

The trance and the translation

Seamus Heaney celebrates the life and work of Scots Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean

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The Guardian, Sat 30 Nov 2002 00.03 GMT First published on Sat 30 Nov 2002 00.03 GMT

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview20>

Sorley MacLean, who was born on the Island of Raasay in 1911 and died in 1996 on the neighbouring island of Skye, lived two lives as a poet. The first was when he was writing the epoch-making poems that brought Scots Gaelic poetry to life between the early 1930s and the late 1950s. The second was when these poems began to be translated in the early 1970s: once MacLean's work was available in English and his actual voice was heard reading the poems in Gaelic, he was a much sought-after and celebrated figure at poetry festivals all over the world.

I got to know the poetry and the poet in the 1970s. First, through reading Iain Crichton Smith's translations of *Dain do Eimhir*, published in 1971 by Jon Silkin in his Northern House Pamphlet series. And then, a year or two later, I met Sorley and read the English translations of poems he delivered in Gaelic at an event in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

Both experiences had an hypnotic effect on me: Crichton Smith's translations had a terrific directness about them, and MacLean's voice had a certain bardic weirdness that sounded both stricken and enraptured. Whether you were listening to him or reading him on the page, you were led into an uncanny zone, somewhere between the land of heart's desire and a waste land created by history - a felt history that stretched from the Highland clearances to the Spanish civil war and the world war it ushered in.

Dain do Eimhir (Poems to Eimhir), MacLean's first book, was published in 1942, a sequence of short love poems written in the 1930s, addressed to a figure named Eimhir. This Eimhir was in fact a composite of two women with whom MacLean had been desperately involved at the time, so the sequence was the sort of thing that had been written in Europe since Petrarch. It was the peculiar intensities of MacLean's situation that lifted it out of the conventional.

MacLean had felt a powerful inner command to enlist on the Republican side in Spain, but failed to do so. This was due in some measure to a need to keep earning at home to support his family, but what the poems record is the effect of his involvement with "the Irish woman" and "the Scottish woman". There is a pervasive sense of a fate being encountered. Read nowadays, the best of the poems sound less autobiographical than generational: they belong to a moment that produced Auden's "Spain" and Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" and Picasso's *Guernica*.

What gave the book its newness for its first readers was the way the traditional Gaelic love lyric was transformed by a charge of modernity: erotic drive and political conscience galvanised a mode of expression that had grown formulaic. Well into the 20th century, the idiom of 18th-century songs still prevailed in Gaelic verse and the music of the Sunday hymns remained strongly, communally influential. When MacLean had finished his sequence, however, Scots Gaelic was a language as tuned to the plight of Spanish Republicans as it had been previously to the plight of the highlanders after the clearances.

Still the poem I remembered best from MacLean's Abbey reading (and would eventually translate) was not one of the Eimhir poems. It was written later, in the 1950s, and is haunted by the great absence that the Highland clearances represent in Scots Gaelic consciousness. "Hallaig" is at once historical and hallucinatory, a poem in which the deserted homesteads of a little settlement on the Island of Raasay are repopulated by a vision of "a fair field full of folk". It arises out of MacLean's sense of belonging to a culture that is doomed but that he will never deny. It's as local as anything in Thomas Hardy and as lambent as Rilke's "Sonnets to Orpheus".

In fact, the myth of Orpheus, the singer who enchants all nature, provides a key to understanding MacLean's whole achievement. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that the key is to be found in Plato's rejection of the Orphic. Plato was against poetry because he equated it with the consciousness-dulling beat of the dance and the tune; he wanted to call the individual to an exercise of all his waking powers rather than give him permission to enter the trance. He wanted responsibility before susceptibility, and the conflicts and resolutions of MacLean's poems could be represented in somewhat similar terms.

