattern of migration to the Lowland cities (where virtually all the Gaelic publishing took place) has a strong bearing on this distribution.

We may attempt to describe the overall flavour of this verse, without going into great detail. Homeland verse was perhaps the most prominent variety, but the theme of homeland is frequently combined with that of love, and especially lovers' partings. These frequently take place on the shore. Iain MacLachlainn writes:

> O, do tell me, western wind,
> when you come across the sea,
> what state is my sweetheart in,
> is she thinking now of me?
>
> When I stretched my hand to you,
> leaving land, on the shore,
> I could scarcely speak the words
> "Fare you well, my adored."
>
> When I turned my back to you
> I saw your tears begin to swell;
> though I took the tiller then
> it was on you my eyes fell.[11]

Such romantic, idyllic settings are characteristic of the homeland/love verse of the period. We find a closely similar situation in Niall MacLeòid's song "*Duanag an t-Seòladair*" ("The Sailor's Ditty"):

> She gave her picture on the shore,
> a smooth lock of her fair hair,
> these bring always to my mind
> the love my sweetheart gave to me.

Earlier in the song this verse occurs:

> The wind is rising, driving spray,
> and I am lashed against the wheel;
> it put new strength into my hands
> to think of my girl's love for me.[12]

The invented detail and the spurious emotion are plain to see. This has little or nothing to do with the fact that Niall MacLeòid was a tea-traveller rather than a sailor, but it does throw serious doubts on his artistic integrity. Another highly popular song of his, "*Màiri Bhaile Chrò*" ("Mary of Baile Chrò") uses an idyllic setting on a shieling. The travelling poet is offered a night's hospitality by the lovely and charming Mary. There is no mention of a chaperon, and it would be improper to question the propriety of Mary's hospitality. Again, his "*Cumha an t-seana Ghaidheil*" ("Lament of the Aged Gael")[13] appears to suffer from the same defect of simulated emotion issuing in sentimentality. The aged Gael has lost his wife and three of his children by death, but has time and inclination to reflect on the vanished cowherd and especially the milkmaid, whose ditties he loved to hear; he recalls her with her hair down over her shoulders in braids of gold. This passage seems to show that the emotional experience was not deeply imagined, and a similar perfunctoriness of identification is common in the popular verse of the period. Eóghan MacColla has a long series of "love-songs" addressed to a large number of ladies from different locations.[14] I must confess that I have not checked on whether he was a peripatetic lady's man, but I suspect, from internal evidence, that many of these love-songs are simulated and stylized. Iain Caimbeul of Ledaig has a series of poems on human "tragedies", e.g. "A Mother bewailing the Loss of her Daughter, who perished in the Wreck of the 'Royal Charter' ", or "Written on the death of a sister and her two children, as if by her Husband".[15] Again the emotion is simulated, and produces sentimentality, as does Niall MacLeòid's "*Bàs Leinibh na Bantraich*" ("The Death of the Widow's Child").[16]

There are other kinds of "set subjects" also, in which the poet retains a totally external relationship with his theme. Niall MacLeòid's "*An t-Uan*" ("The Lamb"),[17] "*Rainn do Neòinean*" ("Verses to a Daisy"), and "*Tobar Thalamh-Toll*" ("The Well of Talamh-Toll") are cases in point. The latter in particular is a verse sermon rather than poetry, and in the poem on the Daisy the moral obtrudes. Dòmhnall MacEacharna's "*An Sruthan*" ("The Burn") might be regarded as veering towards the set subject, but it is saved from total failure by the vitality of its rhythm and some clarity of observation. Poems and songs on Gaelic, on the state and future of the language, are often set pieces also. Expressions of love for land and language tend to be repeated until they can only

rank as clichés, for example in Iain Caimbeul's work, even in his "*Is toigh leam a' Ghaidhealtachd*" ("I love the Highlands"),[18] Niall MacLeòid's "*Brosnachadh na Gàidhlig*" ("Incitement to Gaelic"),[19] with its fashionable praise of Professor Blackie, and Calum MacPhàrlain's "*Na Gaidheil an guaillibh a chéile*" ("The Gaels shoulder to shoulder").[20] Too many of these poems, and the last referred to is a good example of this, are plain transcriptions of arguments and sentiments, having the minimum metrical adornments of verse but virtually no heightening of language.

Niall MacLeòid's "*An Gleann san robh mi òg*" ("The Glen where I spent my youth") is often taken as a symbol of the poet's work. Perhaps this is not entirely just, but it may serve as a fair sample of "homeland" verse, and it would be appropriate to quote from it for that reason. It was translated by Henry Whyte who wrote under the pseudonym of Fionn, and was very active in Highland circles in Glasgow. The translation's pawky smattering of Scots words offends against linguistic good taste, but despite Niall MacLeòid's original having more dignity in this sense, the translation is not too unfair a representation of it:

When the simmer bricht returnin',
decks each grove and buddin' tree;
when the birds amang the branches
are a' pipin' loud and free;
an' the bairnies fu' o' glee
pu' the roses in the den
O! 'twere dear delight tae wander
in my bonnie native glen.

In my bonnie native glen,
in my bonnie native glen,
O! 'twere dear delight tae wander
in my bonnie native glen.

. . . . . .

When the lasses gae'd a-fauldin',
aft I joined the merry thrang;
in their hands their milkin' coggies
an' frae ilka voice a sang;
while the echoes sweet and clear

wad gi'e answer frae the ben—
but we hear nae mair their liltin'
in my bonnie native glen.

. . . . . .

There was routh o' sport an' pleasure
tae keep a' the young in glee;
for the loch, the moss, the muirlan'
then tae a' alike were free;
now the bailiff's keepin' ward
on each streamlet, creek, an' fen;
an' ye daurna fish a burnie
in my bonnie native glen.

Now the dwellin's are in ruins,
where ance lived a gallant clan;
theirs was aye the frien'ly welcome,
an' theirs aye the open han';
aft the needy an' the puir
found a place at their fire-en';
now, alas! there's nane tae greet them
in my bonnie native glen.[21]

The note of protest appears, though in a muted form, in the second-last stanza quoted, and this is heard, with varying degrees of urgency, throughout the "homeland" poetry. Iain MacLachlainn voices it rather more effectively, in his "*Och, och mar tha mi*" ("Alas, my state"). This belongs to an important sub-variety of the homeland verse: verse about the evictions and clearances, symbolized by the new sheep and shepherds and their new language:

Not sweet the sound that waked me from slumber,
coming down to me from the mountain tops:
the Lowland shepherd whose tongue displeases,
shouting there at his lazy dog.

In May, on rising at early morning
there's no birds' music nor moorland lowing,
only creatures screeching in English,
calling dogs, setting deer a-scamper.[22]

Niall MacLeòid, in his poem "*Na Croitearan Sgitheanach*" ("The Skye Crofters") does come to grips with the situation of eviction, and the question of human rights, as actuality, but only in some stanzas, while others slide into the grooves of jingoism or braggadocio:

I find sad the account
tonight from my country,
my friends are being scourged
by Lowland poltroons;
with sticks at the ready
being beaten like cattle,
like slaves quite uncared for
being shut in a fank.

The folk who were friendly,
and kindly, warm-hearted,
have now been pressed sore
by landlords' conceit;
their freedom has left them,
their fields are deserted,
sheep have taken the place
of free men in the glen.

Unremembered the heroes
who saved us our country,
with bared blades of battle
defeating the foe;
not bending to slavery,
no justice refusing,
leaving that reputation
unsmirched with their seed.

. . . . . .

An end will come to oppression;
food and possessions,
peace and joy also
will abound in the land;
the youth will sing sweetly
their tunes and their ditties,

and lovely young maidens
tend the calves at the fold.

The heir and the bailiff
will with tenants deal kindly,
with no pride or deceit
as they did in the past;
and Gaels without number
will live in the Highlands,
enhancing the country,
enjoying good name.[23]

This poem might be regarded as a key-poem in a deeper study of Niall MacLeòid and poets similar to him at this time.

In different poets throughout the century one can detect nationalist feeling. It is often of the "land and language" variety, although it is noticeable that this strain of protest did not flourish nearly so strongly in Gaelic Scotland as it did in Wales. There is not much of this nationalist feeling in Niall MacLeòid's work. In "*Na Gaidheil*" ("The Gaels")[24] there are indeed nationalist sentiments, but one senses a lack of real commitment, and perhaps the final stanza quoted above illustrates his lack of political acumen. Nationalist feeling shows more clearly in the work of Eóghan MacColla, who spent some thirty years of his life in Canada. His "*Fóghnan na h-Alba*" ("Thistle of Scotland")[25] has been revived in a nationalist context in recent years. Calum MacPhàrlain, it may be worth noting in this context, makes the point that he is not singing of one region or district, but of the Highlands as a whole.[26] There can be little doubt that there are connections to be seen between these occasional demonstrations of nationalist feeling and the rise of what Professor H. J. Hanham calls "the first effective nationalist movement [of modern times], the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights",[27] in the 1850s, and successive movements and devolutionary developments in the second half of the century.

Eóghan MacColla has one poem in particular in which he shows himself master of a style and technique which is characteristically Gaelic. This is the poem "*Moladh Abhainn Ruaile*" ("Praise of the river Ruail"), which has some clear observation, communicated with precision and economy, and without sentimentality. Similarly, Niall MacLeòid's "*Fàilte do'n Eilean Sgitheanach*" ("Salute to

Skye") has a dignity and weight that is unusual in his work. There is a strong sense of local patriotism here too. The language is clean and hard, and some interesting variety is introduced by the use of staccato rhymes in some of the stanzas. This is how the poem begins:

A salute to your peaks
and your lowering corries,
your grass-covered mountains
where roe-deer run fast.
The winter with darkness
round the hill-tops is closing;
the wind-sounding groves
are stripped to the base.

And I see the Coolins
like a lion all fearless,
with their beard of white snow
encircling their head;
down the cheeks there are pouring
waterfalls with their fine spray,
falling and looping
to the floor of the glen.[28]

The other salient positive virtue that some of this poetry has is that of humour. This is a characteristic it shares with the village poetry, and of course this is essentially what it is in many instances. The village has changed, perhaps from Skye or Lewis or Mull to Overnewton or Pollokshaws or some other locality in Glasgow or Clydeside, but the essential conditions for the verse have not changed beyond recognition. Probably the outstanding example of a village bard who found his village and his public in Glasgow was Iain MacPhaidein (John MacFadyen), of Mull. The first edition of his poems and readings, under the title *An t-Eileanach* (*The Islander*) was published in 1890, at a time when the communal life of Highlanders in Glasgow was well organized in societies of various kinds, when communities were tight-knit, churches well-established, shinty played in "the Shaws" and elsewhere, and the printing-presses still turning out cheap Gaelic books. MacPhaidein tends to use tripping though regular metres, and his humour is more often quiet than boisterous, as in the "*Oran dh'Oidhche-Shamhna*" ("Song for Hallowe'en") which gives a light, humorous description of a Hallowe'en party in a hall south of the "Shaws" district in Glasgow. A non-Gaelic policeman appears intent on keeping the peace, and gets a ducking in a pond for his pains.[29] In another song, about a Hogmanay spree, the statues in George Square begin to dance,[30] while in "*Oran Margaidh-an-t-Salainn*" ("Song of the Saltmarket")[31] we meet the uninhibited Irishry of Glasgow, dancing and fighting in the street. Many of the songs are peppered with references to streets, shops and characters in Glasgow.

MacPhaidein has another type of composition which has not worn well: longish dialogue-poems, e.g. between the Author and an Owl, or the Author and a Wood-pigeon, or the Author and a Mermaid.[32] These tend to be more serious, with desultory argument, moral advice (e.g. not to drink too much), though the second of those referred to above has passages on the plight of the Highlanders at the time. Dòmhnall MacEacharn shows a liking for the dialogue-poem also. His "*Còmhradh eadar am Bàrd 's an Clobair*" ("Conversation between the Bard and the Shepherd")[33] contains some three hundred lines of rather inert argument (the verse equivalent, perhaps, of the somewhat prosy and long-winded dialogues of the time). His "*Impireachd Bhreatuinn*" ("The British Empire")[34] is a conversation between the Bard and the Sun, presumably in its never-setting capacity; the Sun comes up with the assurance that the British Empire is still strong and fine. MacEacharn's verse as a whole is dull and pedestrian, in distinction to his prose, which has humour, gaiety and a sense of style. Perhaps several of his poems suffer from being competition-pieces. The jingoist strain appears in his verse also.

Many of the poets whose work has been referred to composed pop songs which have enjoyed a long popularity. This is partly to be explained by the elaborate system of *céilidhs* and concerts staged in Glasgow and Clydeside generally, and the early links between the organisers of these, and the song-writers themselves, and the National Mod, which began in 1893. There was a strong contingent of Argyllshire singers in the earlier decades of the Mod, and indeed afterwards also, and this body of modern pop-song was well maintained until recent times. One thinks of Mac Colla's "*O till, a leannain, o till, o till*" ("Return my love, return, return"),[35] Iain Caimbeul's "*O théid mi gad amharc*" ("I shall go to see you"),[36] Dòmhnall MacEacharn's "*Bean a' Chòtain Ruaidh*" ("The Lady

in the brown Coat"),[37] Calum MacPhàrlain's "*Mo Dhachaidh*" ("My Home"),[38] a pretty picture postcard of a song, Iain MacLachlainn's "*Seinn an duan so*" ("Sing this Song")[39] and Niall MacLeòid's "*Sine Chaluim Bhàin*" ("Jean"),[40] "*Doire na Smeòraich*" ("Grove of the Mavis"),[41] "*Far an robh mi'n raoir*" ("Where I was yestreen")[42] and many others. Niall MacLeòid would seem to be the example *par excellence* of the popular poet in Gaelic, and he more than any other became part of the pop culture of his time. It would be useful to analyse his work carefully, as it, and his popularity, throw valuable light on the dynamics of Gaelic society in his time.

