

## *Sorley MacLean: the Man and his Work*

The year 1970 was a turning point in the literary career of Sorley MacLean, the man who, only ten years later, had become internationally known as a major poet and his work accepted as comparable with major works in any language. Yet to talk about the literary career of a Gaelic poet is misleading, for what career is there for a poet writing in a language many say is dying and only 80,000 people in Scotland speak? Although most of his poetry was written before 1970, it was appreciated only by a few inside the Gàidhealtachd, and some enthusiasts outside it. Sorley MacLean began to emerge from that obscurity in 1970, with the appearance of *Lines Review* 34, a special issue devoted entirely to his work and, more significant still, the publication by Reprographia of a volume entitled *Four Points of a Saltire*, containing a substantial selection of the work of four poets: Stuart MacGregor, William Neill, George Campbell Hay and Sorley MacLean.

Poets are seldom slow to recognize the worth of a poet: Douglas Young in the Forties did everything he could to promote the poetry of Sorley MacLean; other Gaelic writers such as Iain Crichton Smith had long valued his work, but it was the uncompromising claims made in the preface to *Four Points of a Saltire* by Tom Scott, fellow poet but non-Gael, which marked a watershed in MacLean's poetic career. In his preface, Scott places him in the same rank as Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir:

How many people know that the best living Scottish poet, by a whole head and shoulders, after the two major figures in this century, Edwin Muir and Hugh MacDiarmid, is not any of the English writing poets, but Sorley MacLean? Yet he alone takes his place easily and indubitably beside these two major poets: and he writes only in Gaelic . . . That Sorley MacLean is a great poet in the Gaelic tradition, a man not merely for time, but for eternity, I have no doubt whatever . . . If MacLean is not a major poet, then I do not know what major poetry is.

For the first time in Gaelic since 1943, and the first time ever in English, a large body of his poetry was readily available.

MacLean was born in 1911 in Osgaig, a small township on the island of Raasay off the east coast of Skye, lying between Skye and the mainland peninsula of Applecross, just north of Kyle of Lochalsh. His family on both sides were very talented, and, most important, they were tradition bearers who passed on to MacLean the Gaelic tradition in song, music and poetry from many parts of the Gàidhealtachd. His father's family were native to Raasay, but before that almost certainly lived in North Uist and perhaps originally came from Mull, the home of the MacLeans. His paternal grandmother, who lived with the MacLean family until her

death when the poet was about twelve years old, was one of the Matheson family who had moved to Staffin in Skye when they were deprived of their land at Lochalsh in the eighteenth century. She preserved a great store of songs and traditional lore not only from her own immediate background, first of Staffin, then Portree and the Braes of Trotternish, but also from her family's background on the mainland, in Lochalsh and Kintail. Much of this traditional lore MacLean absorbed from her during her stay with the family. Among the Nicolsons, on his mother's side, were three fine singers, with a wide range of songs from all parts, two pipers and a bard. The voice of Angus Nicolson, his uncle, earned great praise from Professor Sidney Newman. From his paternal aunt, Peggie, he learned much of the native traditions from all over the Highlands, especially in song. His own father and his father's brother were both pipers.

Much of MacLean's inspiration as a poet comes from this incredibly rich background, steeped in the best of the Gaelic tradition. It figures as a constant backcloth to his poems, as he acknowledges in *Chapman* 16:

I think that the first great 'artistic' impact on me was my father's mother singing some of the very greatest of Gaelic songs, and all in her own traditional versions.

It was chiefly the words, and the very subtle, intricate rhythms and *tempi* of these songs which made an impact on him, so much so that he remembered the words of songs he liked after only one hearing. This matched well with his brother John, who had a wonderful memory for the tunes of these songs, and for pibroch; together these brothers preserved both the words and the music of their vast inheritance in the Gaelic tradition. Bards figure among his ancestors on both sides. MacLean's father had an extraordinary sensitivity for the Gaelic language, sung or spoken, in its phonological and semantic variations between dialects, its rhythms, nuances and associations — a sensitivity he conveyed to his son. His father also had a wide knowledge of Gaelic poetry and, when young, MacLean would often witness long arguments between his father and his maternal uncle, Alexander Nicolson, on the relative merits of the main figures in Gaelic poetry, Duncan Macintyre, William Ross, Alexander MacDonald, Rob Donn, Iain Lom and others. So MacLean grew up in an environment rich in all aspects of the Scottish Gaelic tradition, an environment which furnished him with the basis for both the structure and content of his poetry: the importance to MacLean of this inheritance cannot be overestimated.

Sorley MacLean was educated at the local Raasay primary school, then at Portree High School in Skye, along with the rest of his family, two sisters and four brothers. His mother, Christina, and his father, Malcolm, survived on the proceeds of a small croft and a tailoring business. The family gave up the croft to move to a better house, leaving them financially dependent on the tailoring business which, as the Depression grew nearer, became less and less prosperous. MacLean's own generation turned out to abound in talent too; for example his brother Calum became one of Scotland's best folklorists.

An important part of MacLean's background is the history, not just of Raasay, but of the whole Highlands. Both Raasay and Skye have long histories which reflect the troubles of the Gaels through the centuries. Together with the rest of the Highlands, they experienced the Reformation and the impact of Calvinism, clan feuding, the Jacobite rebellions and subsequent persecutions, the Clearances, mass

emigration and the constant shrinking of the Gaelic language in both power and influence. These historical factors were just as much present in MacLean's childhood as in the oral tradition. He knew many people whose memories went back to the Clearances: they had affected different parts of the Highlands and the bitter tragedy was keenly felt by everyone. History and poetry came together in the figure of Mary MacPherson, Màiri Mhór nan Oran — Great Mary of the Songs, who was one of the main influences on MacLean. As Bard of the Land League Movement, her work was much appreciated in Skye, particularly by MacLean's maternal uncle, Calum Nicolson, because of her protests about the Clearances and her championing of the people in their distress. This is also present in MacLean's work, in which an important theme is the historical and political position of the Gael.

The situation of his people, immediately of Skye and Raasay, but ultimately of the whole of Scotland and beyond, deeply affected MacLean. Not only were the Clearances a living memory, but MacLean grew up surrounded by visible evidence of them everywhere — ruined crofting townships, people crowded onto infertile strips of land near the sea where they had to suffer the most meagre of existences, often in unhealthy conditions because of overcrowding. MacLean's mother's family lived in Braes, which was one of these coastal districts into which the population had been herded. Raasay itself had suffered clearances between 1852 and 1854, within the memory of some who were still alive when the poet was young. The experience of the Clearances bred a strong radical tradition in which the Clearances and Toryism were seen to be connected. This radical movement found expression in the Land League of the 1880s, culminating in the Battle of the Braes in 1882 in which MacLean's grandfather's brother took part. All this was a living, vital part of MacLean's childhood and a strong influence in his youth.

The Island of Raasay is a stronghold of Free Presbyterianism, a movement which seceded from the Free Church of Scotland in 1893. This could have been an excessively repressive force in MacLean's childhood, but his family were not as strictly orthodox as some, believing in it "at the level at which human beings can believe in it and continue sane" (*Chapman*, 16). Indeed, MacLean's poetry owes much to the length, eloquence and range of vocabulary in the Free Presbyterian sermons.<sup>1</sup> On a personal level, perhaps, the love of song and the Gaelic cultural tradition which was so deep in his family moderated the sternly rigorous influence of religion.

Childhood seemed to be happy for MacLean, who did well at school, particularly in History, Latin, Gaelic and English. No doubt his ability in History had something to do with his acute awareness of the history of his own people. On a more mundane level, reading material on Raasay was limited, and many of the books available were historical: MacLean, an avid reader, had read the whole of Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution* and complete histories of Scotland and England by the time he was twelve. Of several of his teachers, and in particular of the Headmaster of Portree Secondary School, a Latin Teacher, Tait, and the Head of English for most of his time there, a woman called MacKenzie, he speaks very highly, remembering them with gratitude and affection. Later, when MacLean became a teacher himself, he used the teaching he had received at Portree as a model, such was its quality. It was at school, too, that the family passion for the energetic game of shinty found expression. While standards in both the arts and languages at Portree were extremely high, those in Maths and Science were not so well developed; but this accorded well with the predilections of MacLean and his brother John, both of

whom went to Edinburgh University because neither Maths nor Science was required in the Open Bursary Competition there. Glasgow University, the natural focus for many Gaels, was out of the question since they did not shine at scientific subjects, but excelled in the humanities, John at Latin and Greek, Sorley at English and History.

At university, MacLean had to decide which course to follow. He had been advised in his final year at school to study history because of his aptitude for it and because it was a better qualification for the higher echelons of the Civil Service. However, history did not attract MacLean as a study, nor did the Civil Service as a career. The choice for him was between Honours English Language and Literature, and Honours Celtic. Regretfully, MacLean rejected the Celtic option: openings in this field were few and almost all the posts available then were filled with young incumbents. Perhaps even more important for MacLean was the fact that Celtic is an academic discipline and he may already have begun to feel that he was not primarily an academic; furthermore, his emerging passion was literature. Throughout his teens, he had been an eager reader of poetry, of Gaelic poetry and nineteenth-century English romantic poetry, Shelley and Wordsworth. In fact, one of his reasons for taking English was that he cherished a youthful ambition to write a book on Shelley whose *Prometheus* he admired, partly because of Shelley's humane socialism. All MacLean's instincts were leading him in the direction of literature. The realization that he was not by nature an academic grew throughout his four years at Edinburgh University; even on the English course, there was a large proportion of material in which he had no real interest and had simply to suffer for the sake of the qualification. This was one of the factors in his choice, after graduating with First Class Honours in English, not to go to Oxford to do post-graduate work, as Herbert Grierson, his professor, was urging him to do. Instead, he chose teaching as a career and took the post-graduate teaching diploma at Moray House College of Education, in Edinburgh. He had hoped during that year to take Honours Celtic as an extra, with the blessing of Professor Watson of the Celtic Department, but, unfortunately, Moray House's unbending bureaucracy frustrated this intention. In 1934, he began his first appointment as teacher of English at Portree High School.