This poet's inherited equipment was perfectly Orphic. His aural and affective capacity came to him from ancestral and communal sources. His forebears included famous pipers and singers. The family were regarded as keepers of the Gaelic tradition of music and poetry, and this inherited role linked MacLean to a history of loss as well as to a body of lore. His love of pibroch, his socialism, the high lamenting register in his voice and in his stanzas were all part of his dachas, his sense of belonging. If he shut his eyes, he immediately entered the glen of his nativity, the singer of its traditional song; but the modern world asked him to open his eyes and see his way into subjectivity and individual choice.

In the case of MacLean, a tradition that began with the troubadours, one which involved ardent devotion to the lady and chivalrous engagement with the arts of war, was drastically revised. In English, this tradition appears at its most elegant when it is near its end, in a poem like Lovelace's "To Lucasta, Going to the Wars", but such Cavalier flourish was not for one born a Highland Calvinist. The overarching angst of the politicised 1930s replaced for MacLean the claustrophobic pressure of the religion he had grown up with.

Whatever the reasons that kept him from going to Spain and joining the anti-fascist cause, the intensity of the mental turmoil that ensued, and the mixture of guilt and ardour that characterised his love, proved immensely productive for Scots Gaelic poetry. Its Orphic resources were called upon to take the measure of an ordeal of contemporary consciousness, and the result was something closer to the mind-stress of the 17th century metaphysicals than to the worldlier spirit of the Cavaliers.

MacLean once professed a preference for the work of Andrew Marvell and what attracted me to Iain Crichton Smith's translations, and in particular to "The Choice", poem XXII of the Poems to Eimhir, was an echo of the Marvellian note. This poem, both in the original and in English, conveys exhilaration as well as extreme tension. The poet and his medium have risen to the occasion. Situated between the fire on the ancestral hearth and the fires on the European horizon, MacLean was able both to absorb the shock of the new circumstances and transmit their impact in the old language. It was a unique, passionate, lonely triumph, old-fashioned in its candour, as dramatic as it was "confessional":

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?"

These Poems to Eimhir are at once the poems of a puritan conscience and a passionate nature; they enter the arena of their times bare-handed, and there is something very moving, something akin to naivety, in their readiness to face the historical odds head on. Marx and William Blake look down with equal admiration. The political and the visionary are near allied and there is a constant readiness for a mental fight.

It's as if the choice - to write in Scots Gaelic, taken despite the evident world power of English, fuelled a need in MacLean to come back at the world with justified anger. Politically, linguistically and artistically, he was prepared to go a certain distance towards the horizon but not prepared to leave the landscapes and seascapes where the navigation markers of his spirit were located. He would go eventually as a soldier to the Western Desert and when he was there he would remember Culloden, but not in a nationalist Anglophobic way. He identified rather with the downtrodden in the battle-line, with the English Tommy whom he saw die in Egypt, one of the non-commissioned with whom MacLean himself enlisted, not wanting a medal or any froth from the mouth of the field of slaughter.

Which is to say that MacLean stuck to his guns in all kinds of ways, not least in his determination to let his poetry stand as the pure thing it was in Gaelic and not to attempt anything in his own translations other than a faithful account of the meaning in an almost word-for-word way.

It so happens, however, that these translations by MacLean, which are first and foremost cribs, have a very direct and reliable feel to them. They don't set their cap at the reader. Their strength is in the firmness of the words, their lack of fanciness, their thorough word-for-wordness that keeps us aware that we should be thinking Gaelic; whereas the strengths of Crichton Smith's versions are that they sound confidently and artfully at home in English. If Crichton Smith had translated "Hallaig" I don't suppose I would have attempted it, but eventually I had a go simply because I wanted to get as close to it as I possibly could.

"Hallaig", written more than a decade after the publication of *Dain do Eimhir*, arises out of more serene conditions. It is like a dividend paid to MacLean by his lyric muse because, in Yeats's words, he had not "broken up his lines to weep". His Orphic gift had survived the test of awakening to the nightmare of history. The woods in this reimagined *Hallaig* have sprung into being as the result of a poetic fiat, like the tree that springs up in the opening lines of Rilke's first sonnet to Orpheus. "A tree ascended there," Rilke cried, "O pure transcendence! /O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!" And as John MacInnes has pointed out, the landscape of "Hallaig" is not just the topographical landscape of Raasay but a corner of the mythopoeic universe.