It was suggested earlier that some of the hymns of this century showed metrical influence from English hymns, and that elementary English school texts and popular literature in the Lowland context may have influenced the "new" Gaelic poets in the Lowlands. At any rate, it is particularly noticeable that the pop songs of the period show a strong tendency to be written in quatrains, or in eight-line stanzas with simple rhyme-patterns which may be regarded as juxtaposed quatrains or couplets. The quatrain rhyming a b a b, and the eight-line stanza rhyming a b a b a b a b are common, with variant patterns such as a a a b and a b c b. The assonantal character of Gaelic rhyme make these patterns quite unexacting. Niall MacLeòid chooses the quatrain in close on two-fifths of his poems, and an eight-line stanza in a slightly larger number of instances. He also shows a subdued liking for the rhyming couplet, a form that had been a favourite of the Islay poet Uilleam Mac Dhunléibhe, whose work we have still to consider. MacDhunléibhe probably took the form over from Sir Walter Scott's work in particular. In the present century we find this chain of metrical influence reaching the work of Somhairle MacGhillEathain (Sorley Maclean), in his case perhaps as a devotee of MacDhunléibhe.

Niall MacLeòid and Iain MacLachlainn in particular, but these poets we have been discussing in general, make a strong feature of vowel melody in their work, and this poetry is also characterized by rhythmic regularity. This may be in conformity with its character as a poetry basically lacking in surprise, shock, tension.

Besides the poetry we have been considering, much of it published in individual collections, there is a good deal of similar verse published in anthologies, particularly district or island anthologies. The anthology *Na Bàird Thirisdeach* (*The Tiree Bards*), for example, includes work by some fifty bards, many of them nineteenth-century ones such as Iain MacGhillEathain (John Maclean of Baile

Mhàrtainn), the author of highly popular songs such as "*A Chaluim Bhig*" ("Little Calum")[43] and "*Hi ho ró's na hóro éile*".[44] The latter is a direct and simple love-song, which gains enormously in effect from being set to a fine traditional melody. Another such anthology is *Bàrdachd Leódhais* (*Poetry of Lewis*), and we shall meet one poet in particular whose work was published there. And beyond the individual collections and the anthologies there is much verse that has never achieved systematic publication at all, although some of it has been written and recorded. A case in point is Iain Dubh MacLeòid ("Black" John MacLeod), a brother of Niall MacLeòid's, whose work is sometimes said to be of a distinctly higher quality than that of his famous brother. Their father, Dòmhnall nan Oran (Donald MacLeod), it is of interest to note, had published an anthology of verse, including some of his own, in 1811.

There are three poets whose work seems to have a special individuality, strength and *gravitas* in this age of flux and resignation and triviality. Gaelic poetry, and Gaelic self-respect, would have suffered had they not produced their work. All three were concerned, in different ways, times and places, with their countrymen's struggle for freedom. The notable bid for freedom in religious and ecclesiastical matters, which had led to the Disruption and the birth of the Free Church in 1843, showed the desire for freedom issuing in action, and strangely enough little or no memorable poetry issued from this campaign. The other great campaign of the nineteenth century was the long-drawn-out one for land rights, starting with the smouldering resentment against landlords, chiefs and factors at the time of the Clearances and Evictions (and it must be remembered that these went on for close on a hundred years, erupting in different places at different times), and finding a solution at last in an organized struggle, using both constitutional means and violence. In the events leading to the final dénouement an important part was played by Lowland Gaels, attuned to current political tactics, and in touch with Irish developments also, but one of the trio of poets we are to consider took an active part, as poet, in the campaign which won security of tenure for the crofters in the mid-1880s. This was Màiri Mhór nan Oran or Mary MacPherson of Skye. The other two poets were dead by this time.

The eldest of the trio was Uilleam MacDhunléibhe (William Livingstone, of Islay) who lived from 1808 to 1870. MacDhunléibhe, who was a tailor by trade, was a keen self-taught student.

He acquired a diffuse knowledge of several classical and modern languages: Latin, a little Greek and Hebrew, French and Welsh. His editor, Robert Blair, says that he remembers "calling upon him in his little garret at 68 Dale Street, Tradeston, Glasgow, and finding himself and his wife busily engaged in translating a French history of the Druids".[45] He also read widely in Scottish history, and published several parts of a projected History of Scotland. His intense Scottish patriotism often took the form of a deep hatred of the English, and his work is much coloured by these opinions.

Many of Livingstone's poems are concerned with dramatic reconstructions of incidents in the earlier history of Scotland, or imaginary battles between the racial groups whose struggles for supremacy looms so large in earlier Scottish history. "*Na Lochlannaich an Ile*" ("The Norsemen in Islay") and "*Blàr Shunadail*" ("The Battle of Sunadale"),[46] each running to over 1,000 lines, are set in Norse times, and purport to deal with the struggle between the Gaels and the Norsemen. These poems are full of anachronisms, many of them deliberate, and it cannot be said that they carry much conviction. The characters are not sufficiently developed, and the poems have a vagueness of plot which is reminiscent of James Macpherson's "translations" of Ossian, and they were no doubt influenced by these, or perhaps more likely, by the Gaelic version of these. It is difficult to keep the thread of the action in mind, though there is some vivid writing, especially in the descriptions of battle scenes. He has other battle-poems also, e.g. on the Wars of Independence, and on the battle of Tràigh Ghruineaird,[47] in Islay, fought in 1598 between the Macleans of Mull and the MacDonalds of Islay. This latter poem has an imaginative and visual quality which many of the historical poems lack, and the poet's lyricism comes to the surface here too.

But the poles between which his emotions sway are a *saeva indignatio* and a brooding melancholy, and these are the qualities which give his poetry its distinctive stamp. It is the former one we see in this passage from the poem "*Cuimhneachan Bhraid-Alba*" ("Memorial of Breadalbane") where his themes are depopulation, dispersal of the Gael, and the intrusion of the hated English. He surpasses the invective of Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair himself in this context:

> Scotland, bless now my cry,
> waken, Mother beloved,

> before curséd enslavement binds you;
> the old valiant clans
> have been scattered abroad,
> heroes' offspring inured to hardship;
> their halls overgrown, nettles sprouting through stones,
> deserted and damp and wailing;
> owls of sadness are seen,
> bats emerge from the holes,
> unafraid in the gloomy dwellings
> where heroes were reared,
> a free Christian stock,
> now driven the whole world over,
> by glum envious toads,
> seed of gluttons most gross
> and shameless sows with their lips drooping,
> a dirty treacherous brood
> whom our fathers called *Goill*,*
> sad the grief of the remnant left by them.[48]

But the most effective of his poems, partly because they are the most sustained, are "*Eirinn a' gul*" ("Ireland weeping") and "*Fios thun a' Bhàird*" ("A Message to the Poet"). In the former he recalls how he was used to seeing Ireland from Islay in his youth, and to hearing stories of Ireland, so that it was for him a magic land, although now he sees it as a beaten land. There was still more than half a century to run before Ireland won a measure of freedom:

> . . . . . .
>
> In the innocent morning of youth
> I heard the tales of ages past
> at Islay's Clan Donald hearths
> before the Gaels were driven out.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Today as before I discern
> your coastline over the sea,
> from South Islay's wave-lapped shore,
> and sad to tell is your state.

* *Goill* is used of strangers, especially Lowlanders.

Tale of sadness, oppression, exile,
starvation, injustice and grief,
no means of relieving your pain
since you yourself shattered your strength.

Where's the valour of the three Hughs,
heroic O'Donnell, O'Neill,
Maguire with no fear of the foe,
no yielders—they stood till they died.[49]

"*Fios thun a' Bhàird*" begins on a deceptively mild note, describing a sunny morning in Islay, and going on to several stanzas of evenly-flowing Nature poetry, with brief descriptions of herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, flowers, and the peaceful yet teeming life of the countryside. But half way through the poem—literally and exactly half way through it—there is a sudden reversal of mood, which we must conclude was anticipated and planned. Islay, teeming with sheep, has lost its human population, and this is the central theme of the poem, the first half being a disarming introduction which serves in the end to underline the human desolation of the scene. The poem has fourteen stanzas; three are quoted in translation from each half of it:

The morning's bright and sunny,
and the west wind softly blows,
the loch is smooth and peaceful
with the strife of sky at rest.
Under its lovely canvas
the ship's lively—does not tire,
as it carries this clear message,
as I see it, to the Bard.

. . . . . .

There are cattle in their thousands,
on the plains, white sheep on slopes,
and the deer in the wild mountains
undisturbed by foreign scent,
their offspring, wild and powerful,
wet with dew from mildest breeze;
will you carry this clear message,
as I see it, to the Bard.

The great sea-bay lies murmuring
in its everlasting power,
majestic in its beauty,
head-high to waves that roll,
with its seven-mile white halo
of sand swept from edge of tide;
will you carry this clear message,
as I see it, to the Bard.

. . . . . .

Though the rays of sun may ration
heaven's warmth to meadow's bloom,
though the shielings have their cattle,
with folds full of lowing calves,
Islay has lost her people,
the sheep have emptied homes;
will you carry this clear message,
as I see it, to the Bard.

Though a stranger, in his wanderings,
comes to harbour in the mist,
the hearth has no light shining
any more upon this coast;
for Lowland spite has scattered
those who will not come again;
will you carry this clear message,
as I see it, to the Bard.

. . . . . .

The poor will find no shelter,
nor the traveller his rest,
nor will preacher find an audience;
strangers, wrong and tax have won.
The spotted adder's coiling
on the floors whereon there grew
the great men that I saw here:
take this message to the Bard.[50]

A similarly deep and bitter anger, finely controlled, shows perhaps in only one other Gaelic poet of the century, Iain Mac a'

Ghobhainn (John Smith, of Iarsiadar), who died in 1881, aged thirty-three. He had been a medical student at the University of Edinburgh, but was forced by ill-health to abandon his course. It is thought that the main body of his surviving work—some 1,400 lines or so—was composed after he returned to Uig, in Lewis, from Edinburgh. Some of this work had survived only in oral sources, as so often happened with Gaelic verse.

He composed village verse of a high standard, fluent, controlled and humorous, including burlesque which is reminiscent of Uilleam Ros in his "*Gaisgeach mór na Féinne*" ("Great Fenian Hero"),[51] songs about night-visiting or courting expeditions, and occasional songs about local episodes. His "*Oran an t-Seana Ghille*" ("Bachelor's Song")[52] is a fine example of humour with a clean, hard bite. There is evidence of nationalist views in several of his poems, though little evidence of that strong anti-English feeling we saw in MacDhunléibhe. Even this following reference is restrained compared to the Islay poet's:

> The violent Saxon
> most stupidly thinks
> we'll yield to his power—
> that we ought to be tame.
> That the Gael should stay quiet
> in a corner alone
> were like a dog putting
> the lions in pen.[53]

Earlier in this poem, "*Am Brosnachadh*" ("The Incitement"), after praising the Gaels and the Scots for their warlike qualities, and their fighting for the country, there comes this withering comment, with its reference to the encroachments of deer forests and foreign hunters:

> It was not for fawns
> with their bottom's bald patch
> that this mantling blood flowed,
> filling up all the pools.[54]

Though relatively few poems by Mac a' Ghobhainn survive, a good range of style and interest appears in them. His "*Coinneach Odhar*", a poem about the legend of the Brahan Seer, is a modern heroic ballad. It is influenced distantly, mainly in matters of nomenclature, by James Macpherson's work, but weaves legend and imagination to make a new blend. It shows narrative strength, and has a startling clarity, and a power with words, here in the main simple, terse vocabulary.

The poetry which forms the core of his work, however, is quite different from those types so far mentioned, though we have seen a hint of it in his "Brosnachadh". That core consists of a poetry of social, political and moral criticism. It resembles Rob Donn's poetry in some respects, showing a similar realism and barbed wit. Its thought processes are less oblique and subtle than Rob Donn's, but the poetry has a greater *gravitas*. In the whole of nineteenth-century Gaelic verse this is probably the most considered and the most damning and scathing indictment we have of those policies which decimated the Gaelic people. The fearless quality of Mac a' Ghobhainn's mind shows through repeatedly.

Besides "*Am Brosnachadh*", which we have glanced at, the main poems in this core are "*Oran Luchd an Spòrs*" ("Song for Sportsmen"), and the two longer poems "*Spiorad an Uamhair*" ("The Spirit of Pride") and "*Spiorad a' Charthannais*" ("The Spirit of Kindliness"). In "*Oran Luchd an Spòrs*" he examines the policy of turning large tracts of the Highlands into deer-forests, for the benefit of landlords and visiting sportsmen. The problem which exercised Mac a' Ghobhainn a century ago is still with us, a grisly if often discreet reminder of the colonizing temper of the palmier days of Empire. The problem has attracted its soap-box orators and its pamphleteers,[55] parties have hinted at tackling it, and it still remains. Mac a' Ghobhainn seemed to see it, perhaps not entirely correctly, as a Scottish problem. At any rate he addresses his complaint to Scotland, which has rejected her own sons, and taken instead sportsmen whose pockets are filled with money. He reflects on the practical consequences of this in the event of war, born as he was in the year of revolutions (1848), and living as he did in the shadow of the Crimean War, and the longer shadow of Waterloo. Addressing Scotland, then, he says:

> Now that you've sent them abroad
> you're no longer "the land of the brave":
> you're the land of the gadabout Saxons,
> land of the setters and grouse.