It was while MacLean was at Edinburgh University that he met two men whose influence on him was to be seminal: James B. Caird and George Elder Davie. Quite apart from the close friendship which grew up between the three men, Caird and Davie each made an invaluable and unique contribution to the poet's intellectual life. It was Caird who, during this period, first uttered the 'heresy' of suggesting that "Milton was as great a poet as Donne, or Yeats as great a poet as Eliot". With Herbert Grierson, the great modern champion of John Donne, as Professor of English that was heresy indeed to many undergraduate minds. But for MacLean, this evidence of original thought greatly attracted him to Caird. Although MacLean later came to have the highest regard for Yeats's work, at that time he ruefully remarks, "I did not listen to him on Yeats enough to get past the early Yeats".<sup>2</sup> In Caird, MacLean came up against a man of extremely wide culture and learning, astonishing in someone so young. In an interview with Aonghas MacNeacail, he describes Caird as a man who "even then combined a tremendous knowledge of literature — English, Scots, French, Latin and Greek, as well as Russian in translation — with what I considered a very unusual sensibility". Indeed, MacLean thought that Caird "ought to have been Professor of Literature but circumstances

and lack of worldly wisdom prevented that".<sup>3</sup> In fact, Caird later became one of H.M. Inspectors of Schools and an influential man in Scottish letters.

While Caird provided MacLean with a great 'literary stimulus', George Davie provided an equally great 'intellectual stimulus'. Davie, another undergraduate, was remarkable for his "historical knowledge of all kinds of things Scottish and his fundamental interest in ideas and immense range".<sup>2</sup> Davie had the deepest understanding of the entire gamut of Scottish culture — philosophy, theology, educational theory, of Scottish contributions to science and mathematics, as well as an understanding of art and literature. Most importantly, Davie's perception of Scottish philosophy set it firmly in the larger European theatre, and he was able to make connections between elements in Scottish thought and that of not only mainstream European thinking, but also of the more obscure elements, such as phenomenology, largely ignored by English philosophers. This range and depth is clearly visible in Davie's famous book *The Democratic Intellect*, which is probably the most important book ever written on the principles and development of Scottish thought, particularly in relation to the Scottish universities in their struggle to maintain an independent intellectual tradition against the more powerful, if not always intellectually superior, academic movements in England. Not only did Davie influence MacLean intellectually, but he was an extremely valuable source of ideas for Hugh MacDiarmid.

At no time in his youth was MacLean conscious of an ambition to become a poet, but it was almost certainly his love of Gaelic songs and poetry, Gaelic and otherwise, which led him to write his first poems, most of which were parodies, at the age of fourteen or fifteen. A crucial, if surprising factor, is MacLean's tone-deafness. He freely describes himself as a traditional Gaelic singer *manqué*: "Even to this day, I sometimes think that if I had been a singer I would have written no verse".<sup>2</sup> It is curious that both MacLean and Yeats, whom he much admires, were unable to sing, being relatively tone-deaf, yet both could produce poetry with an extraordinary quality of verbal music. But MacLean's need was not just to produce music, as the singer does, but also to create it, as he conjectures: "but perhaps if I had been a singer I would have tried to create original melodies".<sup>2</sup> His only outlet was the creation of verbal music in lyric poetry.

It is said that many young poets instinctively begin writing by imitating the techniques of established poets to whose work they are drawn. Perhaps this phenomenon was at work in the young MacLean when he was writing mainly parodies. Later in his teens, in common with many other poets, it was the first stirrings of love which provided the impulse to write poetry, in both Gaelic and English. Until he left school, he had no knowledge of modern poetry, but at university he fell under the influence of Eliot and Pound, an influence which found its way into his writing in English, but not so much his Gaelic writing. By the time he was twenty, he had written a good deal of poetry in both languages, but was becoming more and more dissatisfied with his English poetry, which seemed to him to lack both passion and depth:

When I was at the university I came to realize that my English verse, which was mostly imitative of Eliot and Pound, was over-sophisticated, over self-conscious, and that what I had written in Gaelic was better in the sense that it was more myself.<sup>4</sup>

One English poem from that period survives, published in a small pamphlet, *Private*

*Business*, edited by David Daiches and published by the English Literature Society of Edinburgh University in 1933.

*East Wind*

The air is chill, and a little rain  
has left the moist cold tincture on the grass,  
but drops have left the window pane  
through which I watch the grey clouds pass  
on Glamaig's wizened, dark-scarred face;  
and eastern gusts, the surly black, efface  
the tender blue and silver of the sea  
to ripples of their own chill dreariness:

Full of the whole world's bitter weariness,  
even of the soul, the spiral flame  
that ever mounts encurl'd  
on all the earthly images of praise and shame  
pointing its snake tongue to some other world.

As John MacInnes has pointed out,<sup>5</sup> MacLean's poetry transcends Romanticism, particularly in its symbolic and totally unsentimental use of landscape: the beginnings of this, and of MacLean's pessimism, the signs of his intellectual and emotional range, of his surrealistic imagery, are all there, even in this English poem. It is fitting that in the same pamphlet is an early poem by Robert Garioch called 'Technical Notes' in which he defends the use of Scots in his poetry:

Burns fand emotion, coupin mice,  
an Wordsworth saw religion in a stirk,  
Gode warks in maist dumfoonrous weys,  
A've kent folk even seek it in a kirk!

Wha'll blame me, syne,  
ir slate this clarty dialect o mine?

A camel in the desert'll  
slorp drumly watter oot a dub;  
a man whaw'd write in Edinbro  
maun seek his language in a pub.

A like it fine,  
this bonny clarty dialect o mine.

As with MacLean's poem, the hallmark of the mature Garioch is clear in this short poem.

In part at least, it was a political decision for Sorley MacLean to write in Gaelic, his first language. No doubt in his mind at the time was the fact that he had studied English, not Celtic at university, and the rejection of English as the language of his own poetry assuaged his guilt over this earlier choice. It was a political decision in that he gave the most positive support he could to his native language, culture, traditions and way of life, all of which was and is still under threat from the powerful political and economic forces of our capitalist society. MacLean's purity of motive in this choice is underlined by the fact that he knew well that only a handful of people would ever be capable of fully understanding his work in the original, and that he

was much less likely ever to see his work in print than any writer of comparable work in English. But the choice was also a perfectly natural one given his love of Gaelic song and poetry and his sensitivity to the Gaelic language. He remarks: "My ear's defect in pitch seems to me now to have been compensated for by a painful sensitivity to what I felt faults of rhythm and time".<sup>2</sup> That sensitivity could only operate fully in a Gaelic medium. For a poet like MacLean, with his love of sound and rhythmic subtleties, Gaelic is the natural language to write in, using his finely tuned ear for rhythm and melopoeia to the full. English, compared as a language to Gaelic in this respect, is arid and tuneless, heavily reliant on abstractions and rhythmically crude, its symbolism mainly visual. MacLean explains this in a letter to MacDiarmid: "My stuff, like most Gaelic verse, has a sensuousness chiefly of the ear. Now, as far as I can see, recent English poetry concentrates on a jungle of bristling, more or less surrealist imagery which strikes the eye".<sup>6</sup> Gaelic verse also has riches in rhyme and form which English cannot rival. It is as well to be aware of what is lost when poetry is translated from Gaelic into English. For many reasons, the decision to write in Gaelic rather than English was entirely the right one.

In the summer of 1933, during his final year at University, Caird and Davie introduced him to the work of Hugh MacDiarmid in *Scots Unbound*, *Sangshaw*, *Pennywheep* and, later, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and *To Circumjack Cencrastus*. Such was MacLean's admiration of the early lyrics for their "under-the-skin awareness and auditory magic . . . which I consider as quite unrivalled and unapproached in the British Isles at present",<sup>6</sup> that he almost stopped writing himself, feeling that the nearest to the "unattainable summit of the lyric"<sup>2</sup> had been achieved. MacLean's obsession with the lyric was, initially, a direct influence from his Gaelic background in poetry and song, but it was also due to the literary influence in his teens of Blake and Wordsworth, as well as Shelley; Blake because of his close approximation to song in his short poems, and Wordsworth because of the lyric peaks in his poetry, particularly in *The Prelude*, which entranced MacLean because of its "expressions of a sensitivity to certain impressions from external nature".<sup>2</sup> MacLean's devotion to the lyric was confirmed and given philosophical consolidation when he discovered that Benedetto Croce "didn't believe in the long poem, that he considered it fundamentally a series of flats interspersed with lyric peaks. That I took to because it fitted in with my own predilections".<sup>7</sup> MacDiarmid's lyrics also confirmed MacLean's own convictions that "the lyric is the summit of all poetry",<sup>2</sup> but he clearly denies that they had any direct influence on his own poetry:

I wouldn't say that these lyrics of Hugh MacDiarmid influenced my own poetry much though they had a kind of catalytic influence, because, as I think you will agree, that of all poetry, and I mean all poetry that I know, they are the most inimitable and the most difficult to follow in practice and imitate, but they had this tremendous influence on me and confirmed my belief in the supremacy of the lyric and the lyrical nature of poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps MacLean's use of the word 'influence' here is misleading. That MacDiarmid made a great *impact* on MacLean is clear; undoubtedly, knowledge of MacDiarmid and his work helped to sustain MacLean in his own writing. It is further tempting to see MacDiarmid as a linguistic influence on MacLean. In many ways the two poets were in similar positions, and achieved similar things. MacDiarmid revived Scots, dragging it out of the nineteenth century (some might

say the eighteenth) into the twentieth, and using it to express a truly modern world view and sensibility. As Iain Crichton Smith, John MacInnes and many others have said, MacLean did the same for Gaelic and Gaelic poetry, which, until his poetry appeared, was stuck in a nineteenth-century idiom, inward and backward looking in content, sentimental and trapped in its own literary conventions. Both poets were technical innovators in their use of language and poetic form. It is mistaken, however, to see MacLean in any sense as following in MacDiarmid's footsteps, remarkable though it is that at more or less the same time two Scottish poets should provoke similar changes in the poetry of Scotland's two minority languages. There was no direct, 'causal' influence at work: those who wish to provide explanations may summon up the *Zeitgeist*, which probably furnishes as good an explanation as any. The facts bear this out: MacLean was not aware of the work of Hugh MacDiarmid until 1933, but, by 1931 he had already written 'A' Chorra-ghridheach' and *Dàin do Eimhir I*<sup>7</sup>, and in 1932 he wrote, 'A' Chiall 's a Ghràidh'. Shortly after writing 'A' Chorra-ghridheach', he took the decision to write only in Gaelic because he felt that poem to be so much better than anything he had done in English. MacLean writes: "I was committed to Gaelic poetry before I had read a single poem by MacDiarmid".<sup>2</sup> The word 'committed' must be understood in its fullest sense here.

