

## Freedom from judgement above? Predestination and Cultural Trauma in Scottish Gaelic Poetry of World War I

*Peter Mackay*

The first anthology of poetry from the Isle of Lewis, *Bàrdachd Leòdhais* [The Poetry of Lewis], was published in Glasgow in 1916. Thirteen years in the making, the volume does not once mention – in its introduction, its brief history of ancient Lewis, or any of the poems it anthologises – the war that had started some two years previously; it does, however, include a song about Bannockburn. ‘Allt a’ Bhonnaich’ [Bannockburn], to the tune of ‘Scots Wha Hae’, by the primarily religious writer Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn (1848-81), juxtaposes a glorious past with a desperate present. It addresses and celebrates the stream itself – ‘Uillt a’ Bhonnaich a’ chliù bhuain’ [Bannockburn of lasting fame] – and its hero, ‘A Bhrusaich iomraitich nam buadh’ [O renowned virtuous Bruce], but ends on a lamenting note, telling the spirit of Bruce not to look down from heaven:

Mum faic thu dìol do dhùthcha fhèin;  
Tha ’n gleannan làn de bragsaidh bhreum,  
Na gaisgich thrèig an dùth’ich.

[In case you see how your country has been drained / avenged; | The glens are full of foetid braxy, | The heroes have abandoned the country’].<sup>1</sup>

The plight of the Highlands is, in a manner common to 19<sup>th</sup> century Gaelic verse, presented synecdochically through braxy, an inflammatory disease fatal to the sheep now kept over much of the cleared land; Mac a’ Ghobhainn’s poem evokes a glory that has passed from the world, presenting social abandonment, decay and crisis through hints of intestinal bloating and rot. Mac a’ Ghobhainn uses the battle of Bannockburn to bemoan the current situation of the Highlands, with the implicit warning that there are no ‘heroes’ left to defend the country. Very much a poem of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mac a’ Ghobhainn’s poem presages what would be a common note

---

<sup>1</sup> Iain Mac a’ Ghobhainn [John Smith], ‘Allt a’ Bhonnaich’ in Iain N. MacLeòid (ed.) *Bàrdachd Leòdhais* (Stornoway: Acair, 1998 [1916]), 110. My translation.

in Gaelic First World War poetry: a mix of martial fervour and the celebration of (historical and inherited) Highland heroism, juxtaposed with a sense of the catastrophic decline of the Highlands (and with as much of an eye on the distant past as on contemporary conflict).

The shadow of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hung heavy over Gaelic poetry of the war. Philip Larkin's conclusion to 'MCMXIV' – 'Never such innocence again' – rings false in the Gaelic context: such 'innocence' was already long gone.<sup>2</sup> An apt parallel to the Gaelic experience comes from Ireland, and the 'national consciousness' that for Daniel Corkery was already destabilised and uncertain – consciousness that was 'a quaking sod ... [that] gives no footing'.<sup>3</sup> 'Irish society', as Luke Gibbons argues,

did not have to await the twentieth century to undergo the shock of modernity; disintegration and fragmentation were already part of its history so that, in a crucial but not always welcome sense, Irish culture experienced modernity before its time. [...] In a culture traumatized by a profound sense of catastrophe, such as Ireland experienced as late as the Great Famine, is there really any need to await the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history?<sup>4</sup>

In the Highlands of Scotland there was also no need to wait for 'modernism' or for the First World War to 'blast open the continuum of history'; its experience of fragmentation and disintegration had come in waves: the defeat of the Jacobite army at the battle of Culloden, the post-Culloden reprisals, the clearance of villages and communities in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the famine of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and through all this the constant flow of people emigrating from the Highlands and Islands to the Lowland cities and beyond, to North America and the Antipodes. Many in the Highlands themselves saw this cultural, political and social crisis as a deserved form of punishment or divine retribution, as emigration was paralleled by

---

<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (New York : Russell and Russell, 1965 [1931]), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 6, 167.

the expansion and deepening of the hold of Presbyterianism in the Highlands: still visible in the windowsill of Croick Church in Sutherland are carvings from 24 May 1845 made by one emigrant from Glencalvie, describing 'the Glencalvie people' as 'the wicked generation'.