When battle and slaughter begin,
and the deerhound folk go to war,
I'm afraid, facing that, they'll crack up,
though they're smart at maiming the hare.[56]

Later in the poem he refers to the power whisky distillers have gained over the Highlands, both by broadcasting their product and as landlords and dictators of policy. Speaking of other kinds of proprietors, he says:

Some of them trafficked in opium,
they gathered a great deal of riches,
their vice made the Chinamen suffer,
their people destroyed by the poison;
men without kindness or mercy,
who were hard to prick in the conscience;
in payment for all of their plunder
they deserved to be stabbed with a whinger.[57]

He had in mind the Matheson proprietor of Lewis, a member of the firm of Jardine and Matheson, which had an extensive business in the East. The poem is written from a thoroughly radical standpoint. It shows a strong control of verse argument, and an ability to use robust expression, realist detail, and original turns of thought.

These characteristics mark "*Spiorad an Uamhair*" also. He expresses his radical views on the nobility, and on the wealthy, with a realism that cuts through cant and cliché, as in these lines:

Though your wealth were of the order
that the world were yours entirely,
a simple twist of your intestines
would make it worthless as potatoes.[58]

And when he turns from the rich and the high-born to the poor, who yet suffer from spiritual pride, he is as it were on his home ground, and the poetry gains in immediacy. His description of the Pharisee (and it can scarcely be doubted that he is describing the Lewis variety) seems to come straight out of his own experience:

I'm certain I'm a child of grace,
numbered for ever with the elect;
my belief is firm and strong,
and I loathe the name of pride.
I am conscious of that love;
my new nature's Spirit-given,
I praise the One who quenched my hauteur;
I'll find favour, being a lamb.

Better the pride of a Caesar
than that false pride coming near us.
It makes us think that we are Gods
to chasten everyone around us.
That pride comes in like sneaking serpent,
but coils about their hearts and preens it;
it thrives mid poverty and patches
more lustily than in a palace.[59]

Yet this poem is not so successful overall as his "*Spiorad a' Charthannais*". The latter begins with a well-ordered discussion of the action of the spirit of kindliness in society. He uses a succession of balanced statements to build up a case and generate some emotion. In the first part of the poem he addresses the world, which he thinks has too often renounced kindliness. Here his argument is a general, abstract one. But as the poem proceeds he moves from the general to the particular, and we find the emotional temperature rising, and the language becoming more figurative and compelling. There is an interesting intermediate passage in which he attacks the loquacious and dogmatic, or alternatively the broody minister or Christian, making the point sharply that creeds and religious organizations are not what matter most, and in the context of Lewis society he here shows a clear independence of thought and judgement, and the courage of his convictions. The latter section, in which he deals with the particular case of evictions, is very vivid in its detail. Here he had in mind the land-troubles which came to a head in Lewis in the 1870s, and in particular the infamous case of Donald Munro, Sir James Matheson's Chamberlain, whose oppression of tenants and general double-dealing were notorious. The translation which follows selects stanzas from these various sections of the poem:

The Spirit of Kindliness

. . . . . .

I fear that you have left us now,
departed up to heaven;
men favour now injustice,
your nature quite remote from them.
The surly hide of selfishness
engarbs them all around;
nothing I know will tear through it
but the shaft of the Lord of Hosts.

. . . . . .

(Addressing the world:)

The gracious man is grieved by you,
the evil man wins through;
you stroke the man in luxury
and strike the one who's hurt;
you're generous to the wealthy,
you scorch the man who's poor;
you warm the man who's well-clad
and freeze the man who's bare.

. . . . . .

The preaching sermonizer
shouts with his lusty cry;
we're cursed if we don't listen
to his creed—no other's right—
instead of ever urging us
to answer duty's call,
and making us use reason
before Almighty God.

. . . . . .

The gentle man who rises up
to heaven on love's wings

does not backbite, nor yet debate
too keenly about creeds:
Episcopal or Orthodox,
of Presbytery or Rome;
he's one whose heart has human warmth
and finds a place for love.

O kindliness, most lovely,
O grace of highest worth!
but many never give you room
in hearts that are too hard.
And if the Muses granted me
some eloquence a while
I'd tell you something of the deeds
of the beasts who bore you hate.

. . . . . .

They handed over to the snipe
the land of happy folk,
they dealt without humanity
with people who were kind.
Because they might not drown them
they dispersed them overseas;
a thralldom worse than Babylon's
was the plight that they were in.

They reckoned as but brittle threads
the tight and loving cords
that bound these freemen's noble hearts
to the high land of the hills.
The grief they suffered brought them death
although they suffered long,
tormented by the cold world
which had no warmth for them.

Does anyone remember
in this age the bitter day
of that horrific battle,
Waterloo with its red plains?
The Gaels won doughty victory

when they marshalled under arms;
when faced with strong men's ardour
our fierce foes had to yield.

What solace had the fathers
of the heroes who won fame?
Their houses, warm with kindliness,
were in ruins round their ears;
their sons were on the battlefield
saving a rueless land,
their mothers' state was piteous
with their houses burnt like coal.

While Britain was rejoicing
they spent their time in grief.
In the country that had reared them,
no shelter from the wind;
the grey strands of their hair were tossed
by the cold breeze of the glen,
there were tears upon their cheeks
and cold dew on their heads.

. . . . . .

O tremble midst your pleasures,
oppressor strong and hard!
What death or pain will fall on you
for the hurt you did to men?
The grievous sighs of widows
blow up your bloated wealth,
and every cup of wine you drink
is full of paupers' tears.

Though your estate were spacious,
and though people bowed the knee,
Death's laws are also stringent,
you must bow before his power.
That landlord makes arrangements,
giving equal rights to all,
for your estate he'll give a shirt
and six feet of green turf.

That will be your abject ending,
O man of mounting pride,
with your summonses and warnings,
that cast over all a cloud.
In that serene inheritance
your hauteur won't be high;
the bailiff's scolding can't be heard
nor the ground-officer's rage.

The wriggling worm will praise you then
for your flesh's enticing taste,
when it finds you placed before it
on its table, silent now,
saying "This one's juicy flesh
is good for earthy worms,
since he made many hundreds thin
to feed himself for me."[60]

It was the most savage and final indictment of the men and the policies that cast their cloud of shame over the century, and a real measure of reform was only a few years away when Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn died in 1881. His greatest poem has the heartbeats of his countrymen in it, but also the pulses of their intellect, and an observer a century later may confess to a sense of relief that heart and mind combined to produce a great poem before the century was out.

The remaining poet of note in the nineteenth century was Màiri Nic a' Phearsain (Mary Macpherson), of Skye. She was known as Màiri Mhór nan Oran (Big Mary of the Songs): she was, by her own testimony,[61] seventeen stones in weight, and she sang and composed many songs. The Rev. Kenneth MacLeod of Gigha, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's collaborator, recalled at the 1951 Mod having heard Màiri Mhór singing songs at the first Gaelic Mod,[62] and she has become something of a figure of legend. This is partly because of several of her songs which have remained popular and partly because she had become a legend even in her life-time, especially in her championship of land-reform. It has been said that her songs contributed significantly to the victory of the popular land-law reform candidates in the Highlands in 1885 and 1886, and she was indeed the bard of that movement. Her song "*Brosnachadh nan Gaidheal*" ("Incitement of the Gaels")[63] was composed for the

1885 elections. Her "*Oran Beinn-Lì*" ("Song of Ben Lee")[64] recalls the Skye land-reform fighters in glowing terms, and it is clear that she took an independent and fearless stand on this issue. She shows independence of mind also in her poem "*Clò na Cùbaid*" ("The Cloth of the Pulpit"),[65] where she voices criticism of churchmen, and even of Free Churchmen. Her language here is vigorous and picturesque, combining homely metaphor with plain speaking. It is with a sense of surprise, then, that one reads her "*Oran an Diùc Chataich*" ("Song for the Duke of Sutherland"),[66] with its string of compliments. Another theme which touched her closely was a personal one. She had been imprisoned in Inverness on a charge of shop-lifting, and claimed that she had been "framed". She returns to the bitterness of this theme frequently, claiming at one point that this was the incident that had made her turn to verse, and in "*Na dh'fhuiling mi de dh'fhòirneart*" ("The Oppression I suffered")[67] producing a fine series of Biblical parallels.

Her political verse is of course of great interest in an historical context, and other parts of her work are of interest to the social historian. They do not seem to me to carry much weight as poetry, though her work has indeed a great deal of pithy, down-to-earth realism which jolts it out of the nostalgic rut of the period. She has a large number of celebratory songs on various topics, addressed to Shinty Associations and friends and dignitaries in Skye, Inverness and Clydeside. Yet, despite the very real legend of her life, what will perhaps survive longest are her evocations of Skye and the community she knew there in her youth. She belonged to the people there, and had a voice that could reach them, and that is the voice that survives. She touches, skilfully, on one of the great themes of the century in "*Soraidh leis an Nollaig ùir*" ("Farewell to the new Christmas"):[68]

> But change has come upon the clouds,
> on the hills and on the fields,
> where once kindly people lived
> now there are "big sheep" and lambs.
>
> When I came into the place
> where my people once had stayed,
> dogs were barking at my heels,
> O their welcome sounded cold.

> And, when I reached the Mounds,
> my grandfather's house in dust,
> a clump of bracken in the room
> where my heart was joyous once.

She has several songs in praise of Skye which are effective in their blend of emotion and vowel music, and fortunate in their melodies. The one which has the greatest density of texture is "*Nuair bha mi òg*" ("When I was young"),[69] and part of this is translated:

> I wakened early, with little sadness,
> on a morning in May in Òs;
> with cattle lowing as they gathered,
> with the sun rising on Leac an Stòir;
> Its rays were shining on the mountains,
> covering over in haste night's gloom;
> the lively lark sang her song above me,
> reminding me of when I was young.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It brought to mind many things I did then,
> though some eluded me for all my days,
> going in winter to waulkings, weddings,
> no light from lantern but a burning peat;
> there were lively youngsters, and song and dancing,
> but that is gone and the glen is sad;
> Andrew's ruins overgrown with nettles
> reminded me of when I was young.
>
> When I walked by each glen and hillock
> where I once was carefree, herding cows,
> with happy youths who have now been banished,
> the native stock without pride or guile,
> the fields and plains were under heath and rushes
> where I often cut wisps and sheaves of corn;
> could I but see folk and houses there now
> my heart were light as when I was young.

It is perhaps fitting enough to end this chapter, not on the note of the period's greatest poetry, but on the highly characteristic one

of the exile's nostalgia, tinged with anger. Our period spilled over into the twentieth century. Màiri Mhór had died in 1898, but several of the poets we have looked at were active in the early years of the twentieth century. The effective watershed is the 1914–18 War. The literary stage was being set anew some time before then, for example by the publishing activities of Ruaraidh of Erskine and Mar, the promoter of the periodicals *Am Bàrd* and *Guth na Bliadhna*, and we shall see that some of the earliest new voices came from the battlefields of France.

7

Renaissance

VIEWED FROM WITHIN the tradition, one of the most striking characteristics of Gaelic poetry in the twentieth century is that it is a poetry of innovation. We have seen before that there were phases of innovation in earlier centuries, whether these affected style or subject-matter, or both, and that there were clear instances of individuals, whose innovatory skills can be seen to be at the "cutting-edge" of the tradition: those poets who belong to the tradition in one or many ways, but who are prepared or compelled to drive new shafts into the darkness ahead. It is doubtful, however, if innovation has ever featured so largely and persistently in the Gaelic verse tradition of a period as in the present century. It has been a matter of controversy affecting readers as well as writers, and it can be said without exaggeration that virtually whole generations of writers have thrown in their lot with the innovatory styles. The older styles have survived to a muted extent, especially among older writers, but one would feel a sense of great surprise if a new writer were to appear on the scene now, using older styles. So drastic a change calls for some comment.

A difficulty which exists in discussing these matters objectively has to be admitted, particularly by one who has been deeply involved in these movements for the last thirty to thirty-five years. It is not likely that anyone can attain perspective on the matter for some time yet. And there are difficulties in discussing, from within, the work of a small group of writers who mostly belong to different circles or cliques. There is evidence, for instance, that political affiliations enter into such groupings, and that attitudes which at first might appear to be literary have political undertones. It may be that some future historian of the literature will wish to investigate these ramifications. The purpose of this work is different. For all that, personal considerations and questions of perspective dictate an approach different from that taken in some earlier chapters. The work of contemporary poets will not in the main be considered in compartmented sections, but an attempt will be

made to discuss and illustrate the new styles and techniques and subjects, with a muted relation to the personalities of poets involved.

Before coming to that, which may be regarded as the core of the matter, it is desirable to sketch the conditions which are the setting, or the background, to the verse of the twentieth century. In previous centuries we have seen particular instances of poets whose personal contacts with English literature have been reflected in their work. But always behind that border contact, as it were, there were the depths of Gaelic country. There is a sense in which we can see these contacts taking place at borders which have retreated perceptibly to the west and the north over the centuries, and in such a series we would place the twentieth-century contacts in the far west of the country, in the Western Isles. This is much the same as saying that English influence has penetrated to all parts of the Gaelic area. There is now no linguistic hinterland to which the Gaelic writer can retire, except for that hinterland of the imagination which can be summoned up at times, though it too needs its defences. It might be thought that this situation needs to be pushed only a little further to reach crisis level: that the language of poetry has only a limited life-expectancy where that language is shrinking in terms of daily use, and developing use at that. This may well be so, and in that case the use of the reservoirs of the imagination and of conscious learning could only add a modest period to that life-expectancy. But we have still to discover whether a prolonged and healthy bilingualism is possible in the Scottish situation, and whether such a bilingualism can sustain a Gaelic poetic tradition of value. In addition we have now the novel development of Lowland learners of Gaelic contributing to the literature.