Sorley MacLean and Hugh MacDiarmid first met in 1934, while MacLean was still studying at Moray House. A friendship arose between them almost immediately and continued until MacDiarmid's death in 1978. It is not surprising that the two men were strongly drawn to each other considering the similarity of their positions. Each held the other's work in high regard, and, because they were working in different traditions, there could be no question of rivalry between them. The first fruit of their friendship was their co-operation on the translation of the Gaelic poems by Alexander MacDonald, the 'Birlinn Chloinn Raghnaill' and 'Moladh Móraig', and of Duncan Bàn MacIntyre's 'Ben Dorain'. When MacDiarmid's translation of the 'Birlinn' appeared in *The Modern Scot*, MacLean wrote congratulating him for capturing the spirit of the original better than any other translation. Gaelic scholars were less positive in their response, which MacLean characterised as "piddling pedantry"<sup>8</sup> and roundly dismissed their criticisms, reassuring MacDiarmid:

You need not be perturbed by anything that the Gaelic scholars may say. Which of them in Scotland has produced a piece of criticism worth mentioning? The best of them are good grammarians not literary men. And which of them has produced a verse translation of a Gaelic poem that is not beneath contempt?<sup>9</sup>

MacLean described MacDiarmid's translation of 'Ben Dorain' as "wonderfully good", but not on the whole so good as that of the 'Birlinn', since he failed to "recapture the Gaelic rhythms – an impossible task".<sup>10</sup> There is a suggestion here that MacLean is being generous in his estimation of these translations, no doubt feeling that MacDiarmid's efforts, in spirit at least, deserved higher praise than more scholarly works.

By 1935 MacDiarmid was living in isolation on Whalsay, Shetland, where MacLean visited him in August of that year; his hospitality was returned two years later when MacDiarmid stayed with MacLean during a visit to Raasay to gather material for his book *The Islands of Scotland*. Their intention was to collaborate on an anthology of Gaelic poems with English translations, a project which never came



about, partly because of MacDiarmid's subsequent ill health. These two men made a great impact on each other, something of which is visible in MacLean's letter to MacDiarmid, thanking him for the present of a small volume of selected poems:

It is indeed a present to be proud of. I had long thought how imposing such a collection, comprising short lyrics from your longer poems as well as from the short lyric collections would be, but I was greatly struck when I saw the book itself. I realised that I had not fully appreciated the effect of the juxtaposition of such great lyrics.<sup>11</sup>

Although at first MacLean rated the lyrics in *Sangshaw* more highly than those in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, he came to appreciate the latter much more in time. His reason was that he considered it to be

the greatest long poem of the century that I have read, . . . because along with the subtlest and most daringly imaginative, the most organic and marvellously sustained use of symbolism, it has the variety that has something for most natures. It converted me to the belief that the long medley with lyric peaks was the form for our age.<sup>2</sup>

Here we can see how from MacLean's reading of *A Drunk Man* came the idea which led to his writing 'An Cuilithionn' four years later – an attempt, like *A Drunk Man*, to maximize the force and scope of the lyric.

Sorley MacLean was one among many millions of people who, in the Thirties, were unable to do what natural inclination might have led them to because of the Depression. While his brother John went to do post-graduate work in Cambridge, he did not go to Oxford, partly because he had rejected the academicism, but chiefly because family circumstances dictated the need for him to have a stable income. His father had given up the croft in 1931, and although it was never an important factor, the family missed its financial contribution. His father's tailoring business, faced with the declining economic situation, became increasingly less profitable. When, in 1934, MacLean took up his first teaching post in Portree Secondary School (now Portree High School), his salary helped to provide for his family and finance the education of his younger brothers and sisters.

Because Portree Secondary School catered for pupils from all over Skye, some teachers had to be resident in the Elgin Hostel, where pupils boarded during the week. MacLean, one of the teachers in the hostel, had to be on duty there every second night, a task he found both unrewarding and onerous:

If I have to stay here (Elgin Hostel) much longer, I shall be extinguished completely. I can read but that is about all. I cannot get the necessary concentration for doing any real work. I suppose a teacher has sooner or later to recognize the fact that he cannot use what talents he has, however modest they are.<sup>12</sup>

That ominous note gives the first indication of the heavy toll of MacLean's talents and energies that teaching was to take. For a young teacher, the work is particularly strenuous and MacLean, as always, was more than diligent. He was lucky, though, at Portree, to have the companionship of one of his university friends, Jack Stuart. MacLean had met Stuart through his brother, Ellis Stuart, with whom MacLean had played shinty at university. Jack Stuart, in turn, had introduced MacLean to Robert Garioch, again during MacLean's undergraduate days. MacLean held Jack

Stuart in the highest esteem, and his presence at the school in Portree helped to make life bearable for him. Shortly before Stuart left Portree to go to Aberfeldy, MacLean wrote to MacDiarmid:

I myself am being asked for an interview for a job at Tobermory, Mull and if I get it I shall take it . . . I do not like the idea of leaving Skye but things have changed for the worse in the school of late. However I really do not know what is to happen. Of course I shall never get a fellow like Stuart to teach with again and without him I am afraid of the prospect of Portree school.<sup>13</sup>

In January 1938, MacLean was appointed teacher of English at Tobermory Secondary School, where he felt as ever the heavy burden of teaching, the difficulty of writing under these circumstances, and the great intellectual isolation. But these were not the only frustrations for MacLean at that time. He has always seen himself essentially as a frustrated man of action, as more of a politician than a poet. This impulse first showed itself at the age of twelve, when he claims he “took to the gospel of Socialism” and saw himself as

primarily an idealist democratic revolutionary and I fancied my future role in life as a politician helping to change the world, rather than as a scholar or a poet. ‘Negative capability’ I understood but it was not for me.<sup>2</sup>

Exactly how this change came about he describes in a published discussion.<sup>14</sup> He had been telling one of his uncles about the history being taught at school, regurgitating the text books’ exaltation of Disraeli over Gladstone on the issue of imperialism and his uncle had exclaimed: “The bloody Tories, who did the Clearances!” MacLean adds, “I saw red from then on”. From that moment also, the connection between the capitalist landlords and Toryism was clearly established in his mind. MacLean’s youthful socialism accounted in great part for his admiration of both Shelley and John MacLean. The latter was also an admirer of Shelley and influenced the young MacLean more than any other literary figure. The poet had met several people in his youth who had known John MacLean and had regarded him as a hero and a saint; thus he came to have the highest respect both for John MacLean’s political thought and for the man, whom he says “was the last word in honesty and courage. He was a terrific man.”<sup>14</sup> Sorley MacLean’s instinctive leaning towards the political figure as exemplar is expressed in a letter to MacDiarmid asserting that “names like Lenin, Connolly, John MacLean are more to me than the names of any poets”.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps behind this is the implicit recognition that poetry, no matter how powerful, can do comparatively little to change the world. It also accounts for the frustration MacLean was feeling in Mull.

In the interview with Aonghas MacNeacail, MacLean describes his ‘native’ politics as a “kind of pretty left-wing radicalism focussed on what was happening in the Highlands”. His socialism, however, was neither naïve, nor over-idealistic; to him, it was simply the most advanced and morally superior social and political theory yet evolved, and as such, he owed it his strongest support. Of the failure of Communism to live up to socialist ideals, MacLean says “Communism is an affirmation of humanity, however it has been debased or perverted”. Fascism, on the other hand, he condemns as “an affirmation of cruelty, the desire for power . . . the denial of *all* humanity”.<sup>14</sup> MacLean often refers to himself as a ‘natural pessimist’, someone too sceptical to believe wholeheartedly in any system. This ‘natural pessimism’ MacLean believes was

probably engendered by my religious upbringing and a hatred of elitism, social elitism and all that made me equate what was happening then to the politics I had learned from the traditions of the Land League, and especially the traditions in Braes.<sup>3</sup>

MacLean's belief in political systems may be inhibited by profound scepticism, but his pride in his ancestry, and in the struggles on behalf of the crofting community by the "big men" of Braes, is quite without reservation. Equally 'native' to MacLean as a Scot, as a Gael, as a poet concerned with the culture of his country, is Scottish Nationalism, which MacLean supported alongside his socialism. There have been times when MacLean has felt very drawn towards nationalism as the best hope, for Scotland at least, but for the most part he has lacked belief in it as an ultimate force for change.

MacLean's strong political convictions were such that the impulse to action was irrepressible; but his family circumstances, the necessity of teaching, and the restrictions arising out of the public role of a teacher as well as the exacting nature of the job, prevented him from taking any direct political action. This frustration is expressed in an undated letter to MacDiarmid in the late Thirties, in which he agrees with MacDiarmid's 'special line' on Scotland, John MacLean's marxist view, and tells him that he has been "reading nothing but Marxism in which I am considerably more proficient than I used to be". This was the nearest to expression of political involvement available to him at the time, as he goes on to complain:

Of course the position of a school teacher is intolerable – the matter of getting anything done – but I fear that for the present at least I shall have to abide it. I can only try to sail as near the wind as I can.<sup>16</sup>

It is worth noting that MacLean's marxism was not naïve or sentimental, as some critics have supposed, but both educated and informed.

Although MacLean relinquished Calvinism in favour of socialism at an early age, Calvinism continued to make a profound impact on him, influencing his thought as well as his language. This is examined in detail in Terence McCaughey's article in this volume, which shows that religious symbolism and reference abound in his poetry. His religious background is responsible for his 'natural pessimism' because "if you are brought up in a church which seems to say that the bulk of humanity are going to suffer an eternity of physical as well as mental torture, it is very difficult not to be a pessimist".<sup>3</sup> This condemnation of the bulk of humanity, and, of course, the bulk of Free Presbyterians, made Calvinism for him a terrible religion. The other aspect of this doctrine, that only a few, the 'Elect', will be saved, is also responsible for MacLean's hatred of social elitism, of any elitism, and for his disapproval of MacDiarmid's "arty attitude to politics"<sup>17</sup> and his apparent dismissal of the mass of people in *A Drunk Man* and elsewhere. MacLean also rejected this doctrine on more personal grounds. He complains to Douglas Young that only a few of those he loved would be 'saved' and that "salvation without them is a desolate prospect". His 'lost' friends were infinitely preferable to the 'saved'. Moreover, hardly anyone in his family seemed to show any "potentiality for salvation". He goes on:

I dislike most of the obvious 'elect' not because of their good fortune but because most of them were unloveable people and I regarded their preoccupation with salvation much as I regard the careerist at present. . . and Christ's attraction was modified by the early realization that his earthly

suffering was nothing because he was not properly human.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian God may not have appealed much to MacLean, but the devil did evoke a certain sympathy in him as he explains to Douglas Young:

I was never a 'converted' sinner who had experienced 'conviction of sin, repentance into life, effectual calling and sanctification' as Muir probably was in some ways. I had experienced conviction of sin and still do but not against a Seceder God or any other God but merely against my own aspirations.