This sense of the catastrophic end of a civilisation infuses Gaelic poetry of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and – in particular – 19<sup>th</sup> century. To borrow Edna Longley's phrase from her discussion of 'War Pastorals', the characteristic mode of Gaelic literature in this period was the 'interrupted georgic ... [poetry] in which war or latent epic infiltrates an agricultural scenario.'<sup>5</sup> In song after song the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are rewritten as a site of historical interruption and contemporary absence, through a complex interaction between emigration, participation in Imperial wars, and forced clearance: the recurrent images are of loss, change and nostalgia for a stable society. This interaction is complex because it presents a doubled and almost contradictory identity, in which the poets are (unwittingly) complicit in the decline of the culture they are mourning: songs, for example, could lament the clearance of the Highlands by the forces of the state while also celebrating Highland participation in the British army. And rather than presenting a 'rupture' with this earlier poetry, Gaelic verse of the First World War should be seen as a re-iteration of distinct yet troublingly convergent 19<sup>th</sup> century themes. The first is a patriotic and cultural investment in participation in the British military (with the weight of centuries of clan-and-chief poetry realigned to praise captains-and-colonels) as a central part of Highland identity. The second is a fatalism, derived from poetry of the Clearances, which at times combined a post-Ossianic understanding of the decline of Gaelic civilisation with an (often Calvinist) belief in predestination.

The militaristic strain of Gaelic poetry can clearly be seen in a song such as 'Òran a' Chogaidh' [Song of the War], composed by Pàdruig Moireasdan from North Uist at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli in 1915. This song is predominantly generic. It could – with

---

<sup>5</sup> Edna Longley, 'War Pastorals, 1914-2004' in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 466.

the tweaking of place names and a couple of minor details – have been written about any conflict of the previous hundred or so years in which Highland soldiers had taken part: it combines such features as a ‘toast to the lads’, an envious glance back to the home fireside, a recognition of the danger involved, a commemoration of fallen comrades, a resolution to be resolute, an optimistic glimpse of a future in which victory toasts will be drunk, and a concluding message to a hastily-sketched beloved back home, imagining their reunion.<sup>6</sup> Moireasdan’s poem is quite unsophisticated, but a celebration of military culture also appears in a more nuanced form in the work of the most celebrated of the Gaelic First World War soldier poets, Dòmhnall Dòmhnallach [Dòmhnall Ruadh Choruna]. That Dòmhnallach would fall in with a Highland military propagandist line is unsurprising: the ‘Coruna’ in his Gaelic patronym comes from the family tradition that his great-grandmother had given Sir John Moore his last drink of water when he died at the battle of Corunna in 1809, a battle in which Dòmhnallach’s great-grandfather had also fought. There is no glorification of war in Dòmhnallach’s poetry, but there is a glorification of Highland soldiers. His ‘Oran do’n Chogaidh’ [Song to the War], written just after the Somme (in which he was badly injured), represents the huge losses of British – and especially Highland – troops. The poet’s response to these losses is, however, to bemoan the fact there are so few Highland soldiers: with the implication that had there been more, the British would, obviously, have carried the day.<sup>7</sup>

Dòmhnallach’s song – like many of the conflict – invokes the Gaelic concept of cultural and racial inheritance, ‘dualchas’, the rights and responsibilities pertaining

---

<sup>6</sup> Pàdruig Moireasdan, ‘Òran a’ Chogaidh’, in Pàdruig Moireasdan, *Ugam agus Bhuam* (Acair: Steòrnabhagh, 1977), 92-3. For more information about the poet, see Ronald Black, ed., *An Tuil* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999), 747-8.

<sup>7</sup> This argument appears as early as John MacCodrum’s ‘Oran do na Fògarraich’ [Song to the Exiles], from the 1780s; it echoed Henry Dundas’s reasons for opposing emigration from the Highlands; see Peter Mackay, ‘Lost Manuscripts and Reactionary Rustling’ in *United Islands? The Languages of Resistance*, ed. John Kirk, Andrew Noble and Michael Brown (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 131.

to you as a result of your bloodline, people or kin; this included an expectation of furious 'pride' or haughtiness in battle:<sup>8</sup>

Gu robh Gàidheil nam bean fuara,  
Mar bu dualach dhaibh o'n sìnsreadh,  
'M fuil ag goil aig meud an uabhair  
'N uair a chual' iad gu robh strì ann.

[That the Gaels of the cold hills | Followed the legacy of their ancestors, |

Their blood boiling with their pride | When they heard there was a conflict].<sup>9</sup>

'Dualchas' here, as in other Gaelic poems, is almost a performed identity, a uniform donned. In Donald MacIntyre's 1918 'Pìobairean Camshronach anns an Ruaig Mhór' [The Cameronian Pipers in the Great Retreat], for example, the song shifts in tone from comedic descriptions of the pipers looting, to (a more generic) exhortation of the pipers to stand and fight, through the invocation of this inheritance: the pipers are addressed as 'A chlann an Fhir Mhóir' [sons of the Big Men], with the expectation they will live up to the example of these ill-defined, celebrated ancestors.<sup>10</sup> Unlike MacIntyre's, the aim of Dòmhnallach's song is not incitement, or encouragement, but of local politicking. The deaths of the Highlanders (especially the Camerons, Seaforths and Gordons), and the possible end of the martial line they represent, are invoked almost as a bargaining chip. The argument is that, under current local political conditions, the Highlanders cannot be relied on to fill this role indefinitely: as a result of emigration and of Government acts limiting the carrying of weapons and deer-stalking in the Highlands there are few Highlanders trained to follow in the footsteps of those who had won glory at Alma and in India. There is a certain amount of 'the fug of imperialism' here, as Sorley MacLean has suggested, but there is also a complicated sense of a contractual bond involved in the participation in war, of what it means to submit to being 'fo ghlas-làmh aig a' Chrùn'

---

<sup>8</sup> See Donald MacAulay, 'Canons, Myths and Cannon Fodder', *Scotlands I* (1994): 39.