The pace of bilingualization is speeded up enormously for those whose careers lie in the professions, though it is possible for them also to regain lost ground through greater opportunities for reading. The 1872 Education (Scotland) Act led blatantly to the suppression of Gaelic Schools, and to the enshrining of English as the vehicle of education and advancement in Gaelic Scotland. In this context, which has been challenged only very spasmodically, the dice are heavily loaded against the survival of a secure Gaelic personality, whether in the arts or in other contexts.

It was against this background, almost predictably, that revival burgeoned. The situation of repression (whether overt or otherwise) has produced the necessary tension, as it did in Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's time. It is of course no accident that similar tensions

have operated in the wider Scottish context. The steady growth of Home Rule sentiment, and the gradual extension of devolutionary instruments, characterize the period from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, although the contrary centralizing tendencies may in many sectors of life have more than cancelled out these. There was a parallel movement in the arts, and especially in poetry, and a clear involvement among poets with political movements which aimed at Scottish independence. This can be seen clearly in the movement spear-headed by Hugh MacDiarmid, especially in the twenties and thirties, and in the work of his successors in the forties and since. Beneath the ideological attitudes, whether Communist or Socialist or otherwise, there is usually a hard core of Scottish separateness. It would, perhaps, be impossible to imagine a Scottish poetic renaissance without it.

In the Gaelic context there was indeed a strong element of Gaelic nationalism again, as in the eighteenth century and in the latter half of the nineteenth. Some at least of the poets became Scottish nationalists because they were Gaelic nationalists. It might at any rate be said, without offence to anyone's political sensibilities, that it was the desire, or the compulsion, of a Gaelic identity that kept them writing in Gaelic.

The bilingual situation, and the prominence of English in the educational system, naturally shows strongly in the poetry of the time, as it had shown in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Probably, however, English literary influence shows in a much more assimilated and pervasive way in twentieth-century verse. Some of it, indeed, makes the silent assumption that it proceeds out of a bilingual, bicultural context, and is addressed to such a public. There are other alternatives: to cultivate the Gaelic garden assiduously, and to quell English weeds with whatever will serve as pesticide in this situation, or to tend Anglicized blooms lovingly, and trample on Gaelic dockens. The former of these has sometimes been attempted. This may be one way of assessing Aonghas MacDhonnchaidh's (Angus Robertson's) Gaelic writing,[1]* and parts at least of the work of a number of other poets. But more generally, and with greater assurance as the century wore on, the Gaelic poets have frankly written out of a bilingual background, and without much self-consciousness about impinging on two literary traditions. Probably such an attitude could not have existed within a generation of the new school system introduced in 1872,

* For Notes, see pp. 318–19.

and it was rare to find it in writers who had gone to school at all in that first generation. Right on this border-line are writers such as Murchadh Moireach (Murdo Murray) and Iain Rothach (John Munro), two Lewismen who were born within a year of each other (1890 and 1889), and who had recently graduated from King's College, Aberdeen, when they joined the army in the 1914–18 War. Their writings which have survived from the battle-fields of France show the bilingual and bicultural influence strongly, sometimes in obvious ways, as where Murray's war-diary fluctuates continually between Gaelic and English,[2] sometimes in style, choice of theme or metre. Murray uses the sonnet form and the Burns stanza, and in 1916 was moved to translate Charles Murray's "Auld Scotland counts for something still".[3] Yet it was Munro, who was killed in action in 1918, who most clearly showed his sensitivity to change, and probably his war-poem "*Ar Tìr 's ar Gaisgich a thuit sna Blàir*" ("Our Land, and our Heroes who fell in Battle") is the finest early burgeoning of the "new" poetry of the century. Its novelty lies in metre and rhythm and construction, and it is clear that it was in some ways influenced by the work of his contemporaries in English poetry.

Our Land, and our Heroes who fell in Battle

(i)

Snow mantle on the mountain peaks,
like white hair lie the mist streaks,
the runnel and the moor-burn
leap and pour
tumbling and rumbling down the rough glens
that skirt and buttress the high bens;
antlered stags and red deer
roam the long slopes, heather-dun—
this is the Land of Brave Men,
a hero's land of hill and glen,
this is the Land of Brave Men.

(ii)

Many a handsome man, young, agile, quick of hand,
with gay mien matching warm heart,
who had often climbed, with strong step, light, foot-sure,
bright

to the high upland of the great hill,
went to his meeting with death—
often fore-knowing its skaith—
went out to the war:
the green grass grows over
the shreds his enemies' arms
left, when holocaust had had its fill.

With some of them, when they were alive,
we had our differences, did not see eye to eye.
Ah! they have fallen on the battle-field:
We found them lying, wounded to death—
their unsightly dust was all that was left—
five of them lying, like fingers outstretched,
summoning, guiding,
urging fresh effort upon us,
asking us to press on, together,
as when they fell, advancing,
over the plain of the battle-field.

Stay with me for a little while,
close your eyelids over your eyes,
and in the treasure-house of your mind,
(with the soft light of early morning, calm June morning
filling it, dawn at the back window),
in the repository of loved things,
in your soul's shrine,
there, take, cherish a picture of them
lying, as they fell, in the field;
feel, hear
their summons, their speech in our ear—
the ideal for which they gave their breath
lying there
on the slaughter-floor,
their image kept alive for us
as though a cunning craftsman had carved
a priceless memorial in stone:
"Be ready to leap up,
with firm step, bold, fearless,
crossing the plain of strife,
do not weaken, be strong,

attack them, requite,
destroy their trust in themselves;
forward, forward,
this is the road,
set up the standard,
firm and high,
that the glory of Peace may come again."[4]

The translation attempts to recapture the rhythms and to suggest many of the rhymes and half-rhymes of the original. I know no work in Gaelic from the earlier part of the century which has the rhythmic strength and assurance of this poem. Unfortunately only a handful of Munro's poems survived.

Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich (Donald Sinclair) had begun to publish Gaelic poetry, at an early age, a few years earlier, and his long sea-poem, "*Là nan seachd Sion*" ("A Day of Tempest") had appeared in the periodical *Guth na Bliadhna* in 1915 and 1916. It was a longer poem than Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's "*Birlinn*", and while clearly inspired by that work, has its own virtues. Sinclair's imagination and his linguistic virtuosity show in it. Yet it strikes one as another attempt to cultivate the Gaelic garden assiduously, and therein may lie the seeds of its failure. Sinclair seems slightly more in tune with the incipient innovation of his time in such a poem as "*Slighe nan seann Seun*" ("The Path of the old Spells"), where the language is indeed densely-packed but where the lines, regular as they are, show rhythmical strength and sinuousness. The poem, which laments the passing of the old Gaelic world, ends:

No wonder my folk's churchyards beside the sea are dumb,
no wonder tops of graves swell with the worth that's gone,
O world, my grief no withered hour returns,
nor can my constant wish from dead men's sleep wring words.[5]

Sinclair died young, in 1933, and his poetry, which survives in manuscript, has never been collected and published. Its importance remains to be assessed in detail.

A number of poets modified their style in a marked way, in tune with the strong reaction to the older tradition, but without cutting themselves off from that tradition significantly. Seumas MacThómais (James Thomson) is a case in point. A contributor to

Guth na Bliadhna in the second decade of the century, and first crowned bard of the National Mod in 1923, his collection *Fasgnadh* (*Winnowing*), published in 1953, contains a large number of later poems which show a marked freedom of movement and structure although they do not abandon rhyme. Many of the poems are on religious themes, and both these and others have as a salient characteristic a quiet epigrammatic grace. The break-up of the native Lewis community of his youth is one of the poet's recurring themes: the early part of the century had seen heavy emigration from Lewis to the New World. A poem such as "*Tha 'm fraoch fo bhlâth*" ("The Heather is in Bloom")[6] captures this mood succinctly and with restraint, while poems such as "*Mo Ghrian-éirigh*" ("My Day-spring")[7] are effective evocations of Lewis, particularly of its coast and seascape. Love and religion are fused in an effective lyricism in the short poem "*Companaich Slighe*" (Companions on the Way"):

On my way I have a trinity
and two of them I love—
the one who gave her heart to me,
whose words I most approve,
and He who promised me a place
in His own heart for ever.
In company of these two
it's natural to seek then
cheerfulness and kindliness,
comeliness and tenderness;
but how then should I view my claims
to be the third one of the three,
and when will these two with a heart
in their image fashion me?[8]

Donnchadh MacDhunléibhe (Duncan Livingstone) was born in Mull in 1877, being eleven years older than Seumas MacThómais. After serving his time as an ornamental mason in Glasgow he settled in South Africa at the beginning of the century. He was still writing prose and verse in Gaelic in the 1950s and 1960s, usually on contemporary issues. He contributed a poem on the "Wind of Change" theme to the periodical *Gairm* some appreciable time before Harold Macmillan made his famous speech on that topic,[9] and he celebrated the appearance in the Southern

Hemisphere of the Russian sputnik. His poetry, like his private correspondence (which was conducted in Gaelic whenever possible) shows a strong radicalism and compassion for the underdog. In terms of Scottish politics he would have been a Jacobite rather than a Nationalist, but his championship of the black peoples, at least in his verse, was of a strongly humanitarian rather than a political kind. Here is part of his indictment of the white man in his imperialist phase:

. . . fickle, restless like the winds that blow over Europe's north,
the white men moved in swarming hosts; their strength like yeast in dough.
Ingenious as the Devil's son; pitiless to poor or weak;
intolerant of rule or guide; loving sword's edge more than right.
Courageous, without fear or fright; ready for tempest or for calm;
sure, and trusty, lacking doubt; wealth and power their two gods.[10]

He links his two countries beautifully in an elegy for his wife:

Anguish

I ought to be happy in this sun-drenched land
with its skies of light-blue, and its plains of the greenest,
and the warmth of its breezes;
a land full of blessings, of ease and of leisure,
a land without poverty, rich in its earnings,
a land made for pleasure.

. . . . . .

But far in the northlands a vision disturbs me:
Mull of the cold hills, where I found my darling,
fine rose of the garden.
I am drawn back to Mull by her lovely remembrance;
I would fain have lived there, with my sweetheart and treasure,
but fate has withheld it.

And in spite of the pull of each fragrant remembrance
I don't wish to leave the land of the blossoms,
the home of my love now.

In this soil there is laid my fresh rose for safe keeping;
O, love, your white hands on your bosom are folded
in the silence that seared me.

My love, who was noble, now shrouded in windings,
in the shade of bright trees, with blossom above you,
in your grave like a garden.
My dearest, my kind one, when the time came to call you,
and you lay all alone, you made this land holy,
and made holy its beauty.[11]

. . . . . .

Dòmhnall Ruadh Mac an t-Saoir (Donald Macintyre) wrote some ten thousand lines of verse in his life-time, though much of it was not published until after his death.[12] His affiliations are much more clearly with the village-verse tradition. He was a South Uist man, and had inherited in that environment a rich vocabulary and store of verse and song and story. Without abandoning that store, he had made part of his being the radical tradition of Clydeside, and a thorough acquaintance with the poetry of Robert Burns. He translated some of Burns' works with brilliance, notably "*Tam O Shanter*"[13] and "*The Twa Dugs*",[14] and deals in a lively, sometimes ribald, but certainly disrespectful style with topics such as Mussolini,[15] the British Establishment of the 1930s[16] or the coming of the Unemployment "Buroo" to the Highlands.[17] In his middle and later years his views were strongly Nationalist and Leftist (this was a time when it was possible to hold strong Nationalist views within the Scottish Labour Party). There are many poems of homeland, and poems on humorous topics, in his large corpus of verse, which constitutes a quite remarkable linguistic and sociological document for this period. We may sense his flavour from this translation of some stanzas from his song about the taking of the Stone of Destiny:

The Stone of Destiny

The Stone of which my grandma
and grandpa told me stories,
has come back as it left us—
hurrah for the Stone!

It can be in Kerrera,
in Callander or Calvie,
so long as it's in Scotland
its own rugged home.

. . . . . .

Let us indite our verses,
and polish them for those
who took the Stone from Spain once;
if it goes back to Scone now
our nation's reputation
will stand higher than it did;
for they took it from the rabble
who sat on it with their buttocks,
and the rogues have other articles
they ought to hand back.

. . . . . .

The Dean was tired and weary
that morning when he wakened,
his eyes were red and bleary
as he rose from his bed;
he walked and walked the floor then,
now sighing and now praying,
and looking in the corner
where the Stone had been.

What a clatter and a stamping,
and a running there was there then,
and all his conversation was
"Where is the Stone?"
and "Mary, Mary Mother
what will I do tomorrow
for I know that the Queen
will go clean off her head."

He spoke, with deathly pallor,
"I could never have believed that

anyone could move it
an inch off the floor.
What Destiny's in store for me?
May Providence be kind to me—
the man who moved that Stone
was as strong as a horse."

. . . . . .