The connection between the Christian God and the political establishment is obvious to MacLean, who says of himself, "I have never been on the side of the established angels".<sup>19</sup>

It cannot be supposed that MacLean altogether condemns and rejects his religious background: the truth is much more complex. He has complained that many people in Scotland, particularly in the Lowlands, criticize Calvinism out of ignorance. For instance, many quite wrongly associate Calvinism with smugness, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. MacLean claims that Free Presbyterianism is such a terrifying religion, so many souls being doomed, that smugness and self-righteousness were rare among the flock; even the 'Elect' were full of self-torture, wondering whether they were or were not of the 'Elect'. He finds it difficult to hate a religion because he has known so many wonderfully good people who adhered to it, some of whom he has thought of as almost saints. Paradoxically, the terrifying nature of Calvinism has positive effects, in particular the fact that it brings people up against the cruelties of the world and in doing so prepares them better for life. In this respect, MacLean regards Calvinism as more intellectually honest than many other religions which paint a rosier picture of this life or the afterlife.

MacLean was very alone in Mull, and living there sharpened his awareness of the tragedy of the Gaels, because the island had suffered so badly from the Clearances. Mull, he says, "nearly drove me mad", it was such a "heartbreaking place"<sup>20</sup> for anyone named MacLean, the most common name on Mull until the Clearances. In 1938, there were almost no original Mull families on the island, a fact which greatly upset MacLean. The traumatic Mull experience, in fact, spurred him into poetry:

I believe Mull had much to do with my poetry: its physical beauty, so different from Skye's, with the terrible imprint of the Clearances on it, made it almost intolerable for a Gael, especially for one with the proud name of MacLean.<sup>2</sup>

Out of MacLean's time on Mull comes 'Ban-Ghàidheal', one of his most moving poems, which describes the personal toll of the Clearances on many Highland women and men:

Is thrial a tìm mar shnighe dubh  
a' drùdhadh tughaidh fàrdaich bochd;

mheal ise an dubh-chosnadh cruaidh;  
is glas a cadal suain an nochd.

And her time has gone like a black sludge  
seeping through the thatch of a poor  
dwelling:  
the hard Black Labour was her inheritance  
grey is her sleep to-night.

So far, the conflicts and frustrations felt by MacLean, in the years at Portree and Mull, have only been examined in general terms, but there were specific political causes for those frustrations. While MacLean could have no straightforward belief in socialism as the remedy of the world's problems, he could have a completely uninhibited fear of the rise of fascism which he observed in Europe from 1933

onwards. Probably his greatest preoccupation, from 1933 to 1945, was his hatred of and opposition to fascism. The advent of the Spanish Civil War, in July 1936, only confirmed his worst fears, that fascism would predominate in Europe, that creed which he regarded as the "denial of all humanity". Jack Stuart, his colleague at Portree Secondary School, wanted to go to Spain to fight with the International Brigade, and asked MacLean to go with him. With his family dependent on his salary, for the education of the younger members, it was impossible for MacLean to agree to this, but had he not been so committed, there is no doubt that he would have fought in Spain. His conduct in the Second World War bears this out.

Contrary to the impression given in some of MacLean's poetry, and by some critics, it is simply not true that MacLean did not go to Spain because of his love for a woman: he did not meet that woman, an Irish woman, until more than a year after the outbreak of the war. There was another woman, a Skye girl, to whom he had been strongly attracted in 1934-35, but the circumstances and his feelings had soon changed. This affair was not intrinsically serious enough to produce that pitch of conflict. In reality, it was outside factors, not internal conflict, which prevented him from fighting in Spain; the decline of his father's business, his mother's illness in 1936 and the need to help his father maintain and educate his younger brothers and sisters were very real, practical circumstances. MacLean's hankering after political action was no doubt symptomatic of a general wish to be politically involved, and, after the summer of 1936, this was compounded by the frustration of wishing to fight in Spain, yet not being able to do so.

The chronology of the poems backs this up: *Dàin do Eimhir* I was written in Raasay in August or September 1930<sup>9</sup>, but the first and last verses were added in December 1939. Although it features in Iain Crichton Smith's *Poems to Eimhir* translations, it has been omitted from *Reothairt is Contraigh*. The girl referred to by the poem is neither of the women mentioned earlier. The line "What do I care for battles of their making" may foreshadow the famous conflict of later poems, but more probably it is simply a statement of the commonplace sentiment that his own feelings are more immediate to him at that moment than problems created by others which the poet feels have nothing to do with him, remembering that many battles are petty affairs which would have been better unfought. Most likely, the girl is a personification of the ideal object of desire, perhaps a symbol of his love for Raasay, for the Western Isles, his love specifically for a people, a culture, a way of life, a language which is disappearing. In this poem, the poet's passion has not yet reached its fiercest pitch, but is still latent, waiting for the right circumstances to bring it into full play. I cannot but see this poem as a description of the scene, a backcloth of landscape for the meditation in 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa' (*Dàin*, IV). 'A Chiall 's a Ghràidh' (*Dàin* II) was written in Edinburgh in 1932. It explores, in abstract form, the conflict between reason and emotion and anticipates the later effect of this conflict on the poet:

is reub e friamh mo chré  
'gam sguabadh leis 'na shiaban.

and it tore the root of my being,  
sweeping me with it in its drift.

The conclusion of the poem, the reconciliation, is too easily achieved, and oddly hopeful for MacLean:

Is thubhairt mo thuigse ri mo ghaol:  
cha dhuinn an dùbailteachd:  
tha 'n coimeasgadh 'sa' ghaol.

And my intellect said to my love:  
duality is not for us;  
we mingle in love.

Perhaps that ending illustrates both the nature and, curiously, the limitation of intellect, which can glibly provide a reconciliation when none is, in reality, possible. In 'Am Buairleadh' (*Dàin*, III) the conflict, or turmoil, is described in much more specific terms, contrasting the poet's response to the suffering of the world, which made less of an emotional impression on him than "The glint / of her smile and golden head", at which his "stubborn heart leaped". The poem ends:

Agus chuir a h-àilleachd sgleò	And her beauty cast a cloud
air bochdainn 's air creuchd sheirbh	over poverty and a bitter wound
agus air saoghal tuigse Leninn,	and over the world of Lenin's intellect,
air fhoighidinn 's air fheirg.	over his patience and his anger.

In this poem, the woman is largely idealized, but at the time of writing (Portree, November or December 1935) he had in mind the Skye girl, who never had reason to suspect that MacLean had a strong, if transient feeling for her. The poem expresses, very dramatically, the obsessive turmoil into which such an experience, and especially an unrequited love, can throw any human being. What MacLean is condemning himself for is the extent to which the turmoil overcomes him, even to the extent of overshadowing his political and moral awareness; in this state he feels, temporarily, that all else is trivial. This is, in fact, not an unusual experience. In the background, heightening both the dramatic tension of the poem and the personal tension of the poet, is the ever-growing influence of fascism in Europe. The Spanish Civil War, of course, cannot figure, since it had not started when the poem was written.

The woman in 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa' (*Dàin*, IV) is an Irish woman whom he met in Edinburgh while attending a Celtic Congress in August 1937. On this occasion, MacLean's passion was certainly stronger, and not at all transient. As with the girl in Portree, she knew nothing whatsoever about MacLean's feeling for her, which he kept to himself because he believed that one of his friends wished to marry her. Therefore, he felt he had no right to interpose his feelings between them. His decision not to act upon his feelings was confirmed by the fact that she seemed to be a pious Catholic, from a pious family, and to be conservative in politics. At the time, during the Spanish Civil War, MacLean was very negative about catholicism because he believed most Catholics were pro-fascist, supporting Franco. As with the first affair, the fact that this also was unrequited served to intensify the emotion felt, if for no other reason than that the affair relies on the imagination of the individual, becoming more urgent and powerful for being unfulfilled and therefore untempered by emotional release in real experience. This is all the more true when the person concerned tends, like MacLean, to be obsessive. Ironically, in December 1939, she married a man who gave up his Jesuitical training and became something of a socialist. This is referred to in the poem 'An Roghainn':

a bheil e fìor gun cual	is it true you heard
thu gu bheil do ghaol geal àlainn	that your beautiful white love
a' pòsadh tràth Di-luain?	is getting married early on Monday?

This poem dates from the summer of 1939, *before* MacLean heard that the wedding was to take place. It reflects on his decision, or choice, not to go to Spain. Because MacLean "followed only a way / that was small, mean, low, dry, lukewarm", because he "did not take a cross's death / in the hard extremity of Spain", he did not deserve "the radiant golden star", that "thunderbolt of love", fit only for those who, unlike him, had a "whole spirit and heart". This is an emotional impasse, a kind of

self-crucifixion, from which he cannot escape. Having admitted to himself that his desire for a woman is greater than his desire to fight for a political ideal, he no longer deserves “the one new prize of fate”, and, in preferring the woman, loses her. In ‘Reic Anama’, MacLean takes his argument one stage further: because the woman he loves has such “grace” and a “proud spirit”, and in spite of her ability to forgive him for committing the “black blasphemy” of selling his soul for her love, she is forced to reject him for it. The remarkable aspect of this poem is its conclusion, in which the poet abandons himself completely to his feelings, even in the knowledge that they are also his doom:

Uime sin, their mi rithist, an dràsda,  
gun reicinn m’ anam air do sgàth-sa  
dà uair, aon uair air son t’ àilleachd  
agus uair eile air son a’ ghràis ud,  
nach gabhadh tu spiorad reicte tràilleil.

Therefore, I will say again now,  
that I would sell my soul for your sake  
twice, once for your beauty  
and again for that grace  
that you would not take a sold and  
slavish spirit.

What emerges from this poem, and others, is that MacLean never quite comes to terms with the strength of his passion. All he can do is abandon himself to it; his intellect is incapable of dealing with it. This is important to remember when considering ‘An Roghainn’ and ‘Urnuigh’, both of which have helped to create the misconception that when confronted by the choice between his love for a woman and the fight in Spain, MacLean chose the former.