<sup>9</sup> Dòmhnall Dòmhnallach, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna* (Glasgow: Gairm, 1969), 13-6. My translation.

<sup>10</sup> Donald MacIntyre [Dòmhnall Ruadh Pàislig], *Sporan Dhòmhnail* (Edinburgh: Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1968), 42. My translation.

[in the handcuffs of the Crown].<sup>11</sup> This bond is not simply a matter of ‘patriotic’ duty, but is almost emotionally closer to the relationship between clan chief and followers, with the understanding that obedience, fealty and service are not given blindly, but rather that some reward is due. Martial loyalty, that is, was a matter of negotiation (and the extent to which the promises of a ‘land fit for heroes’ were not quickly or sufficiently enough followed through was one of the spurs for the many land raids across Lewis and Skye in particular in the years immediately following the war).

The traditional features of Dòmhnallach’s work - the invocation of historical Highland heroism, say, or his romanticised pastoral view of the Highlands themselves - sit uneasily, however, with his detailed presentation of the conflict. In his songs, more than any other Gaelic poetry, we get a sense of the mental, physical and emotional conditions of the front: the ironic response to marching ‘at ease’ at Arras when you are most likely marching to your grave [‘Oran Arras’]; how the poet’s eyes streamed in gas attacks (‘Oran a’ Phuinnsein’); his emotional attachment to his gun - ‘Mórag’ - and his ‘Bras is copar is feòdar, | Luaidhe, cordite is fùdar’ [brass, copper, pewter | lead, cordite and powder]; going over the top at the Somme (‘Chaidh an talamh as a rian | ‘S chaidh an iarmailt gu mireag’ [The earth became deranged | and the sky fragmented] - ‘Air an Somme’); and being pummelled by enemy fire in no-man’s land:

Thionndadh iad le’n compaist

An gunnaichean trom oirn,

‘S thiodhlaic iad ‘s a’ pholl sinn

‘S ar com air a sgealpadh.

[They used their compass | To turn the guns on us | And buried us in the mud | Our bodies blown apart].<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Sorley MacLean, *Ris a’ Bhruthaich* (Stornoway: Acair, 1985), 27; Dòmhnallach, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Dh’fhalbh na Gillean Grinn’ [‘The Lovely Lads Left’] in Dòmhnallach, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna*, 25. The previous examples are from the same volume, pages 22, 26,

Experience in the trenches infects the poet's memories of Uist, whether memories of deer-hunting (as in 'Oran na Seilge' [The Song of the Hunt]) or his beloved Maggie MacLeod, conflated with the hills, glens, lochs, bays and eponymous white swans of Uist in 'Eala Bhan' [White Swan], Dòmhnallach's most famous song (still a staple of the Gaelic song repertory).<sup>13</sup> In this last, woman and landscape combine in a traditional, almost clichéd way, as she becomes 'canach geal na mòintich' [white bog cotton of the moors] and 'ròs a' fàs an gàrradh' [rose growing in the gardens]. But this is, again, so flatly generic that realism seems beside the point, and instead the opposition of the 'real' and 'unreal' seems upset; it is unclear which, if either, of the trenches or home is 'real', whether in this interrupted georgic the 'epic' infiltrates the agricultural setting of the Highlands, or if the war itself is turned into a nightmarish version of the georgic homeland. This is an enervating nightmare; although the song draws on the conventions of the aisling genre, unlike many aislings it would not incite poet or reader to a nationalist fervour: it is Celtic Twilight melancholic rather than Celtic Revival militant, ending with "'nam chluaisean fuaim a' bhàis, | Gun dùil ri faighinn às le buaidh' [the sound of death in my ears | with no hope of getting out of it with success].<sup>14</sup>

A similar uneasy balance of 'home' and the front is found in the work of the Lewis soldier poet, John Munro, who was killed in April 1918 near Wytschaete. His poem 'Ar Tìr' [Our Land], written on the train to Kyle of Lochalsh while returning on leave from the front, is a celebration of the Highlands as 'Tìr nam Beann, nan Gaisgeach, 's nan Gleann' [the Land of the Hills, the Heroes, the Valleys], which describes flowing streams, mountainous crags and stags, but does not mention the war that provides its context. There appears to be no irony in the poem's celebratory last

---

23. My translations. See also Ronald Black, ed., *An Tuil* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999), 747-8.