Highlanders and Lowlanders
are both now chirping proudly
elated with vainglory
since we got the Stone.
When first it came from Ireland
it then was said about it
that we would stay united
so long as it stayed.[18]

Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna (Donald MacDonald), of North Uist, was a composer of very popular songs, one of which "*An Eala Bhàn*" ("The White Swan") is widely known and sung. The earliest group of his poems dates from the 1914–18 War, with titles such as "*Oran Arras*" ("Song of Arras") and "*Air an Somme*" ("On the Somme"), but they are in marked contrast to John Munro's poem:[19] the horror of the Somme becomes almost trite, and the lack of clean-cut detail produces a muzziness of emotional response in the reader.[20] The main part of his verse output was on themes of local interest, with a group of poems concerning old age and approaching death. They do not have the verbal felicity of Donald Macintyre's work, nor his range of interests and sensibility, but they make very pleasant reading.

Many of the true village-poets do not achieve book publication, for reasons of a practical and financial nature, though it is likely that with their numbers growing smaller, and the demand for Gaelic books increasing, a higher proportion will be published in future years. The work of Murchadh MacPhàrlain (Murdo MacFarlane) of Melbost, Lewis, has a keen local public, and several successful songs have made him known more widely in recent years. His collection, *An Toinneamh Dìomhair*, has newly appeared (1973). Similarly, a collection by Donald J. MacDonald of South Uist is projected. It would not be difficult to name a dozen more poets of

marked talent, from each of the Outer Isles, from Skye, and from other areas, whose work awaits collection and publication. Many of them are now in their sixties and seventies, and the signs are that they are not being replaced by a younger generation. There are, however, isolated instances of younger poets, like Donald R. Morrison of Scalpay (Harris), who uses both traditional and non-traditional styles. A number of these poets have contributed spasmodically to *Gairm*, and a series of poems by Lewis bards has been published in book form.[21] This continued a well-established earlier tradition of area or island anthologies, and this tradition has probably not come to an end yet.

One of the most remarkable of the poets represented in the recent anthology of Lewis rural bards was Aonghas Caimbeul (Angus Campbell), better known by his nickname Am Puilean. A collection of his poems, *Moll is Cruithneachd* (*Chaff and Wheat*) appeared in 1972, and makes an interesting study in the context of innovation and conservation. Some of the poetry belongs securely to the tradition of village-verse, some seems to be ambitiously reworking the linguistic riches of monoglot Gaelic days, while some is frankly of its own time, and of much more than local relevance. The choice of subject-matter helps in this, for some of these poems were reflections in a Polish prison-camp during the 1939–45 War. From this period also comes the hilarious "*Deargadan Phóland 1944*" ("Polish Fleas 1944"), which must have boosted the morale of the Gaelic group in Aonghas Caimbeul's Stalag. Addressing the fleas and one of his more emaciated companions together at one point, he says:

> If you followed Gaelic instead of just Polish,
> you might use a talented strategem slyly;
> you need not expire on grass-thin unfed body
> when the full lap of plenty is right by your side.
>
> See Rory More, fifteen stones to his credit,
> a plumpness derived from a lush youth in Shader,
> food with its spice that would keep you and feed you
> a twelvemonth or more if you rationed it out.[22]

There is much humour, satire and social criticism in Aonghas Caimbeul's work—qualities which appear in good measure also in his recent autobiography.[23] These qualities may be illustrated by a

quotation from his poem to the Devil, "*Am Fear nach ainmich mi*" ("The One I shall not name"):

The One I shall not name

> Black Donald of the tricks,
> Wily Planner, thieving Rascal,
> most to-be-avoided here,
> nails on you like a hay-fork;
> peace you never leave behind
> where you happen to visit,
> strategist who's cunning, sly,
> hooved and taloned destroyer.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> With your cloven feet of deer
> from a colt's thighs protruding,
> antlers of horn, you beast,
> jaws and chin of a seal;
> fiery vapour from your mouth,
> and teeth like a sea-lion's,
> devil's-light from your hide,
> phosphor-gleam from your nose.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> How attached you are, my lad,
> to this place beyond others;
> it may be that Gaelic
> is the language you know,
> all these foreigners there
> with their purposeless stammer,
> hardly know about peats,
> ceilidhs, tatties and herring.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> But you dearly love your own,
> black accursed evil-doers;
> giving alms from the poor,

with interest, to well-to-do;
what you do is to clart him
with soft-soap of applause,
conscience sealed in holy blubber
though the deeds he does stink.

No one else is as respected
when the coins chink in your purse;
no one gives a thought to honour—
"what the eye doesn't see . . .";
yet they like a goodly name,
searchers after excess wealth;
you're the greaser of their palms
though their faces may grimace.

. . . . . .

Here's a health to you, Donald,
I'd be better not to quarrel;
you can listen to a leg-pull
and forgive me after all;
if my luck and fortune hold,
when I reach my home again
I'll drink my glass off to the dregs
in the *Caley* to your health.[24]

A close friend and collaborator of Aonghas Caimbeul was Tormod MacLeòid (Norman Macleod), who was widely known by his sardonic pseudonym Am Bàrd Bochd (The Poor Poet). His work still awaits collection, but enough appeared in periodical form to establish his persona and his reputation. He was a poet of some range and sophistication. His work leaned towards the humorous and local, and he believed that this was the best way, perhaps the most democratic and humane way, to use his talent. A teacher of various subjects in Lewis, and latterly a teacher mainly of Gaelic, he had a hand in the production of a most lively Junior Secondary School Magazine which had a large Gaelic content—the magazine *Tàintean*—was an indefatigable collector of songs, words and traditions, an active Labour Party stalwart, and a great lover of drams and company. His humorous poems about local incidents have touches of comic genius as well as passages of very broad

humour. In a scathing satire of the proposals for crofters to earn their living from tourism, he advises the crofter to learn his new trade carefully:

Buy a mutch-like chef's tall hat,
white jacket and striped trousers;
learn by practice how to point
your bottom smartly upwards;
wax and "spittle" your moustache
until it sticks out finely;
so no one twigs that you were born
in these Western islands.

. . . . . .

But I must sound a warning
though the words will take some finding:
somewhere behind the cornyards
is no toilet for the strangers;
there's a danger there of pimples
where the skin is somewhat tender,
and most of all when they don't know
a docken from a nettle.[25]

He finishes this poem on the sardonic note that the notorious mess of pottage, and the sold birthright are going to be more tangible rewards than a pride in independence and a good reputation.

Am Bàrd Bochd's verse reflects a lively interest in current affairs, and he uses a mélange of prose and verse to describe a fantasticated, but shrewdly conceived version of the Summit Meeting between Khrushchev, Kennedy, Macmillan and de Gaulle. He could write in a quieter, lyrical vein also, and we may leave him, a little uncharacteristically, on that note:

Glen Ramadale

Glen Ramadale;
my love in the dew of twilight;
a morning glory in her hair,
setting it alight;
the hidden cuckoo's call
encircling her.

I heard the cuckoo yesterday;
a shadow fell across the evening;
beauty tearing apart memory's harp
in Glen Ramadale:
Darling! where did you go?[28]

It may be worth remarking here that the concept of a short lyric of this kind had become foreign to the Gaelic tradition. I use the phrase "had become" advisedly, for although it is true to say that the longer, more exhaustive poem has always predominated in the tradition, the shorter lyrical vein was once practised. But in the modern period one of the rough rule-of-thumb tests that can be applied to a poet, to discover his attitude to the tradition is this: does he essay the short lyrical form? I forbear from suggesting the use of more complicated statistical measurements.

There were in fact some attempts also in our period to construct poems of more epic proportions, ranging from T. D. MacDhòmhnuill's "*An Déidh a' Chogaidh*" ("After the War") (1921) and the epic veteran Land League champion, the Rev. Donald MacCallum's *Domhnullan* (1925), to Aonghas MacDhonnchaidh's (Angus Robertson's) *Cnoc an Fhradhairc* (1940) and Niall Ros's (Neil Ross's) *Armageddon* (1950). Of these, *Cnoc an Fhradhairc* approaches most nearly the conditions of poetry. It is grossly overburdened with exotic (and sometimes invented) vocabulary, and carries too great a load of detail as it muses, in the words of the Foreword, "on the ethos of his race, their society—their love of home and kindred—", but it has passages of well-judged description and some lyrical inserts which raise its general temperature.

In the case of the poetry we have been considering up to this point in the chapter, where any considerable quantity of a poet's work survived or was accessible it could be seen that the older tradition was still exerting a strong influence on it. The effectiveness of that influence depended to some extent on personality, but it was also influenced by questions of age and date. Proximity to the first generation of the post-1872 regime seemed to inhibit a surrender of the traditional values, perhaps because the new external influences were less fully assimilated at that stage. Educational opportunity, and the poets' environment—both physical and job environment—influenced directions also, sometimes with interesting cross-currents being brought to bear, as in the case of Am Bàrd Bochd for example. In the main, however, a steady process of

polarization can be observed, as the century advances. This polarization is no longer one simply of poetic styles but one which involves life-styles as well. The non-traditional poets belong quite clearly to a society far advanced in bilingualism and biculturalism, and are usually involved in professional or academic activities. The influence of their work, and perhaps of propaganda associated with it, has been so strong and pervasive as to win over partial converts from the ranks of the traditional poets. Both types of poetry gain prestige from publication, but the non-traditional type probably has the edge on the other in this respect. The intermediate style, which is traditional but not village-poetry, is gradually being squeezed out by this polarization. This represents a remarkable shift of style over the last half-century, and more particularly over the last thirty years. The rest of this chapter will be mainly concerned with this new poetry, which will be examined in relation to its themes and styles. There are those who feel that this verse, which is almost by definition more cosmopolitan than the other type we have characterized, is less characteristic of the Gaelic temperament, and therefore less worthy of study by students of Gaelic matters. It may be freely admitted that it offers less to the advances of antiquarians, but it may be that future generations will find in it evidences of a Gaelic genius as salient as those to be found in the poetry of earlier centuries. It would be presumptuous to attempt to give an answer one way or the other at this stage.

The poetry of the last thirty years has been dominated by a relatively small group of poets, consisting of an older generation and a younger one, with a still younger group in process of forming now. The eldest of these groups is that consisting of Somhairle MacGhilleEathain (Sorley Maclean) (b. 1911), Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay (George Campbell Hay) (b. 1915), and Ruaraidh MacThómais (Derick Thomson) (b. 1921). The second wave consists of Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn (Iain Crichton Smith) (b. 1928) and Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh (Donald MacAulay) (b. 1930). The third and youngest group has as its most prominent members at the present time the two sisters Catrìona and Mòrag NicGumaraid (Catriona and Morag Montgomery), still in their early twenties, and Aonghas MacNeacail (Angus Nicolson), who is slightly older, but a number of other poets who publish more spasmodically might seem to have affinities with this group, for example Dòmhnall Iain MacLeòid (Donald John MacLeod). Again there are poets, mainly publishing spasmodically, whose affinities with

these various groups are less clearly defined, for example Uilleam Niall (William Neill), Iain Moireach (John Murray), Calum Greum (Calum Graham), Iain MacDhòmhnaill (Iain MacDonald) and Eóghan Gilios (Ewen Gillies). The poetry we are about to examine has mainly been composed within the last thirty-five years, and is still flowing fairly strongly. It seems likely, therefore, that this wave of poetry will last until the end of the century.

The chief markers of the non-traditional Gaelic verse of this century are perhaps of a technical nature, although this depends on the range of matters we class as technical. Clearly the choice and handling of rhyme, stanza form, and the usual metrical ornaments, are matters of a technical nature, and there has been a clear tendency to use these in a freer way, or to dispense at times with some of them. Rhythm, on the other hand, has come to form a more important part of the poet's technical armoury. And, especially in the case of those poets who use *vers libre*, and whose concept of writing is generally affected by views that tolerate *vers libre*, all these devices tend to be used in an organic way: that is to say, not as an adjunct to the matter of the poetry but as a vital part of the communication. But furthermore, the shaping of a poem, the progression of ideas, the symbolic devices used, the patterns that are made, may all be said to be matters predominantly of technique. A fuller and freer appreciation of what constitute the poet's technical resources would seem to be implicit in the work of the non-traditional poets, although at first sight it might seem that by departing from the rule-book of the bardic poets and their successors they were throwing technique to the winds or the wolves. If we interpret technique as widely as that, and there seems no good reason why we should not, its pervasive importance can be easily seen, and by comparison the other marker of innovation, the thematic one, dwindles to some extent in importance.

Yet in such a new departure in a poetic tradition, the choice of themes has its own obvious importance, and this may be considered first. Linked to this topic, inevitably, is the availability of the language for a wide, or new, range of topics. It is no doubt true to say that prose is the normal vehicle for the discussion of novel topics. But even if this were so, or were inevitable, poetry has need of a reservoir of words and images and concepts that belong to the world it seeks to understand or describe. And if poetry consciously excludes a significant part of the world from its purview it would seem to have relinquished a part of its own significance. A poetry,

or indeed more generally a literature, that exists on a partial range of experience, and whose words are a partial vocabulary, is not operating to the top of its bent. This is one practical reason for the policy, in the case of Gaelic, of introducing new vocabulary for new concepts—a policy that is often misunderstood or derided by those who do not pause to consider the philosophy that underlies it. We shall see that there are various instances of such new vocabulary affecting thematic choices in Gaelic verse, but we can hardly anticipate what the end result will be, for poetry, of such a policy. If our theory is right there will indeed be results. The chief initiator of this policy in Gaelic, in our period, has been the periodical *Gairm*, but it has been endorsed also by the Gaelic service of the B.B.C. and by other bodies. The policy is capable of infinite extension and must only be guided by practical considerations.