In ‘Urnuigh’, the poet scrutinizes his own “half-flayed” nature and concludes that he is condemned to persist as a spirit which is not “one-fold”, that he will never have the purity and heroism of Cornford. In fact, this is purely an idealized conflict. MacLean never had the choice of whether to go to Spain or not: he had to stay to help provide for his family. The conflict is real enough, however, in the poet’s imagination. It lay between his passion for the Irish woman and his political and moral duty as he saw it, remembering that his great political obsession during this period was the need to root out fascism, to oppose it whenever and wherever possible. It was clear to MacLean that if Franco won in Spain, then the way was open to Hitler and Mussolini to mount a fascist take-over of Europe, and that not only Europe, but the new Communist state of the U.S.S.R., about which MacLean was then very hopeful, was endangered. For someone already impelled by natural inclination towards the role of man of action, and one imbued with the traditional Gaelic esteem for heroism as one of the most important and admirable of human qualities, and cowardice, moral or physical, as one of the most despicable vices, the only course was to become directly involved in the Spanish conflict. MacLean is asking himself the hypothetical question: what would I do if I had a clear, free choice between this woman, and fighting in Spain? Being only too aware of the strength of his passion, he fears he might have chosen the woman:

Mo bheatha-sa a’ bheatha bhàsail  
a chionn nach d’ fhail mi cridhe mo  
shàth-ghaoil,  
a chionn gun tug mi gaol àraidh,  
a chionn nach sgarainn do ghràdh-sa  
  
's gum b’ fheàrr liom boireannach  
na ’n Eachdraidh fhàsmhor.

My life the death-like life  
because I have not flayed the heart of my  
fullness of love  
because I have given a particular love,  
because I would not cut away the love  
of you,  
and that I preferred a woman to crescent  
History.

This stance amounts to cowardice, and is morally reprehensible in MacLean's eyes. He acknowledges to himself that there is a real, if hypothetical, conflict there, and that the choice is not one which could be made with a whole heart and mind. There is always the "shadow", the "faintness" which obscures the dictates of the moral intelligence.

MacLean seems to subscribe to Kierkegaard's idea that "purity of heart is to will one thing", in condemning his heart for being "half-flayed" and longing for a unity of reason and emotion, as he concludes in 'Urnuigh':

chan eil mo chaomhachd ris an Nàdur	I do not feel kindly towards Nature,
a thug an tuigse shoilleir shlàn dhomh,	which has given me the clear whole
	understanding,
an eanchainn shingilte 's an cridhe sgàinte.	the single brain and the split heart.

It seems paradoxical that his "clear whole understanding" cannot cope with his emotional passion. It is this conflict, inspired by the Irish woman, which dominates more than half of *Dàin* IV-XXII, written in 1938 and the first half of 1939. These poems are not ordered chronologically.

In 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa', which dates from the spring of 1938, the sheer strength and quality of the poet's passions, the emotional on the one hand, and the political (his anguish in the face of political reality and human suffering) on the other, and the poet's moral sensibility and integrity, force him into making this hypothetical choice and into condemning himself for lack of moral integrity and single-heartedness. No doubt this ruthless morality stems partly from his Free Presbyterian background. The question posed in 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa':

Dé gach cuach de d' chual òr-bhuidh	What every lock of your gold-yellow head
ris gach bochdainn, àmhghar 's dórainn	to all the poverty, anguish and grief
a thig 's a thàinig air sluagh na h-Eòrpa	that will come and have come on Europe's
	people
bho Long nan Daoine gu daors' a'	from the Slave Ship to the slavery of the
mhór-shluaigh?	whole people?

is not answered. But the dramatic, almost flamboyant way in which the question is put, leads one to feel that the poet would, recklessly, value the lock of gold-yellow hair more than the fate of humanity in the grip of fascism. However, what the poem also suggests is that MacLean's depth of feeling for both of these is unquestionable; his political anguish is as ineluctable as his love; but the fact that he can imagine himself in conflict here leads him to condemn himself morally, to suffer guilt at his own weakness and lack of courage. There is, of course, another kind of courage evident here — to take a conflict which is theoretical, not actual, and one which is extremely intimate, and to expose this inner struggle in the public medium of poetry. What emerges clearly is the uncompromising nature of MacLean's moral judgement, in placing himself in such a self-compromising dilemma. Finally, just as the conflict is idealized, we cannot assume that the object of MacLean's passion is anything other than idealized also. In a real sense, it does not matter which real woman the poet has in mind. Summing up this period, MacLean has said:

From 1936 to 1939 I became, if a poet, a very different one from what my pre-1936 writings indicated. My mother's long illness in 1936, its recurrence in 1938, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the progressive decline of my father's business in the thirties, my meeting with an Irish girl in 1937, my rash leaving of Skye for Mull late in 1937, and Munich in 1938, and always the



steady unbearable decline of Gaelic, made those years for me of difficult choice, and the tensions of these years confirmed my self-expression in poetry, not in action.<sup>2</sup>

Although MacLean had to suffer the frustration of not being able, for the reasons outlined earlier, to develop a relationship with the Irish woman, the experience was, on the whole, an inspiring and happy one. Years later, MacLean described her as being “as noble hearted as she is beautiful”. Much less happy, however, was the experience he had with the Scottish woman, whom he had met briefly when she was in her teens, then again in Edinburgh in 1939. In August or September, 1939, he began to feel strongly attracted to her, and by December 1939 had committed himself by declaring his love for her. Her response gave him to understand that because of an operation she had been left incapable of enjoying a full relationship with a man. This took MacLean by storm. Having declared his feeling for her, he could do nothing but have the most passionate sympathy for her, being acutely aware of what he saw as her tragedy, and, ultimately, his also. Her subsequent confessions to him that their friendship served as a deterrent to suicide only increased his sympathy and feeling of responsibility towards her. This, and the difference between her situation and that of the Irish woman, is clearly described in ‘An Dithis’:

Tha sinn còmhla, a ghaoil,  
leinn fhìn ann an Dùn-éideann,  
is t’ aodann suaimhneach còir  
a’ falach leòn do chreuchdan.  
Tha agamsa mar chuibhrionn dhìot  
ceann grinn is colainn reubte.

We are together, dear,  
alone in Edinburgh  
and your serene kind face  
hides the hurt of your wounds.  
I have as my share of you  
a beautiful head and a torn body.

Is beag mo thruaighe-sa a nochd  
seach olc do cholainn creuchdaich,  
ach le do thruaighe-sa tha m’ ghaol  
air dhol ‘na chaoir ghil leumraich,  
a’ losgadh am bruillean mo chinn  
mo chuimhne air an tèile,  
air té nas rathaile ‘s nas bòidhche  
‘s i pòsda thall an Eirinn.

My misery is small tonight  
beside the evil of your wounded body,  
but with your misery my love  
turns to white leaping flame,  
burning in the turmoil of my head  
my memory of the other,  
of a more fortunate and more lovely one  
who is married over in Ireland.

This predicament heralded what MacLean later described as two years of tragedy and it accounts for the tragic note of the poems in that section of *Reothairt is Contraigh* called ‘The Haunted Ebb’, stemming from the period from December 1939, when he learned of her situation, until August 1941. The woman who figures in these poems is the Scottish woman.

MacLean came to Edinburgh in January 1939 partly because he knew the war was coming and wanted to spend the remaining time there, in closer contact with national and political events. Also, he had the chance of a post at Boroughmuir High School, which had the full range of secondary teaching, from the first year to sixth year, and could offer greater scope than Tobermory, which had only first year to third year. For a few months, MacLean lived an isolated life in digs in Polwarth, but before long, he fell in again with Robert Garioch, whom he had first met during his undergraduate years at university. Garioch invited him along to weekly meetings in the Abbotsford Bar in Rose Street, where a number of poets met, including Sydney Goodsir Smith. MacLean and Smith soon became very friendly, as did MacLean

and Garioch. MacLean held both men in great esteem: Smith for his intelligence and range of humour from rapier wit to sheer buffoonery, which he enjoyed for its own sake, and Garioch for his quieter, more intellectual wit. MacLean and Garioch began their collaboration on *Seventeen Poems for Sixpence*, which Garioch printed on his hand press, and which first appeared in January 1940. It contained eight poems by MacLean: four later published in *Dàin do Eimhir*, as nos. III, IV, XIV and XXIX ('Am Buairadh', 'Gaoir na h-Eòrpa', 'Reic Anama' and 'Coin is Madaidhean-allaidh'), a section from 'An Cuilithionn' and three other poems ('A' Chorra-ghridheach', 'Trì Slighean', dedicated to Hugh MacDiarmid, and 'An t-Eilean'). Garioch's work was represented by six poems in Scots, two in English, and a translation into Scots of *Dàin*, III, 'Am Buairadh':

I never kent sic glaumeric  
nor stauchert frae sae stark a stound  
at thocht of Christ's dule on the yird  
or millions of the mappamound.

I hae taen nae sic thocht of haiveral dreams,  
mirk-wrocht mirligoes of gleid  
as my dour hert hankert for the smool  
of her smile, and the glint of her gowden heid.

The shadow frae her beauty lay  
owre puirtith and a waesom scauth,  
and the warld of Lenin's intellect,  
his pouer of patience and his wrath.

A second, corrected edition, appeared a couple of months later. The review of this volume in *New Alliance*, June/July 1940, hailed it in positive, if cautious terms: "One would like to think that this is an epoch-making book; it is certainly a very admirable and pleasant one".

'An Cuilithionn', which MacLean began writing in Edinburgh in the Spring of 1939, stemmed from an idea which he had had the previous year in Mull of writing "a very long poem, 10,000 words or so, on the human condition, radiating from the history of Skye to the West Highlands to Europe and what I knew of the rest of the world".<sup>2</sup> The poem ranged from "the most direct political utterance to varying degrees of symbolism".<sup>20</sup> Being an extended lyric, it was undoubtedly inspired by the structure of *A Drunk Man*, and this was one of the reasons why MacLean dedicated it to MacDiarmid. But MacLean was never happy with the way 'An Cuilithionn' was developing. To MacDiarmid, he described it as

a crude, declamatory poem but certain passages manage to sound fairly well in Gaelic. (In translation) the crudity is painfully apparent and such few graces as it has in the Gaelic are conspicuously absent.<sup>21</sup>

The 'crudity' lay partly in the political statements made, some of which were too optimistic or propagandist for MacLean to support for long, in the symbolism itself and in the rather cumbersome nature of the poem's intellectual content. The war prevented him from publishing what there was of it, and by the end of the war he had lost his respect for the Soviet Union, and no longer wanted it published. MacLean stopped writing the poem abruptly when the affair with the Scottish woman turned

into a traumatic experience, after her confessions in December 1939, and instead began the series of lyrics in 'The Haunted Ebb'. MacLean's reservations apart, the published fragments show that 'An Cuilithionn' was by no means a total failure.