<sup>13</sup> Dòmhnallach, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna*, 32-6. My translations.

<sup>14</sup> Aislings, or dream visions, which originated with the Irish poet Aodhagan Ó Rathaille in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, would often feature a (female) figure who appears in a dream to criticize and bemoan the political and social state of Ireland, and predict a brighter (Jacobite) future. This genre also had some influence on Scottish Gaelic poetry.

lines: “s i Tìr nan Gaisgeach a th’ann, | Tìr nam Beann, nan Gaisgeach, ’s nan Gleann, | ’s i Tìr nan Gaisgeach a th’ann’ [this is the land of heroes, | the land of hills, of heroes, and of glens, | this is the land of heroes].<sup>15</sup> However, the parallel poems to this (and only three of Munro’s poems survive), ‘Ar Gaisgich a Thuit sna Blàir’ [‘Our Heroes who fell in battle’] and ‘Air sgàth nan sonn’ [‘For the sake of the soldiers’], detail with some horror the experiences of these ‘heroes’ at the front, among ‘innleachdan dhubh-sgrios an nàmh’ [enemy engines of total destruction] and the ‘dust eu-dreach’ [formless dust] of corpses. Munro attempts, despite obvious strain, to combine an awareness of brutal slaughter and destruction with a continued belief in individual heroism, which results in the dead in ‘Ar Gaisgich a Thuit sna Blàir’ being envisaged as a form of marble sculpture:

tog, taisg dealbh orra  
’nan laighe mar thuit san raon,  
fairich, cluinn ...  
An sméideadh, an cainnt ruinn,  
’n rùn-gnìomh air an tug iad an deò  
suas, ’nan càradh  
air an àr-làr,  
air a ghléidheadh dhuinn beò  
mar gun snaidheadh fear seòlt’  
cuimhneachain cloiche-gun-phrìs.

[take, keep a picture of them, | lying as they fell in the field, | feel, hear...  
waving, speaking to us, | the effort as they gave their breath | up, their  
twisting | on the slaughter-floor, | all kept alive for us, | as if some sculptor  
had carved | priceless memorials in stone].<sup>16</sup>

The dying men, according to the poem, encourage us to be ‘resolute’, to follow their road and ‘cuir a’ Bhratach an sàs | daingeann àrd | air Sliabh Glòrmhor Deagh-Sìth!’ [put the standard up | firm and high, | on the hill of the Glory of Peace!]. The brutality of their deaths is paradoxically meant to sustain the notion of the glory of

---

<sup>15</sup> Black, *An Tuil*, 214-5. My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Black, *An Tuil*, 214-7. My translation.



the struggle; in a bitter twist, the memorials keep the men 'alive' in anguished, twisting death-throes, in a way that seems to both undercut and reaffirm their heroism. The question arises, however subtly, of what it is we keep 'alive' in war memorials, and to what extent the act of remembering the heroic dead is an act of forgetting the manner of their deaths.

Munro, having studied under Herbert Grierson at Aberdeen, was the first Gaelic poet to write in free verse; the experimentation of Munro's poems is paralleled by the work of his school friend Murdo Murray. Munro was engaging with the problem of how to represent the war, and whether the traditions and conventions of Gaelic song were sufficient to the conflict; where Munro experimented with form, Murray did so with syntax and also – in his war diary – explored the limits of representation in Gaelic.<sup>17</sup> Although his diary is for the most part in Gaelic, Murray shifts to a strangely abbreviated and ventriloquizing English description (as if he were transcribing his memories) in his entry for 16<sup>th</sup> June 1915, the Battle of Ypres:

They are mar dhamh ann an ceò [like a stag in the smoke]. The sun had risen now and beams with a calm propitious gaze. A shell has burst and intercepts the view. See them on the horizon running like blazes. A shell burst quite close. Undaunted heroes. On! On! On! ... Our boys took the hill. They are entrenching themselves on the summit. German prisoners passing on the other side of the communication trench. Hurrah! I can't see them for the crush at the hole. Machine guns going strong. Shells again. Pure seething hills. In spite of the fire our own boys still unconcerned. Still digging on the summit. Pluck! Three lines of trenches taken. Very few casualties. Hurrah! I hope they can keep the trench. Machine guns still going. Rapid fire on the left. Hope it is ours. Action on the right. Mines bursting in the same direction.

---

<sup>17</sup> Both Munro and Murray's poems were published in the 1932 anthology *An Dìleab*, edited by James Thomson, which was used as a school textbook for many years, and Munro's work in particular had considerable influence in shaping subsequent Gaelic experiments with poetic form.

