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Gaelic Translations of Burns¹

At a recent conference the late Rev. Roderick MacDonald gave a fascinating paper entitled "Burns and Gaelic,"² setting the scene for his remarkable venture of translating the entire corpus of Burns's poems into Scotland's other national language. The scale of his endeavor alone must earn our admiration; as should his strict adherence to the principle that his translations would retain the original meters and rhyme-schemes, so that all the songs could be sung in Gaelic to the same tunes as we know for the Scots originals. MacDonald's achievement is unlikely to be surpassed in the foreseeable future, though in principle it is certainly not inconceivable that some equally enterprising Gaelic poet-translator should venture on new translations of some or all of Burns's poems. However, his success in translating Burns into Gaelic is not without precedent; and I propose to look briefly at a few of the attempts that have been made prior to MacDonald's magnum opus, and draw some comparisons.

Gaelic translations of Burns (indeed, Gaelic translations of *any* poetry) are a feature, not of the home-based culture of the long-established Highland and

¹This is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual Burns conference at Strathclyde University, January 18-19, 2002. I am greatly indebted to Professor Colm Ó Baoill, who read the original version and made many helpful comments and suggestions.

²Published in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns, a Bicentennial Celebration*, ed. K. Simpson (East Linton, 1997), pp. 148-255. See also his "Robert Burns and Gaelic" in *Scottish Language*, 9 (1990), 17-33.

Island communities, but of the urban Gaeltacht of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this. Until the mass dispersals of the Highland population, the extent of mutual linguistic or cultural influencing between the Highland and the Lowland halves of Scotland was very slight, except along the geographical margins of the Gaeltacht; allowing the literary traditions of the two language areas to develop in startlingly dissimilar directions. There is interesting evidence that some Gaelic songs were written to tunes which had made their way from the Lowlands, but the styles and subjects of the poems written in the Gaeltacht owed little or nothing to those from further south. Burns is well known to be among the most universally appealing of poets, and one who has been translated into more languages, even those of cultures as alien as the Japanese, than any other Scottish poet; but his appeal has struck less of a chord with his Highland countrymen than with many from further afield. W. Jacks, in his landmark study *Burns in Other Tongues* (Glasgow, 1896) quotes at length the opinion of an unidentified friend who, in an account prefaced by the memorable phrase "Burns in Gaelic is a David in armour," lists several characteristics in which the mental and spiritual outlook which pervades Burns's poetry is fundamentally at odds with the Celtic character. Burns's love of nature is not the intense, passionately felt empathy with the natural world—weather, landscape, plant and animal life—expressed in Gaelic poetry, but a background to his much greater concern with human emotions. Conversely, his superbly individual and realistic evocations of the range of human foibles has no parallel in Gaelic writing: Gaelic love poetry, for example, focuses on the beauty and the accomplishments of the beloved rather than the poet's actual feelings towards her. Burns's attitude towards the supernatural is profoundly un-Gaelic: his humorous and satirical treatment of the supernatural world would be impossible for a Gaelic poet, brought up in a tradition where this and the other world existed in intimate closeness. Only in one respect, his admiration for the virtues of patriotism, loyalty to a cause or to a chief, and heroism in battle, does Burns share a common sympathy with Gaelic poets of the traditional school. Roderick MacDonald disagreed vigorously with the opinions expressed by this writer; but they were (so Jacks assures us) those of another learned and experienced native-speaking Gaelic scholar. And though the contrast drawn by Jacks's information may be artificially polarized, there is no denying the extreme mutual remoteness between the Scots and the Gaelic literary traditions. As an interesting illustration, we may remind ourselves that though two of Scotland's greatest poets of the eighteenth century, Robert Fergusson and Duncan Bàn MacIntyre, were contemporaries in Edinburgh for most of Fergusson's adult life, the only contact they could possibly have had was the hostile and damaging one between a young reveler and a member of "that black banditti, the City Guard"!

This being the case, it is not surprising that Gaelic translations of Burns are late in appearing on the literary scene, and have always been sparse. In the

invaluable BOSLIT database, under the heading "Scottish Poetry 18th Century—Translations into Scottish Gaelic," Burns totally monopolizes the field; but it runs to a mere 29 entries.³ Burns translations into German began appearing and continued at a healthy rate from as early as 1795; French took slightly longer to get in on the act but rapidly made up for lost time; apart from one gallant forerunner in the shape of a single translation of "Man was Made to Mourn" by Charles Stewart of Aberfeldy, published in 1800, it was not until 1840 that Gaelic became the vehicle for Burns translations in any numbers (a collection entitled *Tam o' Shanter and Eight Other Poems* by R. MacDougall).⁴ Prior to Roderick MacDonald, only one scholar ventured on the daunting project of translating the entire canon: this was Charles MacPhater, whose *Dàin is Luinneagan Robert Burns, Eadar-theangaichte do'n Ghàidhlig Albannach* was published in 1910.⁵ For the whole period between MacPhater's translation and MacDonald's, BOSLIT is blank; though an important contribution which has so far been overlooked is the elaborate pair of translations by Donald MacIntyre of South Uist, of "Tam o' Shanter" and "The Twa Dogs"⁶; the only other example which I have been able to locate from recent years is "Urnuigh Uilleim Chràbhaich" ("Holy Willie's Prayer"), rendered with impressive accuracy, vigor and musicality, and in unflinching Habie stanzas, by Colin MacKenzie.⁷