September 1939, of course, saw the beginning of the Second World War, and MacLean lost no time in applying to join the army, but, as a volunteer, he would have lost all his teaching salary. This would have affected his family, whom he was still helping to support, so he waited until he was conscripted in September 1940, when he was enlisted in the Signals Corps. In the meantime, he was able to contribute to the war effort by teaching evacuees in Hawick, between October 1939 and June 1940. At last, he had the chance to fight the fascism which he had opposed for years, but his reasons for joining up were double-edged, as he explained to Douglas Young:

I always knew he (Hitler) would attack Russia and that was my main reason for wanting to join up in September 1939 and my acquiescence in my own conscription in September 1940.<sup>22</sup>

Not that the state of affairs in the U.S.S.R. provided much ground for hope, as he earlier commented to Young, "putting it bluntly, I think that all we can hope for is that people like the Scots do the best that is left for themselves in a very bad world".<sup>23</sup> That world, for MacLean, included both Stalin and the state of Western Capitalism. No doubt MacLean would agree with C. S. Lewis when he said that in the Second World War we were simply defending the bad against the worse. In the same letter to Young, MacLean expresses his fear of the "humanist core" of socialism and communism in using systems for military purposes. The difference between communism and capitalism seemed to him to be that the aims of communism were "less ignoble than the real capitalist aims". MacLean's position on the war is best expressed in a letter to MacDiarmid written from Catterick Camp, Yorkshire, where MacLean did much of his army training:

My fear and hatred of the Nazis (is) even more than my hatred of the English Empire. My only hope is that the British and German Empires will exhaust each other and leave the Soviet the dominating influence on the oppressed people of all Europe including Britain and Germany . . . The only real war is the class war and I see my own little part merely as one that contributes to the mutual exhaustion of the British and German Empires. I support the British Empire because it is the weakest and therefore not as great a threat to Europe and the rest of the world as a German victory.<sup>24</sup>

For MacLean, then, the U.S.S.R. was the "greatest, perhaps the only hope of Europe's working classes", but he could not entertain much hope, even in ordinary people:

I know all this sounds fantastic when I look round here and see the vile, cast iron, bourgeois class rule in the British army and I am full of despair when I see here how very willing great masses of humanity are to be slaves if that serves their immediate private interests. When I consider N.C.O.'s as a class I am filled with complete despair. The content and willing slave is the base of everything.<sup>25</sup>

MacLean's pessimism in respect of his faith in human nature was deepened by the war, and afterwards, events in Poland in 1944 led him to abandon all hope in the

U.S.S.R. as the potential saviour of Europe's working classes and all hope in the Communist Party in general. This abandonment MacLean traces to a long conversation he had in 1944 with Sydney Goodsir Smith, in which Smith, after long and ruthless argumentation, convinced MacLean of the need to turn against the Soviets because of their behaviour towards the Polish people in particular. In 1946 MacLean admitted to MacDiarmid that he was "utterly at sea in politics these days, having for the past year, or even year and a half, come to the conclusion that the Communist Party is no use for me"; he added that he had been "shaken by the Polish rising" and had gone back to "social democracy and swithering between Labour and S.N.P."<sup>26</sup>

Supporting the British Empire and Western Capitalism did not come easily to MacLean. With people whom he respected, like Douglas Young and George Campbell Hay resisting the authorities by refusing, as political objectors, to participate in the war effort, MacLean could not help but feel in conflict about his position, although intellectually he was quite clear about where he stood. He found it profoundly discomfiting that he enjoyed "the advantage of having all the scabs, liars and humbugs on my side".<sup>27</sup> He had no faith in the political judgement of those "damned fools" in the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party who claimed that the war had nothing to do with Scotland. That contempt extended to writers like Auden, whom he attacks for "saving his art" in America. However, he found it hard to condemn Young for his attitude, mistaken though he believed it to be:

Still, with one of us in gaol and the other in the front line, I think we are in the only really honourable places a man can be in a war!<sup>28</sup>

On joining up in 1940, MacLean was sent to Catterick in Yorkshire for military training, from which, he admits, he benefited by becoming physically fit; and in many ways he found army life not so intolerable as one might have expected. In October 1940 he wrote to Young that here he was a 'unit' of the British forces and reacting not at all as expected; he "liked the rude physical exertion and the feeling of becoming fit and hardy in body". The lack of privacy seemed not to bother him, as he wrote: "I have, I think, the capacity of covering myself with a tough shell". He also escaped the kind of victimization many suffer in the army because

probably being a little tough I am not a subject for ragging of any kind, but I could imagine a more sensitive person having a bad time.<sup>29</sup>

He did have time in the evenings for reading and writing letters, but little poetry was written during this period, chiefly because of the effects of the affair with the Scottish girl. At one point he tried to learn Greek, but had only a limited success, admitting ruefully to Young, "I am not a facile linguist".<sup>30</sup> At least army training allowed him to "clear my system of complications in private life".<sup>31</sup>

MacLean made that statement in a letter to Young in December 1941 and, while it is no doubt true up to a point, it belies the reality that between December 1939 and August 1941 MacLean was suffering a great spiritual and emotional crisis. The army may have helped to take his mind off the situation, but he continued to be profoundly affected by it. In December 1940, he wrote to Young:

I talked to you of feeling my private affairs irreparably gone wrong but don't be alarmed about that. That has been my normal condition for a few years now. It is merely due to an obsession with a woman and regrets I cannot overcome. I

am afraid that I am one of those weaklings who have one love affair that upsets their whole lives. No doubt many a bourgeois philistine is in the same predicament . . .<sup>32</sup>

Here MacLean was, despite being still very much in the throes of the 'predicament', trying to make light of it to Young. Looking at this period in retrospect, in November 1941, he was able to be more straightforward, although he never disclosed the cause of the crisis, and said that he had suffered an experience which

has nearly driven me mad and not until July of this year did I become anything like normal and even yet I have very frequent moods that approach the suicidal . . . That explains the relative drought of my poetry from the early months of 1940 until July of this year. Had it not been that now and again I had moments free from the terrible fears which I had I could not have written anything . . . but these moments of freedom were very rare, whether I was alone or in company.<sup>33</sup>

In January 1941, he had written to Young that he was "very well physically, not so well mentally, and poetically quite dead".<sup>34</sup> By August of that year, he was saying that his poetry was recovering from a year's blight and by November that he had never been more full of poetic ideas, but these came to nothing because he could not concentrate and the ideas never had the chance to simmer. Finally, in December 1941, he was sent to Egypt on active service.

Gradually, while in Egypt, MacLean's state of mind improved, and he began to achieve a greater degree of serenity of mind. His mind turned to the war itself and the ordinary people caught up in it. In 1940, he had written to Young:

For the ordinary man, workers or petty bourgeois, who does not mind whether he can express himself or not, I think fascism or ordinary capitalist conditions make little difference and now when things like Coventry and Hamburg are the rule, I feel for him, whether workers or petty bourgeois, with a sympathy I never before had.<sup>35</sup>

In Egypt, he became concerned with the plight of the ordinary soldier, irrespective of nationality, forced to fight in a war the origins of which were so remote from him and outwith his control. In October 1942, he wrote to Young about the first dead man he came across, who was a young German boy. Seeing his inglorious death made him ashamed of his "many foolish generalizations" about the need to wipe out fascists, and he realised that the ordinary soldier is not "any kind of an 'ist' at all". This experience gave rise to one of MacLean's finest war poems, 'Glac a' Bhàis':

An robh an gille air an dream  
a mhàb na h-Iùdhaich  
's na Comunnaich, no air an dream  
bu mhotha, dhiubh-san

Was the boy of the band  
who abused the Jews  
and Communists, or of the greater  
band of those

a threòraicheadh bho thoiseach àl  
gun deòin gu buaireadh  
agus bruailean cuthaich gach blàir  
air sgàth uachdaran?

led, from the beginning of generations,  
unwillingly to the trial  
and mad delirium of every war  
for the sake of rulers?

Ge b'è a dheòin-san no a chàs,  
a neoichiontas no mhiorun,

Whatever his desire or mishap,  
his innocence or malignity,

cha do nochd e toileachadh 'na bhàs  
fo Dhruim Ruidhiseit.

he showed no pleasure in his death  
below the Ruweisat Ridge.

Both MacLean and his fellow Scot, Hamish Henderson, have contributed greatly to the body of twentieth-century poetry which exposes war for the ghastly, inhuman thing it is.

In order to understand MacLean's spiritual and emotional state during 1942, and to see its effects on his poetry, it is necessary to examine his affair with the Scottish girl, since this was probably the most important factor during these years, no matter how much military drilling or the experience of active service may have helped to divert MacLean's attention from it. MacLean has never been a habitual writer, but his poetry has almost entirely been inspired by some emotional crisis. That precipitated by the Scottish girl was the most remarkable of all. During the last three months of 1939, MacLean wrote *Dàin do Eimhir*, XXIII-XXXVI, which are arranged chronologically, as are all the poems subsequently, plus a substantial part of 'An Cuilithionn'. The trauma which followed the Scottish girl's disclosure of her medical state late in December 1939 caused the writing of 'An Cuilithionn' to stop abruptly and another set of the *Dàin do Eimhir* poems began. By March 1940, MacLean had written *Dàin do Eimhir*, nos. XXXVII-LV and by spring or summer had completed 'Coilltean Ratharsair' (which superseded 'An Cuilithionn'); after that, no more poems were written for a year until late June and early July 1941, when he wrote *Dain* LVI-LX.

The woman referred to or addressed in these poems (chiefly those of 'The Haunted Ebb' section of *Reothairt is Contraigh*) variously combines with an ideal of Scotland or the Scottish Muse. But some of the poems refer directly to the girl and, bearing in mind the tragedy which seemed to have befallen her, certain symbols and images in MacLean's poetry of that period become clear: the "mutilated body" of 'Uilleam Ros is Mi Fhìn'; the obsessive love from which he cannot escape in 'An Tathaich'; the idea of drowning in sharpness and the "power of mutilation" in 'Crionnachd'; the "golden banner" laid to the ground in 'Aithreachas'; the cutting symbolism in 'An Sgian' and the "grey stake of misfortune" in 'Camhanaich'. One of the most direct references is in the short poem, 'Muir-tràigh':

Chan eil mi strì ris a' chraoibh nach	I am not striving with the tree that will not
lùb rium	bend for me,
's cha chinn na h-ùbhlan air géig	and the apples will not grow on any
seach geug:	branch;
cha shoraidh slàn leat, cha d' rinn	it is not farewell to you; you have
thu m' fhàgail:	not left me.
's e tràigh a' bhàis i gun mhuir-làn	It is the ebb of death with no floodtide
'na déidh.	after it.