Another mine on the right. Thought – one *little* life, what is it worth? Our own wounded running back across our own lines.<sup>18</sup>

This is a strange mix of the boy's-own-celebratory and the literary descriptive (with possible biblical echoes): the 'calm propitious gaze' and the 'pure seething hills'.<sup>19</sup> Murray does not indicate any reason why this passage alone is not in Gaelic; the impression given is that either the English is more immediate, or that the imagistic conventions of Gaelic do not suffice: the one Gaelic phrase he uses is the clichéd simile, 'mar dhamh ann an ceó' [like a stag in the smoke]. More than any other Gaelic writer Murray seems aware that there might be a problem with representing the war in the Gaelic language. His was a literary war, but not shaped by what Paul Fussell outlines as the literary context to the war: Shakespeare, Arthurian myth and Pilgrim's Progress.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Murray mentions reading Ossian (7 Aug 15), hearing a Sergeant Saul reciting the 'Miller's Tale, Reeve's Tale etc' (16 July 15), and his own habit of comparing the Gaelic and English versions of the Bible, to correct the Gaelic. Appropriately, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 1915, he was mulling over the best way to render 'possessed by the devil' (perhaps from Mark 5: 15, Murray doesn't say): he settles on 'Agus iadsan anns an robh deamhnan'.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, the pervasiveness of religious imagery within Gaelic shaped how Murray interpreted the war; and religious debates were important for Murray to an even greater extent than they were for Munro, who had trained for the ministry before joining the Seaforth Highlanders in October 1914. 'Luach na Saorsa' [The Value of Freedom], the one poem of Murray's from the war, problematizes the tendency to figure his own – and other Highlander's participation – in the war in terms of 'Dàn'

---

<sup>18</sup> Murchadh Moireach, *Luach na Saorsa* (Glaschu: Gairm, 1970), 27

<sup>19</sup> See, perhaps, Jeremiah 1: 13 'And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, What seest thou? And I said, I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is toward the north.'

<sup>20</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 155-90. Murray mentions in passing that from his school days John Munro had large sections of Shakespeare off by heart: Moireach, *Luach na Saorsa*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Moireach, *Luach na Saorsa*, 47.

[fate or predestination], and tries to decide if there is any justification for killing. Murray composed 'Luach na Saorsa' on his first day in the trenches, and the poem takes the form of a question and answer, as he asks a 'bullet' if its course is predestined, or whether there is no such thing as divine judgement. The poem revolves around a twisting of the central phrase. The speaker asks whether the bullet provides 'freedom | From judgement above':

An urras math do chloinn nan daoin'  
Tha guin a' bhàis, le d' rinn bhig chaoil.  
A chur am broilleach fallain laoich  
'San àraich fhuair?  
'Na eubha bàis a bheil an t-saors'  
O cheartas shuas?

[Does a guarantee of good for humanity | Come with your slender tip fatally piercing | The chest of some healthy warrior | On the cold battlefield? | In his death-cry is there freedom | From judgement above?]<sup>22</sup>

The bullet, however, asserts the existence of divine judgement (as well as sacrifice) – it brings 'bitter tears to the damned', who are (in a complex syntactical structure) 'sacrificed' by 'freedom' above:

'Nam shraon tha caoin bhith sgart' o thàmh,  
'Nam rinn bhig bhaoil ro-ghuilleag bàis,  
'S an làmh a stiùir bha dhi 'san Dàn  
Deur ghoirt do'n truagh;  
Ach 's uil iad ìobairt saors' o'n Ard,  
Troimh'n Bhàs thig Buaidh.

[In my wail there's a cry at being torn from rest, | In my slender tip there's a fore-cry of death, | And the hand that steered me was predestined to bring | Bitter tears to the damned; | But they're all freedom's sacrifice from above – | For Victory comes through Death.]

To have the bullet suggesting that 'Victory' comes through 'Death' is to leave the value of fighting the war – and any predestined victory in this life – in doubt.

---

<sup>22</sup> Moireach, *Luach na Saorsa*, 73-4. My translation.

However, the contrast between the convoluted syntax of the poem and the direct course of the bullet does suggest that the bullet will provide some form of simplifying, clarifying release. The question in the title of the poem – of the value (or indeed meaning) of freedom – necessarily remains unanswered: the speaker cannot be sure if the death the bullet brings is, indeed, a final judgement.