Again, if we are to make a fair contrast between the new and the old poetry in the matter of themes, we must distinguish between (1) themes which *happen* to be first treated by the new poets, (2) those which are new because they concern events or subject-matter which did not exist earlier, and (3) those which were available before but for some dogmatic reason were not regarded as suitable for poetry. It is not proposed to examine this topic exhaustively, but these distinctions should be borne in mind. There could have been no post-Hiroshima poems until after 1945: no poems on the Budapest rising until after 1956; no poems about Bolsheviks until the second decade of the century. It is of some interest that such topics have become topics of poetry, although that cannot be the chief interest of poems if they are living poems. Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn brings Hiroshima into a number of his poems, and seldom as effectively as in this instance, where he parodies the air and rhythm of a popular nineteenth-century pastoral-romantic song:

> Will you go with me, my youthful maid,
> across to Japan where all our sense
> is wasting in the mighty bomb
> that fell on towns and moors and hills?
>
> Not to Uist among the trees
> or to Lewis, green among the heather,
> not a last farewell to Fiunary
> burning quietly on the kyles,

not a hall in Glasgow or Edinburgh,
where Duncan Bàn moves elegantly
with a bright gun in the untruths
that mushroom clouds about our time.[27]

Somhairle MacGhillEathain uses juxtaposition and paradox to make a point wittily about the strength of his love for Eimhir:

As a Bolshevik who gave no heed
to queen ever or to king,
if we but had Scotland free,
Scotland equal to our love,
a white, lively, open Scotland,
a lovely, happy heroic Scotland,
without petty, paltry, vapid bourgeoisie,
without the loathsomeness of capitalists,
without sly and hateful graft,
a mettlesome Scotland of the free,
Scotland of our blood, of our love,
I would break the strict law of the kings,
I would break the sure law of the wise,
I would proclaim you queen of Scotland
whatever the new Republic said.[28]

Irony tinges both these poems, as also Ruaraidh MacThómais's poem "Budapest";

A heap of corpses at the roadway's edge,
rumble of tanks, the volley of huge guns,
carving of bullets on a smooth wall
writing history plain as on a plaque
or tablet sculptured by a mason—
now the carved face of the mason lies under the chisel.

The walls of Budapest—this image will be seared
on freedom's retina for many an age,
though short the body's memory of pain,
though smoke extends a pall over the wounds,
though leaves will cover them in course of time,
though white snow, smoothly gliding down, will freeze
the human stench on the deserted road.[29]

We have seen the upsurge of radical feeling colouring Gaelic poetry in the nineteenth century. There is strong evidence of this again in the new poetry of the twentieth century. We find it at many points in Somhairle MacGhillEathain's poetry, sometimes taking the form of anti-landlordism and of anti-clericalism. In the short poem "*Calbharaigh*" ("Calvary") the context is a Lowland city one:

My eyes are not on Calvary
or on Bethlehem the blessed,
but a rotting room in Glasgow
where there's festering decay,
and another room in Edinburgh,
of poverty and pain,
where a sick and scabby infant
writhes and turns before its death.[30]

And in Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh's "*NATO 1960*" political feeling breaks the surface more unambiguously than is usual for this poet (the translation is the poet's own):

NATO 1960

The sabbath
descending upon the town
with silence,
mist-fine rain drizzling
and the wind still;
men as if half-dead
crawling;

the question
rising out of the image, sudden,
frantic,
that the hail and shout and spindrift,
the sidetracking of a mode of life
stored up
in the back of the mind's safe keeping
(livelihood and weapons of destruction)
exploding articulation, convention,
symbol:

"is this
what the end of the world will be like
—a sabbath crawling without question or frenzy?"

(carrying its interest)
"is this the symbol
that commands respect—
the vapid quiet before the bang?"[31]

The theme of Scottish Nationalism features prominently in the new verse. This is of course not so much a new theme as the modification of a very old one, which we have seen recurring in Gaelic verse from early times. Nationalism as distinct from a romantic patriotism does not loom large in the Gaelic verse of the twentieth century until the 1930s. There are signs of it earlier, in Dòmhnall Mac na Ceàrdaich's poetry, but the first strong wave of it comes in the poetry of the older group of non-traditional poets. We have seen it appear in MacGhillEathain's poem above. It forms the groundwork of a number of poems by Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay and Ruaraidh MacThómais. There was a notable surge of national feeling in Scotland in the early years of the War, and this finds expression in MacThómais's poem "*Faoisgneadh*", which first appeared[32] in 1943. A longish poem, it was written in 1942–3, in RAF camps in Bradford and Cranwell. A short quotation may serve to give its flavour:

. . . . . .

O hot heart of Scotland,
break the shell of the ice you're encased in,
let the warm sun of hope come inside
to bring growth to the plants of the summer,
new summer of greatness.
Wáke, wake from your slumber, array yourself then
with beauty of morning:
your history's cloak is unsmudged;
draw your mettle around you, O plaid of the blood.

Far away, on the hill-tops, I heard the blast of the bagpipes
like news of the spring of the world,
like the clean wind of March,

like the laughter of waves as they strike
on the pebbles on beaches,
like an infant's sore cry,
hunter's cry of elation—
the hope-blast of Scotland.
And I saw the kilt and the plaid,
red-coloured, bare-kneed and strong-calved,
smothering Scotland's thick bracken
with the braird of new hope.

. . . . . .

At the gate of your prison the pipes are being blown,
the chanter is tuned,
the north wind plays with the tartan.
O cut through your bonds, my country's spirit,
hold up your proud head, and stand on your rights,
blow up embers of anger, set light to your honour,
seize the chance while you have it—it has marrow and music.

Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay's nationalist verse was, much of it, composed in more distant barracks, or has its origins in these, although one poem which is no doubt a nationalistic one, even if not explicitly so, is dated "Catterick, 1942".[33] One of these poems carries an Arabic title, "*Meftah babkum Es-sabar*" ("Patience is the key to your door"),[34] and the juxtaposition of the Arab and Scottish situations adds piquancy to the poem. A different kind of perspective (of time rather than of space) is achieved in the poem "*Feachd a' Phrionnsa*" ("The Prince's Army"):

When the army forded the river,
and stood on the first fields of England,
they turned, without cry or speaking,
they looked with steadfast devotion
at Scotland; each unsheathed his sword.
They gazed silently for a while,
and promised her their strength and courage.

The sheaths screeched as the steel returned,
the pipes cried out and the march went on.

The rest of it we remember.
The promise they made then was kept
with weary steps and bloody wounds.
They set great Goliath rocking,
and, one to three, at last they fell.

They closed their spell on earth with honour—
one spell, one spell we have on earth
to show the temper of our metal,
to test the edge of our courage,
to win fame for our land or shame it.

What we ought to do is stop and turn round,
look at our land with deep affection,
with warm promise, no boast or threatenings,
and bare the blade of our hot spirit,
the old white-flaming sword of our country—
so many years of rust and slumber
have blunted it in its sheath unopened.

It was a black sleep—this is the waking.[35]

The theme of Nationalism, in various forms, continued to be an important one appearing much later also in Ruaraidh MacThómais's work, e.g.:

Sheep

In the still morning the surface of the land was flat,
the wind had died down, its rumbling and thrusting
drowned under the whiteness, each snowflake at rest,
set in its soft fabric like a white blanket.
We had lost the sheep that were out on the moor
when that storm unloaded its burden,
and we spent the morning desperately seeking them.

A storm came over my country,
of fine, deadly, smothering snow:
though it is white, do not believe in its whiteness,
do not set your trust in a shroud;
my heart would rejoice

were I to see, on that white plain a yellow spot,
and understand that the breath of the Gael was coming to the surface.[36]

Nationalistic themes are also very characteristic of Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay's more recent, and uncollected verse, but they tend latterly to be handled in a more patently propagandist form which does some injury to the poetry. Uilleam Niall writes on nationalist themes also, but they loom larger in his Scots than in his Gaelic work.

Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh finds new themes in distant places—a perennial source of innovation in literature. A short stay in Turkey in the middle 1950s produced a very interesting short sequence of poems. His "*Latha Féille*" ("Holiday"), with its sense of history and its compassion, is a very effective poem, and its free, lightly adorned style adds to this powerful effect: simple and profound things go well together:

Holiday

They come down from the hills
Tuesdays and Fridays
a farmer on an ass
and three daughters
bent
under creel and yashmak:

The townspeople
whom they supply with fuel and fruit
always mock their fashion—
they walk on their bare
feet.

And people come down from Ankara
to spend their holidays
who say the townspeople
are old-fashioned, prone to sloth
and dirt.

I am there
numbered among foreigners
who deride

indiscriminately
the people of that land . . .

and me as well—
since I see
with my uncouth eyes
a tradition
that overrides the world of my companions

that orders in its folds
England's queen
and Ankara
and the town, a stronghold
that has stood almost as long as the hills;

since I see
on the streets in the heat of the day
footprints in the dust:
a neat-stepping dance
of bare feet;

under black shawls
stirred by the wind of history
a living eye waiting
though burdened and disparaged;
teeth white as lime about
a tuneful tongue, and cheeks
like the pomegranate.[37]

The poem is of course given an extra piquancy by the very fact that it bears a relationship to the Gaelic community that Mac-Amhlaigh often writes about, and to the Gaelic verse tradition to which he belongs. He places neatly, with a flick of the pen, the categories of people and ideas that the poem is concerned with: not only the Turkish ones, with their grades of sophistication, but also those who think of Elizabeth as "England's queen", while the bare feet and black shawls straddle two traditions in the poet's mind.

Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay also finds some of his innovatory themes abroad. One of the finest examples of this is the poem "Atman". This poem also shows deep compassion. An ethical judgement is expressed, but in poetry's terms:

Atman

You thieved when you had need to,
you tried to lie to get off,
condemned, reviled and whipped by them,
put under lock and key.

The honourable mouth that judged you,
had small blubber lips in a grey face;
Justice was blear-eyed from studying
its account-books that were full and fat.

But the mouth they proved to be lying
was mannerly, cheerful and sweet;
I got repartee and tales there
though it often had nothing to eat.

You would lift your eye from your work
to draw pleasure from the world's shape;
you praised Jebel Yussuf* to me
its colour and its form.

I know you well, Atman,
your five youngsters and wife,
your few goats and your ass,
your plot of rye and your cow.

. . . . . .

You have tried hatred, grief and laughter,
experienced both tempest and sun,
you have tried life's texture
and never once have shrunk.

Were you wealthy, your intestines
thick with your tired ploughmen's dearth,
you would not be the lice's fellow
in the black prison of Mondovi.

When the fine judge of the court
gets an eyeful of my back,

* An Algerian mountain.

I'll cross the street to bid you welcome
if ever I see you again.

Sidna Aissa* was crucified
with robbers on a hill's top;
it were blasphemy to deny, Atman,
that you are a brother of mine.[38]

New themes, or old themes with a difference, appear in such poems as Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay's "*Bisearta*"[39] a moving account of the conflagration at Bizerta, Somhairle MacGhillEathain's poem in which he muses on a symphony by Beethoven and the classical music of the pipes,[40] the same poet's series of poems on the conflict between love and reason,[41] Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn's poems on psychological themes, and on Freud in particular,[42] MacThómais's "exile's farewell" to Lewis[43] or his poems on the Highlands seen in terms of India or Tibet,[44] or MacAmhlaigh's "*Iain a-measg na reultan*"[45] with its philosophical, amused reflections on a child's summary dealings with the laws of dynamics and gravity. There are senses in which many of these represent new approaches to old themes. Any poet who writes introspectively, or who analyses other people's minds and motives may exercise a skill in psychological understanding, but we feel that this is somewhat different to what Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn is doing in his poem "*Tha thu air aigeann m'inntinn*" ("You are at the Bottom of my Mind"):

Without my knowing it you are at the bottom of my mind
like one who visits the sea's floor
with his helmet and goggling eyes
and I don't rightly know your looks or your ways
now that five years of time's tempests
have poured between me and you:

nameless mountains of water pouring
between me, as I haul you aboard,
and your looks and your ways in my weak hands.
You went astray
in the sea-floor's mysterious foliage

* Our Lord Jesus.

in the green half-light without love,
and you'll never come to the top of the sea,
though my hands are ever hauling without cease,
and I do not know your road at all,
you in the half-light of your sleep
haunting the bottom of the sea without rest,
and I hauling and hauling on the sea's surface.[46]

Probably such a poem needs for its groundwork an acquaintance with pycho-analytical theory, though it makes no use of technical language. Mac a' Ghobhainn's interest in such theory appears in many of the poems.

Another novel theme, which played an important part in the poetry of Somhairle MacGhillEathain, was that of the Spanish Civil War. It was the over-riding political and humanist obsession of the 1930s, and coloured English verse of that period deeply. Some of that colouring is transferred to MacGhillEathain's verse, sometimes quite deliberately, as in the echoes of John Cornford's verse, e.g. "To Margot Heinemann" and "A Letter from Aragon" in MacGhillEathain's poem "*Urnuigh*" ("Prayer"). But what is chiefly interesting about the use made of this Spanish theme is that the political passion of the time rages against the emotional or erotic passion which is the other mainspring of this poet's work in the later 1930s, and his attitude to Spain is often used as one of the touchstones of that other passion, as in this poem, which is given in Iain Crichton Smith's translation:

I walked with my intelligence
beside the muted sea:
we were together, but it kept
a little distance from me.

And then it turned and spoke these words:
"Is it the truth that I have heard
that your white lovely darling
on Monday will be wed?"

I checked the bitter heart that rose
in my swift torn side
and answered: "It is certain.
Why should I have lied?"