Marbh-struth na conntraigh 'nad	Dead stream of neap in your tortured
chom ciùrrte	body
nach lion ri gealaich ùir no làn,	which will not flow at new moon or at full,
anns nach tig reothairt mhór an t-sùgraidh	in which the great springtide of love
	will not come -
ach sioladh dùbailt gu muir-tràigh.	but a double subsidence to lowest ebb.

One of the remarkable features of this sequence of poems is the astonishing emotional range and the subtlety with which this range is perceived. Despite the tragedy, there are defiant moments: for example, in 'Am Boilseabhach', "I would

proclaim you queen of Scotland/in spite of the new republic", or in 'Fo Sheòl', where the poet's feeling is suffused with memories from previous times.

The two years of tragedy gave way to two years of perplexity when, late in July 1941, MacLean was led to discount what he had earlier believed, and was told a story which seemed very different from the previous one. At first his response was one of bewilderment, but gradually out of that perplexity emerged a strong feeling of anger at his own quixotic folly. This discovery put an end to the poetic blight, and in 1942-43 he wrote a good deal about the affair seen in retrospect, most of which has not been published. However, the experience changed him: his writings after 1942 have a world-weary air, as if he has suffered a loss of primal innocence, or an expulsion from Eden into a rather sordid wilderness. It also turned him against his own poetry, as he confessed to MacDiarmid in a letter which shows that he was still not at peace because of his private life, even in 1942:

I have probably increased in wisdom and honesty with myself but I think it will be many years before I can make poetry out of that and nowadays I am always finding my own stuff false, shallow and meretricious and frequently I question the value of most poetry.<sup>37</sup>

At that time, while he was in Egypt in 1942, there was no shortage of ideas for poetry, but he lacked faith in and enthusiasm for their realization and was becoming more impatient with certain aspects of his own character. For example, he felt himself lacking in discipline, tending to waste time and devoid of any habits of intellectual organisation and economy. These tensions emerge in his letter to MacDiarmid, written in March 1942:

I am again pretty full of poetic ideas and rhythms but the nature of my duties precludes my having the time to let poetic ideas simmer and take shape. I always hanker after a restrained, calm manner that would express depth and not fire, a manner that would belie an intensity of matter, something that would suggest or be in the same way like the greatest art of Mozart and of the MacCrimmons, and I look with disgust at much of my own too patent subjectivity. But of course, all art is subjective; the problem is to camouflage the subjectivity so that it doesn't offend others, to become universal or apparently universal in one's subjectivity. . . . I try to avoid writing anything now as it reminds me of the *joie-de-vivre* I had during the last two months of 1939, and makes me feel that all my best stuff is the product of a drunkenness that won't return and that if I can write any more it will only be the dreich poetry of 'wisdom'. I liked my drunken idolatry.<sup>38</sup>

In October of the same year he writes that he is filled with "shame and disgust" when he thinks about his own poetry, which is "only rarely". Indeed, so completely did he turn against his own poetry that it spilled over to affect his appreciation of other poets. Donne, whom he had greatly liked, appeared to him now as aridly intellectual; and Shakespeare, whom he had described one year earlier as one of the greatest English poets, became a "sycophantic bugger";<sup>39</sup> and instead of Shakespeare's sonnets, which he acknowledges as one of the most important English influences on his work, being uppermost in his mind, it was Shakespeare's "very limited humanity" and his "private faults of toadyism"<sup>40</sup> which dominated.

Most moving of all of his writing from this period, and the most effective summary of MacLean's feelings about himself and his poetry is the following declaration

which he made to MacDiarmid, probably in February 1942:

I have not done anything since September or October and I know now that, if I am ever to write any more verse, it will be very different from what I have written, that it must be less subjective, more thoughtful, less content with its own music, and above all that I must transcend the shameful weakness of petty egoism and doubts and lack of single-mindedness that now disquiets me in much of my own stuff. Terrible things happened to me between 1939 and 1941 and my own poetry was a desperate effort to overcome them and that left its marks. But now I think I have overcome all that and if I survive this fracas, I will certainly cut away everything that deters me from a complete devotion to my political beliefs, which are now more uncompromising and far more single-minded than ever. I shall try to do what I can to follow as closely after your single-mindedness and dis-interestedness in those two things as I can.<sup>41</sup>

So the effects of the disastrous affair with the Scottish woman permeated all aspects of MacLean's life, turning him against poetry, and making him indifferent as to whether he survived the war. For four years of his life, he was in love with, or obsessed by this woman, and unable to form a serious relationship with any other. It was not until 1945, when he visited the Irish woman in Dublin, that he completely overcame his obsession. Simply being with the Irish woman, who was spiritually far superior to the other, and her husband and three children, had the purgative effect of exorcizing him of the obsession. The Irish woman, however, knew nothing of this, nor of how, eight years earlier, MacLean had entertained such feelings for her, feelings which had achieved such remarkable expression in his poetry.

MacLean may have had a premonition, in September 1939, that he would survive the war, but he almost did not, being wounded three times. The third time, on 2 November 1942, during the Battle of El Alamein, MacLean was seriously injured when a land mine exploded near him and many of the bones in his feet and heels were broken. The following nine months were spent recovering gradually in military hospitals, which at least afforded him plenty time for reading and writing, until his discharge from Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, in August 1943.

It is ironic that MacLean should have turned against his own poetry at a time when, at the insistence of Douglas Young, a volume of his poetry, his first solo publication, was in preparation. A good deal of the correspondence between MacLean and Young is concerned with the arrangements for the publication of MacLean's book, which finally appeared in November 1943 under the title *Dàin do Eimhir agus Dàin Eile*. MacLean was extremely grateful to Young, whose belief in MacLean as a poet was such that he would spare no effort to try to help him and to bring his work to public notice. MacLean also had great admiration for Young, whom he describes as being "of an aristocratic mind and temperament", more so than anyone else he knew. Yet, although they agreed about much, MacLean never felt with Young the same sense of "political kinship", that "intimate feeling of closeness politically" that he felt for MacDiarmid and Muir. MacLean also felt a gap between himself and George Davie and George Campbell Hay, men he liked and respected immensely, but neither of whom, he believed at the time, had "experienced poverty or nearness to it". He explains his reaction further in a letter to Douglas Young:

Why do I immediately sense a sort of political kinship with people as different as Muir and Grieve, but not with you, Davie, Deorsa etc. I think it is a class



question. Neither you, nor Davie nor Deorsa nor Robert MacIntyre are really of my 'class' and hence I have never immediately felt that intimate feeling of closeness politically with you . . . though probably I should intellectually agree less with either Muir or Grieve on most questions than I would with you.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from helping to organize the publication of *Dàin do Eimhir*, Douglas Young had also published in 1943 a volume of poems entitled *Auntran Blads*, containing several translations into Scots of MacLean's poems and dedicated to MacLean and George Campbell Hay. Here is Young's translation of *Dàin do Eimhir*, XXXIV:

When I am talkan o the face and natur  
and the whyte spreit o ma whyte dear cratur,  
ye'd aiblins say I'd never seen  
the muckle mire wi ma blind cen,  
thon hideous flow, reid and broun,  
whaur the bourgeoisie slounge and droun.

But I hac seen frae the Cuillin's hicht  
baith shitten puirtith and glory licht;  
I've seen the sun's gowden glitter  
and the black moss o soss and skitter,  
I ken the ingyne's wersh smert  
mair nor the gley delyte o the hert.

In 1944, MacLean met Renee Cameron, to whom he was immediately attracted, but history repeated itself in that he was led, quite mistakenly, to believe her to be engaged to a man he knew. Not until a year later did MacLean learn of his mistake, and their marriage took place on 24 July 1946. MacLean's happiness and the peace of mind which he derived from this relationship are evident in the poems 'Lights' and 'A Girl and Old Songs', both clearly written with Renee Cameron in mind.

When MacLean was formally discharged from military service, he returned to teaching, first of all at Boroughmuir in Edinburgh where, in 1947, he was promoted to the position of Principal Teacher of English. He remained at Boroughmuir until 1956, and would have been content to stay there indefinitely, because he was happy in the school, and extremely fond of the pupils there. However, he longed to return to the Highlands, to be again part of a Gaelic-speaking community. The easiest way to do so was to seek promotion. In 1956 he was appointed Headmaster of Plockton Secondary School in Wester Ross, where he remained until his retirement in 1972.

Although MacLean came to like teaching, it had certain drawbacks as an occupation. There were also advantages in that it took him out of himself and hardened him to a certain extent. It also enabled him to work with literature, although there was, for him as for all teachers, the danger of a coarsened sensibility because of having to work at such a low level. However, teaching demands a high level of nervous energy which is constantly expended in order to keep discipline, even with the best behaved pupils. MacLean found that teaching took a great deal out of him, leaving him desperately tired in the evening. Another difficult problem for him was the necessity of teaching to an exam syllabus, which demands restricting the material taught to a fairly narrow field, especially for the less able pupils. At Plockton, the size and location of the school meant that MacLean was constantly searching for new teachers and for accommodation for them. MacLean had to make

up for the frequent vacancies or absences in the staff by teaching a large part of the curriculum himself in order to fill in the gaps. This left the normal administrative duties of a headmaster to be done in his own time at home in the evening, in addition to the teacher's normal burden of evening correction. What he had initially thought would be a less onerous post — being Headmaster at Plockton instead of Head of English at Boroughmuir — turned out to be not so at all.

The decline of Gaelic has always profoundly disturbed MacLean, and teaching in Plockton brought him face to face with the problem. The situation of Gaelic, as he saw it, is summarized in a letter to Douglas Young:

The whole prospect of Gaelic appals me, the more I think of the difficulties and the likelihood of its extinction in a generation or two. A highly inflected language with a ridiculous (because etymological) spelling, no modern prose of any account, no philosophical or technical vocabulary to speak of, no correct usage except among old people and a few university students, colloquially full of gross English idiom lately taken over, exact shades of meanings of most words not to be found in any of its dictionaries and dialectically varying enormously (what chance of the appreciation of the overtones of poetry, except among a handful?) Above all, all economic, social and political factors working against it and, with that, the notorious moral cowardice of the Highlanders themselves . . .<sup>43</sup>

This illustrates another facet of MacLean's character: a ruthless realism coupled with a willingness to fight on the losing side. Despite this knowledge, MacLean used his influence as headmaster to push for the establishment of a Learners' paper in the Scottish Certificate of Education examinations. This aspect of MacLean's work is considered in detail by Aonghas MacNeacail in this volume.