The problem of understanding the relationship between the war and God's will – and especially what would happen on judgement day – was widespread among Gaelic speakers, combatants and non-combatants alike. The gravestone epitaph 'Gus am bris an là' [Until the break of day], or the fuller version 'Gus am bris an là agus theich na sgàilean' [Until the day break, and the shadows flee away] gained currency at the time of the First World War (relatively few Gaelic-language gravestones had anything other than basic details prior to the war). This is a near echo to the English 'we will remember them at the going down of the sun, and at the dawning of the day', but in Gaelic it is generally taken as referring specifically to the Day of Judgement, and a particularly narrow understanding of where this judgement would happen. 'In Memoriam Charles MacLeod, Ballantrushal, Killed in Action', an occasional poem only published in 2014, seems to place geographical limitations on the Day of Judgement: 'An dòchas gun shaor an t-Uan thu – | Far bheil d'uaighe cha bhris an là air' [I hope the Lamb will free you – | Where your grave is day will not break on it].<sup>23</sup>

The non-combatant poet T.D. MacDhomhnuill has an even less optimistic view of 'freedom', and especially whether victory at home can be achieved. MacDhomhnuill published two books shortly after the war – *Dàin agus Dealbhan-fhacail an Àm a'*

---

<sup>23</sup> Dòmhnall Moireasdan (ed.) *The Going Down of the Sun* (Steòrnabhagh: Acair, 2014), 403. Alongside the general significance of daybreak and dusk during the First World War, which Paul Fussell describes, the Gaelic dawn has its own peculiar symbolic resonance: not least because the phrase 'Gus am bris an là' was not originally used for Judgement Day, but rather came from a lover's tryst in Song of Solomon 4:6 (although for most who use it this context will have been lost). C.f. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 51-64.

*Chogaidh* [Poems and Word-pictures from the time of the war, 1919] and *An Dèidh a' Chogaidh* [After the War, 1921] – which present sharply contradictory responses to the war. Although many of his poems simply repeat the hortatory style of much other Gaelic war poetry, others at least begin to question such facets as a 'poisonous' 'pride of race'.<sup>24</sup> MacDhomhnuill's verse is ideologically muddled: he could, for example, combine in one poem the idea that both sides of the conflict believed 'Gu bheil iadsan na 's ceart na'n taobh eile [that they are more just than the other side] with the most blunt propaganda: 'Tha nàmhaidean na sith ag àlachadh fuath, | 'S a truailleadh an t-slàigh anns a' Ghearmailt' [The enemies of peace are suckling hate | And enslaving the people in Germany].<sup>25</sup> Repeatedly, MacDhomhnuill moves towards a radical questioning of the justification of the war (and the participation of Gaelic-speakers in the war), but guiltily retreats to reassert patriotic sentiment; this uncertainty is based on doubt about what 'saorsa' [freedom] might actually be or might be worth. At times in his verse, 'freedom' is euphemistic: 'Ann an Tigh-Eiridinn' [In a Hospital], perhaps the Gaelic poem that best fits into the paradigm of the questioning critical 'First World War poem', describes a soldier's physical ruin and concludes, bluntly, "'S a bhreislich mu dheireadh a thug dha a shaors' [It was delirium in the end that gave him freedom].<sup>26</sup> More generally, however, the question arises whether the war is – as MacDhomhnuill hopes – a fight for freedom and if so how that 'freedom' will be shaped in the subsequent peace. When optimistic, as in 'Luchd nan Gabhaltas-Beaga' [People of the Small Landholdings], MacDhomhnuill imagines a version of a land fit for heroes, in which Gaelic will be spoken, and there

---

<sup>24</sup> 'Maighdeanan a' Chogaidh' [The Young Girls of the War] in T.D.

MacDhomhnuill, *Dàin agus Dealbh-faclan aig Àm a' Chogaidh* (Glasgow: Sinclair: 1919), 53. My translation. MacDhomhnuill contributed to the avant-garde periodical *Guth na Bliadhna* during the war, along with Donald Sinclair, who would later become a great friend of Hugh MacDiarmid, and be published in MacDiarmid's *Golden Treasury*. Sinclair's *Latha nan Seachd Sion* [Day of the Seven Storms] is one of the most interesting Gaelic poems published during the war, not least because it ignores the war entirely.

<sup>25</sup> 'Imcheist a' Chogaidh' ['The Anxiety of the War', c. 1917], MacDhomhnuill, *Dàin agus Dealbh-faclan*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> MacDhomhnuill, *Dàin agus Dealbh-faclan*, 30

will be enough land, salmon and venison for everyone; when not, as in 'Àm a' Chogaidh is na Dheidh' [Wartime and Afterwards], he asks of the soldiers 'An ceannaich e iad fein a daors' | Nuair thilleas iad a nall?' [Did they buy slavery for themselves | For when they come back?]<sup>27</sup> MacDhomhnuill clearly desires greater equality, opportunity and social change in Scotland (and in Ireland) but hesitates from firmly adopting a *Sinn Fein* or socialist line because of his hatred of Bolshevism: as his long book-length poem *An Dèidh a' Chogaidh* makes clear, any 'slavery' encountered after the war would be much worse under the influence of Bolshevism.