How could I think that I could catch
that jewelled golden star
and place it in a prudent purse
where my wise treasures are?

I who avoided the sore cross
and agony of Spain,
what should I expect or hope,
what splendid prize to win?

I who took the coward's way,
the mean road of the slave,
how should I expect to meet
the thunderbolt of love?

Yet, if I had a second chance,
still standing, proud and tall,
I'd jump with undivided heart
from heaven or from hell.[47]

The younger poets, of the late fifties and sixties, despite political leanings to the left, have not brought Vietnam into Gaelic verse in a comparable way, but political viewpoints have added interest and colour to recent work, as in this poem by Catrìona NicGumaraid (Catriona Montgomery):

I see you supervising the tables,
your fine-checked, pleated kilt to the knee.
You talk loudly, shouting—
the badge of the education you got
in a college whose reputation is a mystery to most.
And you came to dig your livelihood in this village,
to fill your belly like a worm
with the earnings of poor creatures
who spend their health scraping
a livelihood from the lazy-beds
that climb from the shore Park to Healabhal—
perhaps that will bring peace to your shallow mind—
the sprightly little tit-larks still find the large silly cuckoo.
And I think when I see you with your feathers proudly cocked
that Catherine the Great of Russia has come from the grave to visit us.[48]

We can see that there is undoubtedly novelty in choice of themes in the new poetry, and this includes a whole class of private and personal poems which would not easily have been committed to print in earlier periods, and probably this reticence extended further, so that few would have been composed either. The "public" character of Gaelic verse had become a deeply ingrained one. We must exclude the passionate "folk" love-songs of an earlier period from this generalization, as also the laments, which could be personal enough. But there was a feeling abroad that it was improper for a poet to stand up, as it were, while in his right mind, and deal with his private affairs in public. It was an attitude understandable in a small society, and especially in a strongly oral tradition.

Changes in society have led inevitably to this literary change. We see it demonstrated in many ways: in love-poems by most of the poets discussed, in poems by Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn about his mother, in poetry describing the author's thoughts and feelings about his native community. This latter theme falls into a broad class very familiar in the previous period: the songs of homeland. Perhaps nowhere is the change of direction in the poetic tradition so starkly shown as here, with the new poetry leaning no longer on simple nostalgia or on melodic sweetness, but bringing to bear a complex set of emotions, analyses and rationalizations to describe the poet's relationship to his theme. The modern fashion of introspective analysis, with various degrees of conscious sophistication, adds a new dimension to poetry of this kind, and the relative freeing of personal inhibition makes this poetry on an old theme very different to the old poetry. We shall have occasion to quote examples of work on these themes of love and homeland later in this chapter.

Yet what makes this poetry different from its predecessor is not wholly, and not mainly differences in theme, in interpretation of theme, or in the poet's standpoint *vis-à-vis* society, though this last point is close to the heart of the matter. The main difference lies in the structure of the poetry.

The traditional structure was basically linear. A poem had a rational progression, based largely on concepts of description, and it attempted to fit facets of the theme into a composite picture, which could be assessed as a photograph is assessed. This structure was not, of course, confined to poems of a descriptive or naturalistic nature. With modifications, it can be seen to fit, for example, the poems of political argument, or the religious verse of Dùghall Bochanan, or even the philosophical elegies of Rob Donn.

As an alternative to this type of structure many of the new poems use one which is not linear, and which has a freer time progression. These fundamental differences allow the poem a closer relationship to the creative sequence or process: they allow it to record or simulate the creative process. It is likely that the widespread interest in psychological processes has put something of a premium on poetry which is constructed in this way. This is not, of course, to suggest that such a way of making poetry is new. But in the Gaelic context—and the same is true to some degree of the English one also—the non-linear poem structure belongs to this century as a generalized phenomenon.

There can be many different kinds of realization of non-linear structure. At times the subject is scarcely capable of linear development, as in this instance, a poem by Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh. The poem is entitled "*Do Fhear-sgrìobhaidh ainmeil*" ("To a famous Writer"). The point to be made, obliquely and in poetic terms, is that the writer in question no longer takes pains over his writing, and is contented with some sort of posturing. There is little artistic interest in making a statement in these terms, and perhaps it is offensive to paraphrase a poem thus crudely, even to illustrate a theme. MacAmhlaigh, at any rate, sets up the situation in one context (a concrete one), that of the fisherman gathering bait, doing this meticulously and with exact references and then finally and suddenly applies the whole image (which is virtually the whole poem):

> The black slabs were slippery;
> who could keep his feet
> but one who knew how to read
> the suction of the tide?
> —and he was without doubt skilled
> in finding his point of balance
> on the tips of rocks:
>
> his practice was to go down each spring-tide
> to poke among the tangle,
> to catch the shrimps
> and pull out the brown crabs;
>
> but the shellfish
> he used for bait
> had a rest from his hook and tooth:
> he was content
> with the contortions of his dance
> on the slippery surface.[49]

Ruaraidh MacThómais's poem "*Air Mòinteach Shuardail*" ("On Swordale Moor") is another example of the technique of making a statement in terms of another system. Here the character in question is a Lewisman who has re-settled in Lewis after long years in South America. This is another slant—an ironic one—on the theme of nostalgia for the homeland.

> At daybreak you set out
> for Swordale moor.
> It was hardly reminiscent of the pampas,
> but you had your dog at heel
> and spoke to him in Spanish.
> Passing Keose Loch
> you saw a rowan growing on an island,
> with no other tree in sight,
> and you remembered the forests of Chile,
> Punta Arenas and Santiago,
> women wearing the mantilla,
> and wine, and fruits,
> and a ship leaving the quay in Valparaiso.[50]

Non-linear structure can be seen not only in single poems but also in extended sequences. The last poem quoted comes from such a sequence, *An Rathad Cian* (*The Far Road*), which attempts to analyse a community, and the poet's complex and changing relationship to it, in poetic terms. The structure of Somhairle MacGhillEathain's sequence *Dàin do Eimhir* (*Poems to Eimhir*) is non-linear also. Here the links are made, e.g. by recurring references to Spain and the complex relationship in which the poet finds himself in relation to Spain and to Eimhir, or by the recurring use of images of light and jewels, or by reference to the continuing though changing conflict between love and reason. These are the two main unified sequences of poems in our period, but both Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh and Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn have sequences, e.g. MacAmhlaigh's "homeland" series and his love series, and Mac a' Ghobhainn's "*Ochd Orain airson Céilidh Uir*"

("Eight Songs for a new Ceilidh"),[51] and "*An t-Oban*" ("Oban"), which is here quoted entire. In this poem Mac a' Ghobhainn brings the twin themes of his Gaelic collection, Bibles and Advertisements, together brilliantly, in the final section:

Oban

(1)
The rain is steadily drenching Oban,
and the circus has gone home:
the lions and the wild-cats
and the other beasts (we have no Gaelic
for them). They went home
through the papers, advertisements.
The seats are emptying
at the sea-front, in front of the houses,
in front of the hotel—rain falls
into the midst of the heavy brine of the sea.

(2)
Shall I build a town of paper,
with coloured lions on the wall,
with huge savage tigers,
the big wheel with its music turning?

Shall I build a paper sky,
paper clouds, white lights?
Shall I build myself of paper,
with my verses being cut on paper?

(3)
The sea tonight is like an advertisement,
book after book shining.
My shadow runs down to the sea.
My skin is red and green.

Who wrote me, who makes a poetry
of advertisements from my bones?
I will brandish my blue fist at them:
"A strong Highlander with his language".

(4)
The circus has gone home.
They've swept away the sawdust.
The pictures of the animals are gone.
Rain is falling on the bay.

The big wheel has taken itself off.
The season is over now.
The lion is running through sunlight.
He has given a clean pair of heels to the rain.

(5)
The great bell began to chime.
The church is opened.
I sat down in it, in my imagination,
and I saw on the window
instead of Nazareth and Christ
beaten earth and sawdust,
a lion moving in the explosive circle
of Palestine without cease.[52]

The new poetry is also characterized by its use of images and symbols, and perhaps conversely by its hyper-sensitive avoidance of clichéd images of the past. MacAmhlaigh, in one of his series of poems on his own relationship to his native island (which he insists is Bernera rather than Lewis), uses powerfully the image of the iceberg:

Landmark

There goes the island out of sight
as the boat sails on,
as seen by many a bard
through sorrow and beer
and by others, tongue under tooth,
and tears blinding—
an ill-defined shadow and windows fading.

But the matter is not so simple
to the one who's a yearly pilgrim
out of returning sorrow rises
from a region the world has derided.

And, that is not my island;
it submerged long ago
the greater part of it
in neglect and tyranny—
and the part that submerged in me of it,
sun-bower and iceberg,
sails the ocean I travel,
a primary landmark
dangerous, essential, demanding.[53]

The imagery of Somhairle MacGhillEathain's "*Rinn sgian m'eanchainn gearradh*" is developed in detail throughout the poem:

The knife of my intellect made a cut
in my love's stubborn stone.
The blade tested every part.
Its scrutiny was keen.

I turned each section of the stone
to the inspecting glass
of the intellect sparkling in its own
chill and searching space.

But after glass and knife and fire
the blade's piercing ray,
after the cutting, burning stare,
there was no change in the stone's hue.

The enchanted stone cut by the ardour
of my keen intelligence
(though pounded lightly into powder)
remained entire and hard and dense.

And the more it was broken to a myriad
scattered pieces in my sight
the more it became a monad,
compact, adamant and white.

It expanded to a thousand oceans,
each part a drop within a wave.

but all the water in its motion
contracted to my massive love.

The stone my intellect had cut
in its cold hard inspecting course
gathered to the arrogant light
and majesty of a universe.

Struck from my breast, its greatness
was measureless to my eye.
It crouched in its giant brightness
like Betelgeuse in the sky.

The love-stone springing from my head
by paradox of active passion
became the genesis of the red
skies of the mind's imagination.

The love begotten by the heart
is a love that dances in its chains
when it embraces intellect—
love of the scrutinizing brain.

And the stone that's always broken
by the assiduous mind
becomes a bright entire stone
made harder by each new wound.

Dearest, if my heart's love
were not as strong as the jewelled stone
surely the intellectual knife
would have cut it from my flesh and bone.[54]

More lyrical, and less elaborated, is the imagery of MacThómais's "*Achadh-bhuana*" ("Harvest Field"):

One deceptive evening, among the sheaves,
with some of the corn uncut, you came by,
and I put my scythe then in hiding
for fear that the edge of the blade would cut you.

Our world was rounded like the harvest field,
though a part was ripe and a part green,
the day to work and the night to dream,
and the moon rose in the midst of content.

I left a little to cut on the morrow,
and we walked together between the swathes;
you fell on a scythe that another had left,
and your skin was cut, and refused healing.[55]

The image of the wedge is very effective in Aonghas MacNeacail's short poem:

This is the new Road

This is the new road:
we'll go together
down to a river
bold and certain.

Flaunting plumage on our cloak
and a warm breeze in our soul:
we will not be wedged between
death and eternity.

O comrade, we will not think of
yesterday, that's history:
we will not listen to the ploughman's warning.

Now we will be,
tomorrow, sleep will come.[56]

On the other hand, a simple unadorned style can be most effective, especially in the creation of atmosphere, as in Iain MacDhòmhnaill's "*Turas*" ("Journey"):

We went back in the evening
to where we had been cutting.
We reached the bay in the boat.

High-tide near
and the seaweed beginning to float.
We began to collect it.

The sea was lukewarm.
We pulled the rope hard,
made it fast at the edge.

It was not too large a raft of seaweed
but it was thick, well-packed.
It would grow enough potatoes for us.

We set off with it,
tied to the thwart.
The gathering held, did not give way.

It had grown cold
before we got home, a red splash
in the west growing larger.

A pale moon
rising, a petticoat
of clouds below it, a high-tide calm.

That was another night, another year.[57]

MacGhillEathain has several poems of great lyrical purity and intensity, as this one:

My boat was under sail, the Clàrach
with laughter at its bows,
my left hand on the tiller
and the other holding the sheet.

On the second thwart, to windward,
you sat, love, by my side,
with your flaming rope of hair
gold-entwined about my heart.

O God, if but our voyage
were to the goal I desire,

the distant Butt of Lewis
were too near for my sail.[57]

It was suggested already that there was a close correlation between the use of non-traditional poem structure and non-traditional metres, but this is far from being a one-for-one correlation. The subject can only be touched on here, as it is particularly difficult to discuss matters of metre, rhythm and those elements of style which depend heavily on language, except by direct reference to the original language. But a general summary can be attempted.

The range of metrical and rhythmical pattern and experiment over the period is considerable. None of the poets restricts himself entirely to one type of metrical technique, but naturally clear predilections can be discerned where there is a sufficient volume of work. Sometimes a clear movement can be seen over the period. Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay's work, particularly the earlier part of it, shows the strongest interest in traditional metrical technique, and carries this interest so far as to reproduce many of the effects of the strict metres, although not being bound by these. The metrical effects of the Irish *trì rainn is amhrán*, a sixteen-line poem which is a near-equivalent of the sonnet, are several times reproduced by him, following the pattern of Irish *dánta grádha* or love-songs. It is of interest that Hay translated a number of Petrarchan sonnets[59] successfully, and has always showed a keen interest in metrical translation. Apart from these instances, Hay favours on the whole the rhyming quatrain. Yet already in his first collection (the Foreword is dated late 1947) he was showing a freedom of movement, albeit with fairly regular rhymes within sections, in such a poem as "*Tilleadh Uiliseis*" ("The Return of Ulysses"). This poem is quoted in full (in a translation which conveys only some of its rhythmical variety, and not its rhyming patterns) since it is a good example of a successful organic matching of metre and rhythm to content, and since this fine dramatic reconstruction of Hay's is so well worth quoting for its own sake generally.