It was inevitable that his poetry would suffer. MacLean now had a wife and three daughters to support, and the necessity of teaching meant that he had little energy left to write in the years 1943-72. Even week-ends did not provide much respite, because it would usually take until Sunday for new ideas to come and he would rarely find time to write them down before Monday morning destroyed the beginnings of creative activity and the possibility of intellectual continuity. MacLean concludes his autobiographical essay in *Chapman 16* by referring to this problem:

Some say that the habit of writing grows on one and that, once it is formed, it is not easy to eradicate. That may be true of most writers, but I think its truth depends on the chances of life. The chances are very much against the twentieth century Gael, who has always to make a living in other ways, and too often he has to do it by what must be one of the most exhausting of all ways, school teaching.

Despite the rigours of teaching, however, MacLean did write some extremely fine poems during this period, although not, one suspects, as many as he might have done in other circumstances. Among these is the wonderful 'Hallaig' which first appeared in 1954, and which encapsulates the history and situation of the Gaelic people. As John MacInnes writes:

The Gaelic sense of landscape, idealized in terms of society, and the Romantic sense of communism with Nature merge in a single vision, a unified sensibility.

'Hallaig' synthesises the manifold variety of the modern Gaelic mind — a poem both sophisticated and simple and innocent.<sup>44</sup>

As well as 'Hallaig', the sixties saw the composition of 'Am Botal Briste', 'Curaidhean', 'Eadh is Féin is Sàr-Fhéin', 'Palach', 'Dà Dhòmhnallach', and the very moving 'Cumha Chaluim Iain Mhic Gill-Eain'. In the 1970s MacLean was mainly writing longer poems: 'Uamha 'n Òir'<sup>45</sup> and 'Screapadal'.<sup>46</sup> Both poems, but especially the former, show that MacLean still has great poetic power.

The publication of *Four Points of a Saltire* and *Lines Review 34* in 1970 heralded a new era for MacLean whose poetry, always appreciated by those closely involved in Scottish literature, suddenly became more widely available and much more widely appreciated. In 1971, a volume of translations by Iain Crichton Smith entitled *Poems to Eimhir* appeared which greatly increased the quantity of MacLean's work available in English. Cuthbert Graham, reviewing this volume for the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, wrote that these poems express "personal misery transmuted here into poetry of compelling power and exactitude of utterance".<sup>47</sup> He also quotes Iain Crichton Smith's statement that MacLean has opened "Gaelic poetry out to the world beyond purely parochial boundaries".<sup>48</sup> In 1973, Claddagh Records produced *Barran agus Asbhuaib, Poems by Sorley MacLean read by himself*. Accompanying the record was a text of the poetry in both Gaelic and English, and notes by Iain Crichton Smith in both Gaelic and English (with an Irish translation by Máirtín Ó Direáin). The production of this record occasioned the article by Iain Crichton Smith which appeared shortly after in the *Glasgow Herald*, in which Smith explains the quality of MacLean's poetry in this way:

It is the work of the whole man, exposed, suffering, joyous, often in despair. But, more than that, this joy and despair, this turmoil has been transformed into art and therefore does not remain a brutal residue to poison the psyche but it is truly out there for others to use. It is this final triumph that one salutes.<sup>49</sup>

However successful MacLean's work seemed to have become, the problems inherent in being a Gaelic poet remained even in the 1970s. 'Uamha 'n Òir' was published in English translation, but the Gaelic original remained unpublished, and MacLean himself felt that no-one would want to publish it without the English version. Luckily, *Chapman 15* published the poem in its Gaelic entirety (the English version was later published in *Chapman 30*). Most satisfying of all for MacLean was the appearance of *Reothairt is Contraigh, Spring Tide and Neap Tide, Selected Poems 1932-72* in 1977. This was extremely well received and widely reviewed. The reviews, which varied considerably in quality, are probably best summed up by Iain Crichton Smith:

When confronted by this kind of poetry, one can only marvel that it exists: criticism seems impertinent since there is so little to criticise. For this poetry is not simply verbalization: it is both words and music together, it is what one wants poetry to be.<sup>49</sup>

In the last ten years, MacLean's presence has been increasingly in demand at poetry readings and conferences all over Scotland and Ireland. Recognition of his work has spread to Europe, North America and England. In 1973, he began two years as Creative Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University, and from 1975-6 was Filidh at Sabhal Mór Ostaig, the Gaelic College in Skye. He has been awarded

Honorary Degrees by three universities: Dundee in 1972, the National University of Ireland in 1979, and Edinburgh University in 1980. The first Cambridge International Festival was an important event for MacLean. I was fortunate enough to be present at his first reading. The audience was packed by people who had come not to hear him, but other, better known, English poets. The entire company was astounded by his poetry, the like of which they had never heard before, despite the language difference. Unlike many poetry gatherings, the atmosphere was electrifying; the readings he gave were certainly the high point of the festival. MacDiarmid expressed his opinion of MacLean's status as a poet in a letter written the year before he died:

You (MacLean) have always been over-indulgent about my poetry and too modest about your own. There is, I think, no doubt about you and I being the two best poets in Scotland . . . By definition, every good poet has something that is *sui generis* — something that is his alone and couldn't be done by anyone else. Like can only be compared with like. Your work and mine is utterly different, so it is rubbish to say . . . which of us is greater.<sup>50</sup>

MacLean's poetry undoubtedly ranks among the best in modern Europe because of the unrestrained and fearless passion with which he greets every experience, from the most obviously significant to the most apparently trivial. In it a remarkable human being opens the most intimate aspects of his nature to ruthless moral scrutiny, to an extent which even most poets fail to achieve. Here we see the anguish and the joy of an individual whose sensibility responds on a universal level to all the important issues of modern humanity with an understanding which stems from an awareness of the history of his own people and people everywhere. It is outstanding on account of its intellectual and emotional range, its combination of emotional sensitivity and rigorous intellectuality in a uniquely Gaelic synthesis.

It is somehow characteristic of the man that one of the deepest satisfactions of this past decade for him is the development of his daughters, Catriona and Ishbel into fine Gaelic traditional singers, and Mary into an artist.

Although now compelled not to undertake too much work, MacLean leads a very hectic life, between conferences, poetry readings and festivals; but even now, in his seventies, he is continuing to write poetry.

JOY HENDRY

#### NOTES

1. John MacInnes, "A Radically Traditional Voice", *Cencrastus*, 7, Winter 1981-82, p.14.
2. "On Poetry and the Muse", *Chapman*, 16, Summer 1976.
3. Angus Nicolson, "An Interview with Sorley MacLean", *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 14, 1979.
4. Catalogue to National Library of Scotland exhibition on Sorley MacLean, 1981, p.14.
5. John MacInnes, "Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig', a note", *Calgacus*, 2, 1975.

6. Letter from Sorley MacLean to Hugh MacDiarmid, 25 May 1940, Edinburgh University Library (E.U.L.).
7. "An Interview with Sorley MacLean", *op. cit.*
8. Letter from Sorley MacLean to Hugh MacDiarmid, 8 Feb. 1935, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
9. Letter from Sorley MacLean to Hugh MacDiarmid, undated, 1935, *ibid.*
10. Letter to MacDiarmid, 13 June 1935, *ibid.*
11. Letter to MacDiarmid, 4 Jan. 1935, *ibid.*
12. Letter to MacDiarmid, 20 Dec. 1936, *ibid.*
13. Letter to MacDiarmid, 8 Nov. 1937, *ibid.*
14. Sorley MacLean, "Poetry, Passion and Political Consciousness", *Scottish International*, 10, May 1970, p.14.
15. Letter to MacDiarmid, 25 May 1940, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
16. Letter to MacDiarmid, undated, *ibid.*
17. Letter from Sorley MacLean to Douglas Young, 23 Nov. 1940, National Library of Scotland (N.L.S.), Acc. 6419.
18. Letter to Young, 7 Sept. 1941, *ibid.*
19. Letter to Young, 11 Sept. 1941, *ibid.*
20. Letter to MacDiarmid, 10 Jan. 1940, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
21. Letter to MacDiarmid, 12 May 1940, *ibid.*
22. Letter to Young, 11 Sept. 1941, N.L.S., *loc. cit.*
23. Letter to Young, 6 Dec. 1940, *ibid.*
24. Letter to MacDiarmid, 8 Mar. 1941, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
25. Letter to Young, 27 Oct. 1940, N.L.S., *loc. cit.*
26. Letter to MacDiarmid, 16 Jan. 1946, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
27. Letter to Young, 25 May 1941, N.L.S., *loc. cit.*
28. Letter to Young, 6 Oct. 1942, *ibid.*
29. Letter to Young, 1 Oct. 1940, *ibid.*
30. Letter to Young, 14 June 1941, *ibid.*
31. Letter to Young, 18 Dec. 1941, *ibid.*
32. Letter to Young, 6 Dec. 1940, *ibid.*
33. Letter to Young, 9 Nov. 1941, *ibid.*
34. Letter to Young, 11 Jan. 1941, *ibid.*
35. Letter to Young, 6 Dec. 1940, *ibid.*
36. Letter to Young, 27 Oct. 1942, *ibid.*
37. Letter to MacDiarmid, 15 Mar. 1942, E.U.L. *loc. cit.*
38. Letter to MacDiarmid, 30 Mar. 1942, *ibid.*
39. Letter to Young, 6 Oct. 1942, N.L.S., *loc. cit.*
40. Letter to Young, 27 Oct. 1942, *ibid.*
41. Letter to MacDiarmid, 23 Feb. 1942 (date uncertain), E.U.L., *loc. cit.*
42. Letter to Young, 11 Sept. 1941, N.L.S., *loc. cit.*
43. Letter to Young, 15 June 1943, *ibid.*
44. "Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig', a note", *op. cit.*
45. *Chapman*, 15, Spring 1976.
46. *Cenrastus*, 7, *op. cit.*
47. Cuthbert Graham, "Poems to Eimhir", *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 11 Sept. 1971.

48. *Poems to Eimhir*, translated by Iain Crichton Smith, Northern House, Newcastle on Tyne, 1971.
49. Iain Crichton Smith, "Major Gaelic Poet in a European Context", *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Oct. 1973.
50. Iain Crichton Smith, Review of *Reothairt is Contraigh*, *Glasgow Herald*, 21 April 1977.
51. Letter from Hugh MacDiarmid to Sorley MacLean, 27 Jan. 1977, E.U.L., *loc. cit.*