For Ciorstai NicLeòid, meanwhile, true 'Sìth agus Saorsa' [Peace and Freedom], as her post-war poem of that name argues, can only be enjoyed by those who have fought for it. The poem ends with the claim that 'Ma 's fìor leat an gealladh, ma 's ceart leat an duais | 'S leat smior agus luach na sìth' [If your promise is true and your prize is right, | You have the pith and the value of peace].<sup>28</sup> Divine justification for the war is here a circular game of chance: only those whose cause is 'right' will win, but only by gaining 'peace' have you proved your cause was right. However, NicLeòid has no doubt about the value, justice and necessity of the war, or of the 'heroic bravery' of the Highland soldiers (her husband was one, serving with the Seaforth Highlanders). 'Do Na Laoich' [To the Heroes], from 1915, shares a wish with Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna's 'Nam bithinn mar Ian' [If I were like a bird], that she might have the wings of a seagull; but where Dòmhnallach wanted to escape the fighting at the front to see Uist once more, NicLeòid wants to fly over to France to see with her own eyes the Highlanders living up to their cultural expectations: 'Gàidhealaich a sheasadh cruadal | 'S a bhiodh fearail mar bu dual dhaibh' [Gael who would stand up to hardship | And be manly as is their inheritance].<sup>29</sup> This is not a simple wish: she is, after all, suggesting that she wants to be reassured of the 'manly' courage of the soldiers, even if that means seeing them – her husband

---

<sup>27</sup> MacDhomhnuill, *Dàin agus Dealbh-faclan*, 44-5, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ciorstai NicLeòid, *An Sireadh* (Stirling: MacAoidh, 1952), 48. My translation.

<sup>29</sup> NicLeòid, *An Sireadh*, 3. My translation. See Dòmhnallach, *Dòmhnall Ruadh Chorùna*, 30-1.

included – die. Indeed, there is an almost manic fatalism or attraction towards death to NicLeòid’s verse, a fatalism C.M. Dunn suggests was common in Highland communities of the time.<sup>30</sup> Thus in another post-war poem, ‘Cuimhneachan 1914-1918’ [Memories 1914-18], NicLeòid cedes to destiny, claiming that ‘Bheir dàn iad dhachaidh’ [Fate will bring them home] – with an ambiguity attached to whether or not that is an earthly ‘home’. And in this poem NicLeòid suggests that it is not victory, but the act and manner of fighting that is important: she offers ‘Gu buaidh no gu bàs – deach-slàint’ gach gaisgeach’ [To victory or death – a toast to the heroes].<sup>31</sup> But if heroic behaviour is more important than victory, then what will almost inevitably follow is (heroic) defeat and death.

This fatalism suggests a broader point, beyond the confines of Gaelic literature, which arises from the symbolic importance and desirability of the Highland regiments to the British Army (even when their soldiers were not actually from the Highlands). David Goldie has argued that ‘For young men of many backgrounds, as one observer would put it, “the glamour of the kilt was irresistible”’.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, as Trevor Royle has shown, enrolment in the Highland regiments entailed adopting a quite different and oppositional identity; Royle describes how a Private Alexander Rule of U Company, 1/4<sup>th</sup> Gordon Highlanders saw this as a ‘barbarian role’:

We revelled in our barbarian role and solemnly assured our hosts that the kilt was our normal civilian garb; we even had the effrontery to tell them that our wild hoochs represented the semi-articulate call of primitive ancestors, and were still used to communicating from one rocky Hielan’ crag to another...<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> C.M. Dunn, ‘The Poems of Christina MacLeod’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* XLIX (1974-6), 11.

<sup>31</sup> NicLeòid, *An Sireadh*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> David Goldie, ‘Was there a Scottish War literature?’ in Tim Kendall (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 172.

<sup>33</sup> Trevor Royle, *The Flowers of the Forest: Scotland and the First World War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2007), 72.

This 'barbarian role' of the Highland regiments seems at times to be associated with mildly homoerotic versions of Celticism, as in another of the soldier's accounts quoted by Royle:

Skirling at the head of the column strode the pipers, filling the air with their wild martial music. Behind glinted a forest of rifle barrels and the flash of brawny knees rising and straightening in rhythm.<sup>34</sup>

With the dandyish cavorting in kilts, there may be hints of the Celticist double bind of the 'wild' male Gael: at once barbaric (and so hyper masculine), yet also – by opposition with the rational Saxon – emotional, sentimental and feminized. But there is also, perhaps, in this understanding of a 'wild' music and a 'primitive' 'barbarian' role a fatalistic view of the Celts refracted from Ernest Renan – with his suggestion that 'the Celtic race has worn itself out in resistance to its time, and in the defence of desperate causes' – or Arnold, with his adoption of MacPherson's elegiac description of the Celt who 'went forth to the war but ... always fell'.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say, however, that First World War fatalism as a whole was influenced in any way by Gaelic literature, but rather that there was a shared matrix of origins for such fatalism, which might include the miseries of Ossian, the Romantic sublime, and broader theories of racial and civilizational decline and fall.