For all that, *Hallaig* is an actual place, a ghost clachan north of Beinn na Lice on the poet's native island. The poem begins with an image of screening and blotting out, the familiar sad

sight of a boarded-up window, so common in Ireland and Scotland and so suggestive of emigration, eviction, famine, clearance, the injustice not only of the skies but of the system. But miraculously, by the third line, the screen is removed and the sorrowful recognitions transposed into a paradisaic key. Suddenly, unbewilderingly, the woods have become women.

The poem is set at twilight, in the Celtic twilight, in effect, at that time of day when the land of the living and the land of the dead become pervious to each other, when the deserted present becomes populous with past lives, when the modern conifers make way for the native birch and rowan, and when the birch and rowan in their turn metamorphose into a procession of girls walking together out of the 19th-century hills.

The poem tells us that in Hallaig there is something to protect, and goes on to show that it is indeed being protected, which is the reason for the uncanny joy a reader feels at the end. It concludes with a strange symbolic scenario, suggestive at one and the same time of a Byzantine mosaic and a Celtic wonder-tale. Love is presented as a hunter, time as an apparitional deer, and a bullet from love's gun brings down time, stills it unbloodily, so that it leaves no trace in the wood, and the ruins of the clachan and the clearings on the wood remain shining in the perpetual light of poetic imagining.

My own version does not purport to equal, never mind replace the almost scriptural English that Sorley set down in place of his Gaelic poem. I simply wanted to catch something of the original trance in a verse translation. I was hoping my English could do what Yeats wanted rhythm to do in poetry: prolong the moment of contemplation.

This is an edited version of the first Sorley MacLean Memorial Lecture, given by Seamus Heaney at the Edinburgh Festival, 2002. Seamus Heaney's prose collection, *Finders Keepers*, is published by Faber, price £20.

“Hallaig”, translated by Seamus Heaney

Time, the deer, is in Hallaig Wood

There's a board nailed across the window
I looked through to see the west
And my love is a birch forever
By Hallaig Stream, at her tryst

Between Inver and Milk Hollow,
somewhere around Baile-chuirn,
A flickering birch, a hazel,
A trim, straight sapling rowan.

In Screapadal, where my people
Hail from, the seed and breed
Of Hector Mor and Norman
By the banks of the stream are a wood.

To-night the pine-cocks crowing
On Cnoc an Ra, there above,
And the trees standing tall in moonlight -
They are not the wood I love.

I will wait for the birches to move,
The wood to come up past the cairn
Until it has veiled the mountain
Down from Beinn na Lice in shade.

If it doesn't, I'll go to Hallaig,
To the sabbath of the dead,
Down to where each departed
Generation has gathered.

Hallaig is where they survive,
All the MacLeans and MacLeads
Who were there in the time of Mac Gille Chaluim:
The dead have been seen alive,

The men at their length on the grass
At the gable of every house,
The girls a wood of birch trees
Standing tall, with their heads bowed.

Between The Leac and Fearnas
The road is plush with moss
And the girls in a noiseless procession
Going to Clachan as always

And coming boack from Clachan
And Suisnish, their land of the living,
Still lightsome and unheartbroken,
Their stories only beginning.

From Fearnas Burn to the raised beach
Showing clear in the shrouded hills
There are only girls congregating,
Endlessly walking along

Back through the gloaming to Hallaig
Through the vivid speechless air,
Pouring down the steep slopes,
Their laughter misting my ear

And their beauty a glaze on my heart.
Then as the kyles go dim
And the sun sets behind Dun Cana
Love's loaded gun will take aim.

It will bring down the lightheaded deer
As he sniffs the grass round the wallsteads
And his eye will freeze: while I live,
His blood won't be traced in the woods.