The Return of Ulysses

I

The son of Laertes reached,
a little before day broke,
Ithaca and the shores of his youth.

In the melancholy moments
before the sun rises suddenly, the high ship
was close in the lee of the old coast.

The aged world was stirring,
sighing under the growing burden of centuries;
a sigh of longing for the sun
in every creature's mouth before daybreak;
and the highest peak newly golden.
He was asleep, and the boat,
with lively movement, was kicking foam from her heel,
weathering the well-known bays and headlands.

In the dark of the dewy woods
and the close-set thickets, birds busied with their broods,
cheeped their intermittent complaints;
a sandpiper on the tide-mark
was calling out its hurt in the half-light.
And still Ulysses slept a sleep of peace,
tired after exile.
After action and wandering,
like a child, he slept
wrapped in his cloak.

II

Ulysses slept;
and they left him stretched on the shore,
along with all his riches.

He slept. And when he wakened
he did not recognize the land he loved,
for the goddess had covered it with mist.

The tick-infested blind old dog
was the first living creature to recognize him
when he came back alive from hundreds of torments.

Unwelcomed and unknown,
a butt for others' mockery,
he found a corner in his lordly dwelling.

III

Chewing his anger, disguised as a beggar
in his own fortress, stormy
was his sidelong glance under his brows at
the banquet of the chiefs.

Then, his bow-string sang loud,
cool the waft of his arrows
through the hall on the cheeks of the throng.

Many a haughty drunkard was pierced,
left off his mockery and laughter,
and slumped in his own blood, his red
hands at his throat.

And many a soft suitor was knocked down,
falling face-first, spewing á puddle of blood
amongst the wine, meat, bread, goblets and chessmen.[60]

Hay's second collection (1952) still shows a strong interest in rhymed and regular metres, and includes a large number of rhymed translations, but it also includes more poems in irregular and especially in irregularly rhymed metres than did his first. He seldom lets go of rhyme, although he does this successfully for a moment here and there in such a poem as "*Bisearta*".[61] The use of irregular rhyme, however, is highly effective here and in other poems such as "*Ar Blàr Catha*".[62]

Somhairle MacGhillEathain is less attracted to the bardic metres, but uses regular rhyming metres to an even greater extent than Hay. The poems in *Dàin do Eimhir* use in an overwhelming majority of cases such regular rhymed metres, the quatrain being by far the commonest, with the rhymed couplet also very popular. He uses also various varieties of five-, six-, seven-, and eight-line stanzas. In a handful of instances rhymes occur at irregular intervals, and there are two unrhymed poems in the collection. A strong predilection for monorhyme shows, whether in the couplet or in more extended sequences. To compensate, as it were, for this regularity, his rhythms are strong and varied, and this often disguises the relative monotony of the rhyming patterns. MacGhillEathain has not published much since *Dàin do Eimhir* appeared in 1943. His "*Coille Hallaig*", a longish poem which appeared in

1954, is in rhymed quatrains, and his "*Cumha Chaluim Iain MhicGill-Eain*" ("Lament for Calum Maclean"), which appeared in 1970, uses regular and irregular rhymed stanzas. Of three poems published in *Contemporary Scottish Verse 1959–1969* (1970) two use irregular rhyme patterns, and in one of these the rhymes are tending to become minimal. There would seem, on that evidence, to be a movement away from regular rhyme. On the other hand, in various public poems, especially those composed in his capacity as Bard to the Gaelic Society of Inverness, we can see a strong tendency to use the traditional eight-line rhyming metre. Overall, however, the couplet and the quatrain are the stanzas most closely characteristic of the metrical side of his work, as in the fine poem "*Ban-Ghaidheal*". The translation suggests the rhythm to some extent; in addition, the rhyme-pattern of the original quatrains is a b c b, with, normally, internal rhyme in the second couplet:

Highland Woman

Have You seen her, mighty Jew
who's called the Only Son of God?
Seen her like upon Your way,
at distant vineyard's toil?

A load of grapes upon her back,
bitter sweat on brow and cheek;
vessel of heavy clay upon
her bent, poor, wretched head.

You have not seen her, Joiner's Son
whom they call the Glory King,
among the rugged western coasts
sweating beneath the creel.

This spring and that spring that is gone,
and every score of springs there were,
she carried the cold seaweed for
her children's food and her lord's fee.

Each twenty autumns that have gone
she lost the summer's yellow bloom;
black drudgery has ploughed a rut
across her white and smooth-soft brow.

And Your kindly Church declaimed
of the lost state of her wretched soul;
and relentless drudgery laid
her body in the grave's black peace.

Her time has gone like sooty ooze
drenching the thatch of a poor home;
hard black drudgery was hers;
grey the sleep she sleeps tonight.[63]

The metrical pattern of Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn's main Gaelic collection, *Bìobuill is Sanasan-reice* (1965) is an interesting one. He shows a fairly strong predilection for regular rhymed stanzas, especially quatrains, but uses three-, five-, six- and eight-line stanzas also. His three- and eight-line stanzas are normally rhymed, but the other varieties are usually unrhymed. There is a strong representation of unrhymed poems, and in fact some two-fifths of the poems in this collection use irregular rhyme, minimal rhyme or no rhyme at all. This pattern confirms and accentuates the metrical pattern which appears in the verse section of his earlier book *Bùrn is Aran* (1960). Throughout his work, his rhymes tend to be subdued, often half-rhymes even in the laxer terms of modern Gaelic rhyme. The poem "Oban", quoted above (p. 282) may be regarded as fairly typical of Mac a' Ghobhainn's metrical style, moving as it does from the minimal irregular rhyme of the first paragraph, to the rhymed quatrains of the second, the unrhymed and rhymed quatrain (one of each) in the third section, to the similar pattern of the fourth, and to the final eight-line section with only one closing rhyme.

The two remaining poets—Ruaraidh MacThómais and Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh—of the five poets we have been chiefly discussing in this section, are the main exponents of *vers libre* in Gaelic. MacThómais's first collection, *An Dealbh Briste* (1951) has a considerable number of poems using regular rhymed stanzas, especially quatrains, but including other types, even a ten-line stanza with rhyme a b b a b c a b b b.[64] Yet already approximately one-third of the poems are in some form of irregularly rhymed or unrhymed verse. Considerable use is made of internal rhyme, though in a form different from the traditional use made of this. These tendencies already appear in the poem published in 1943.[65] In *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (1967) the same

tendencies are confirmed, with poems of a non-traditional kind forming more than half the total. *An Rathad Cian* (1970) goes over, virtually entirely, to *vers libre*. There are many novel developments in the use of rhythm in this body of verse, including a simulation of speech-rhythms used to gain a range of effects. Some of these may be suggested in this translation of "*Cisteachan-laighe*", from MacThómais's middle period:

Coffins

A tall thin man
with a short beard,
and a plane in his hand:
whenever I pass
a joiner's shop in the city,
and the scent of sawdust comes to my mind,
memories return of that place,
with the coffins,
the hammers and nails,
saws and chisels,
and my grandfather, bent,
planing shavings
from a thin, bare plank.

Before I knew what death was;
or had any notion, a glimmering
of the darkness, a whisper of the stillness.
And when I stood at his grave,
on a cold spring day, not a thought
came to me of the coffins
he made for others:
I merely wanted home
where there would be talk, and tea, and warmth.

And in the other school also,
where the joiners of the mind were planing,
I never noticed the coffins,
though they were sitting all round me;
I did not recognize the English braid,
the Lowland varnish being applied to the wood,
I did not read the words on the brass,

I did not understand that my race was dying.
Until the cold wind of this Spring came
to plane the heart;
until I felt the nails piercing me,
and neither tea nor talk will heal the pain.[66]

MacAmhlaigh's work, collected in *Seòbhrach às a' Chlaich* (1967) shows a distinct preference for *vers libre*. A high proportion of his poems use irregular or minimal rhyme, or no rhyme at all. A small minority of the poems (approximately one-eighth of them) use regular rhyme, usually in quatrains, but his characteristic form is the minimally or irregularly rhymed variable verse paragraph, also using internal rhyme in non-traditional ways. His rhythms are very subtle, and vary widely, being an organic part of his verse technique. Some of this is suggested in his own translation of "*An t-sean-bhean*":

Old Woman

You walked feeble,
with your stick,
down by the wall;
you stopped and raised
the weight of your bent head,
you put your hand
between your eyes and the sun.

From that shade
you stared out at the spring,
at the furrow the plough turned;
at the boundaries of the croft
and the mountain
(and you looked to see the cow was not trapped).

And you turned, then,
your feet—
no space between them and the ground—
and walked them stiffly
in
(with your stick
and a hand on the wall)

to the house
where the threshold had grown
into an obstacle.

And you sat there in your seat.[67]

In the original especially, the rhythms, line-lengths and the weight of particular words, form a perfect expression of the poet's thought.

We are not concerned with prophecy in this account of Gaelic poetry over the centuries, but looking back over the history of that poetry we can scarcely fail to notice how tenacious tradition has been, and yet how innovation is eventually acclimatized within tradition. In the poetry of the last half-century or less we have seen such a process largely accomplished once again, and the possibilities of exploitation of new and new-old styles seem considerable still. The reservoir of talent still seems formidable, for a relatively small population, and we may await the next half-century with lively interest.

A 1989 Postscript

SIXTEEN YEARS HAVE passed since this book was completed, and it is desirable to close that gap, to some extent, by a brief account of recent developments. These are of two kinds. Interesting work has appeared on the history and criticism of Gaelic poetry, and new poetry has been written and published. This note attempts a quick summary of these developments, some of which can be studied in greater depth in the publications cited.

Of the five most prominent contemporary poets discussed in the "Renaissance" chapter, Deòrsa Caimbeul Hay (George Campbell Hay) died in 1984, but a long and important work of his, *Mochtàr is Dùghall*, was published in 1982. It had been written, much of it in Italy, during the latter part of the 1939–45 War and shortly afterwards, and Hay had hoped to complete it later. Clearly the poem was intended to bring the Arab and the Gaelic traditions into a fruitful comparison and contrast. But it was the Arab section that was largely completed, while the Gaelic one was hardly begun. There are hints that Hay was beginning to find the voice for this Gaelic section, but it had not reached the point where his imagination was truly fired. It had been set ablaze in the Mochtàr part of the poem, which describes vividly a four-generation span of Arab experience, bringing an extraordinary brilliance to bear on the description of Omar, Mochtàr's grandfather, and especially his desert encounter with the Touaregs. Hay had demonstrated his empathy with Arabs in earlier published work, but this long poem must stand probably as his finest achievement. In Hay's latter years he published some propagandist political verse, and some fine reworkings of earlier Gaelic folksongs (these appeared in *Gairm*, e.g. Nos. 122 and 124).

Somhairle MacGillEain (Sorley Maclean) seems to have written very little in the period, and both the unfinished poem "Uamh an Oir" (The Cave of Gold)—English version in *Chapman* 30 (1981)—and a recent poem in *Cencrastus* (1988) suggest a slightly uneasy engagement with the Muse. In recent issues of *Chapman* (Nos. 50–1 ff.) a series of extracts from "The Cuillin", a long poem written in 1939, has been appearing. MacGillEain's selected poems *Reothairt is Contraigh* appeared in 1977. This included a section

of post-1943 poems, the poem "Hallaig" (first published 1954) being by far the best of these, with its delicate symbolism and lyricism. The greater part of *Reothairt is Contraigh* had appeared in *Dàin do Eimhir*, in 1943, but rather disconcertingly the sequence of the earlier work was distorted in the new selection, a re-writing of literary history which has gone largely unremarked.

Dòmhnall MacAmhlaigh (Donald MacAulay) has not published new verse since the early seventies, but in 1976 produced his influential anthology of Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems, *Nuabhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (including work by Maclean, Hay, Thomson, Smith and MacAulay), with bilingual Introduction and texts.

The remaining two of the "five" have continued to write. Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson) published *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* (Freedom and the Eagle) in 1977, reflecting the high tide of Scottish Nationalism in that decade, and his Collected Poems, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* (Plundering the Harp) in 1982, the latter including over twenty new poems, among them the extended sequence "Airc a' Choimhcheangail" (The Ark of the Covenant), an investigation, both sympathetic and sardonic, of island religious attitudes.

Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn (Iain C. Smith) has published three collections of Gaelic poems in this period: *Eadar Fealla-dha is Glaschu* (Fun and Glasgow) in 1974 being a somewhat flippant, but amusing, selection of poems about Glasgow and modern life; *Na h-Eilthirich* (The Emigrants) in 1983, where the poems are about exiles in Australia and Canada and Oban and Lewis, exiled from Lewis and Aberdeen and their past and their traditions; and *An t-Eilean agus an Cànan* (The Island and the Language) in 1987. The 1987 collection is the most interesting of these, especially in the Island section. The poems here are extremely conversational, and in form might be described as prose-poems. They succeed in giving a wry, diverse and at times hilarious series of impressions of the changing life and language of Lewis.

A somewhat younger generation of poets (and also some poets who were late in publishing collections) are well represented by such books as *A' Mheanbhchuileag* (The Midge) by Fearghas MacFhionnlaigh (1980), a long poem on philosophical, religious and political themes; several publications by Aonghas MacNeacail, the most substantial being *An Seachnadh* (The Avoiding) in 1986 which collects some previously published work, and develops the love-theme with a sensuous delicacy; a short collection by Donn-