There was, however, one English language soldier poet for whom a fatalistic proleptic approach to the war was grounded in an understanding of Gaelic poetry. Ewart Alan Mackintosh – the Brighton born, Christ church Oxford educated, son of an Alness family – wrote exclusively in English, although he had taught himself Gaelic, and used Gaelic in the titles of some poems. 'Anns an Gleann san robh mi Òg' [In the Glen Where I was Young], a poem of August 1914, is to some extent written palimpsestically on top of the 1881 song of that name, by the hugely popular and woolily sentimental Gaelic clearance poet Niall MacLeòid. Like many poems of the genre, MacLeod's is structured on a failed pastoral, and in particular the

---

<sup>34</sup> Royle, *The Flowers of the Forest*, 51

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Renan, *La Poésie des Races Celtiques* (1854) trans. W.G. Hutchinson, *The Poetry of the Celtic Races* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 7; Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1867), 107.



discontinuity between the nostalgic place of childhood and the poet's adult experience:

Tha na fàrdaichean nam fàsach  
Far an d' àraicheadh na seòid,  
Far 'm bu chridheil fuaim an gàire,  
Far 'm bu chàirdeil iad mun bhòrd...

[The houses are in ruins | which once reared the strongest men, | where  
rang out their hearty laughter, | where, at table, they were kind...]<sup>36</sup>

In MacLeòid's typically vague way, the cause of this catastrophic change – the clearance of a village – is never mentioned or explored, nor is the place – Glendale in Skye – identified. Instead, this is a lament for a human community and way of life: it is the present absence of people in the glen that is important. The glen which MacKintosh nostalgically opposes to the First World War trenches is, however, precisely the dehumanised 'natural' landscape that troubles MacLeòid. There is an unconvincing reference to 'the people that were kind to me', but otherwise the poet is alone in the glen: remembers being 'a laddie all alone' in a place where instead of a close-knit community, what 'stood close together' are 'blue-bell stems'.<sup>37</sup> The childhood idyll of MacKintosh's reverie is, in other words, already a site of rupture; it has already suffered the decline of the clearances. When this landscape is juxtaposed to the trenches – as when the image of the poet dangling his feet above a stream gives way to the description of 'Water to my knees below, | Shrapnel in the clouds above me...' – there is little succour. The nostalgic reaching out to the memory of the Highlands is undermined by the fact that nostalgia itself reveals a (catastrophic) loneliness; little wonder then that in the last stanza the poem tips over into stuttering sentimentality:

Hold me close until I die,  
Lift me up, it's better so;  
If, before I go, I cry,

---

<sup>36</sup> Donald Meek ed. *Caran an t-Saoghail* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2003), XX. Translation by Donald Meek.

<sup>37</sup> Ewart Alan MacKintosh, *A Highland Regiment* (London: John Lane, 1917), 13-4.

It isn't I'm afraid to go;  
Only sorry for the boy  
Sitting there with legs aswung...

A similar undermining of the present by an act of historic cultural renovation occurs in MacKintosh's poem on the departure of the 4<sup>th</sup> Camerons. This shares its title with one of the most famous pibrochs, 'Cha Till MacCruimein' [MacCrimmon will not return], composed – according to popular tradition – by Donald Bàn MacCrimmon, the piper to MacLeod of Skye, during the '45. MacLeod of Skye fought on the Hanoverian side and MacCrimmon was captured during the Hanoverian defeat at the battle of Inverurie (December 1745); tradition holds, though, that the Jacobite pipers refused to pipe until the 'King of the Pipers' was released. Not only is this a tune that prophesies MacCrimmon's own death (and he was killed at the 'Rout of Moy' in February 1746), but it also suggests the end of a way of life which will be brought about by the victory of the side on which he was fighting. Even victory, that is, will lead to death and defeat. This fatalism carries over into MacKintosh's poem, as the dead of the First World War are brought together under 'a lonely pibroch | Out of an older war':

And there in front of the men were marching  
With feet that made no mark,  
The grey old ghosts of the ancient fighters  
Come back again from the dark;  
And in front of them all MacCrimmon piping  
A weary tune and sore,  
On gathering day, for ever and ever,  
MacCrimmon comes no more.<sup>38</sup>

Mackintosh comes close to predicting that he, like MacCrimmon, will go forth to battle and inevitably fall. With a doomed fatalism grounded in the 'weary' music of MacCrimmon and the cultural trauma of the '45, and its sense that there are

---

<sup>38</sup> Trevor Royle (ed.) *In Flanders Fields: Scottish Poetry and Prose of the First World War* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), 77

historical parallels for the hellish conflict the poet was experiencing, this can be read as a representative Gaelic poem of the First World War: perhaps even more so, as the cultural decline which pervades the poetry of the war leads inexorably to the displacement and disappearance of the Gaelic language itself.