A handful of translations of individual poems also exists. Jacks prints versions of nine in all: "Scots wha Hae," "Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut," "Mary in Heaven," "Highland Mary," "Afton Water," "O' A' the Airts," "John Barleycorn," "Whistle and I'll Come tae ye, my Lad," and (of course) "Auld Lang Syne." All these date from the period 1829-1895, when a vigorous and confi-

³The list is not exhaustive: several items mentioned in the present paper, for a start, are not included; but even a complete list would compare but poorly with the figures for, say, Latvian (50), Belarusian (63), Bulgarian (78) or Czech (91), much less Hungarian (345), Russian (457) or German (823, of which items numbered 4 to 742 are from Burns).

⁴The BOSLIT entry for a translation of "John Barleycorn," *Iain Eòrna*, dated 1800, is a mistake: this is William Livingstone's version (see later), published in 1882.

⁵By Alex McLaren & Son, Glasgow and R. G. Mann, Dumfries. The book is undated: MacDonald gives the date as 1911, but the *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue*, ed. M. Ferguson and A. Matheson (Edinburgh, 1984), no. 508, has 1910.

⁶Published in *Gairm* in respectively the spring and the winter issues of 1957 (vols. 5 and 6), and included in MacIntyre's collected poems, *Sporan Dhòmhnail* ed. Somerled MacMillan, Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 10 (1968), 315-38.

⁷In *Bàrdachd na Roinn-Eòrpa an Gàidhlig*, ed. Ruairidh MacThòmais (Glasgow, 1990), pp. 6-8.

dent social and literary culture, expressed in a healthy rate of publication of books and periodicals, existed among the large Gaelic-speaking communities in the cities. Their provenance casts an interesting light on this culture of the dispossessed Highlanders. The first on the list to appear was “Màiri Àluinn Bòidheach” (“Highland Mary”) by “Abrach” (i.e. from Lochabar), a pseudonym for the Rev. Angus MacIntyre of Kilmonevaig. (One of his poems, “Na Gaidheal aig Alma,” about the worldwide dispersal of the Gaels, contains the line *Tha mise so, Abrach o Lòchaidh*.)⁸ This was first published in the November 1829 issue of the periodical *An Teachdaire Gaelach* (pp. 155-6) and reprinted in a book of songs and poems, including both original work and translations, entitled *Am Filidh* (The Bard).⁹ This book also contains translations, by the editor Seumas Munro, of “What can a Young Lassie” (“Glogaidh-Homh”¹⁰), “Sic a Wife as Willie had” (“A’ Bhean aig Fionnladh Fann”), “The Birks of Aberfeldie” (“Coillteach Ùr na Mòr-thìr”) and “O Tibbie, I hae Seen the Day” (“A Ghursal, Chunna mise Là”): those four are identified as being from Burns, though for “Màiri Àluinn Bòidheach” no hint of the source is given in either the book or the periodical. Naturally, the first two draw enthusiastically on the store of dysphemistic words with which Gaelic is at least as richly furnished as Scots: *Tha ’m bodach a’ smùcail, a’ cneadrach, ag ùnaich*—“The old man snuffles, groans and fusses”; *Roibean feòsaige m’ a mùig*—“A filthy beard (or “beard-like encrustation of filth”) round her muzzle”; and an interesting detail is the appearance of a couple of Burns’s Scots words as loans, “wabster” giving *buabastair* and “hirple” *eirplich*. Several of the poems in the book, though not translations of Burns’s verses, are written to tunes which he used such as “Cauld Kail in Aberdeen,” “Comin thro’ the Rye” and “I hae a Wife o’ my Ain.”

In 1874, “Uisge Aftoin” (“Afton Water”) was published in the periodical *Gael*. The author of this, Dugald MacPhail, came from Mull and is still remembered for his song “An t-Eilean Muileach.” A much more important poet was responsible for the next two translations in chronological sequence. “Iain Eorna” (“John Barleycorn”) and “Sine Bhòidheach” (“Bonny Jean”—i.e. “O’ A’ the Airts”) are the last items in *Duain agus Orain* by William Livingstone of Islay (Uilleam Mac Dhunleibhe: 1808-1870),¹¹ not only a poet of distinction who in his most characteristic work combines a fine rhetorical skill with a

⁸The same pseudonym was also used by a different literary figure, Donald Campbell MacPherson of Bohuntin (1838-80).

⁹Ed. Seumas Munro (Edinburgh, 1840).

¹⁰Edward Dwelly in *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary* (Glasgow, 1901-11) defines the word “Term expressive of great contempt; unmanly, sottish, useless.”

¹¹Glasgow, 1882.

fierce and passionate anger at the oppressions and injustices suffered by the Gaels, but a self-taught polymath, an ardent and active Scottish Nationalist, and an Anglophobe of MacDiarmid-like bitterness.¹² The first few poems in Livingstone's book are all about battles: Mons Graupius, Bannockburn, Dail Rìgh (in Strathfillan, where Robert Bruce was defeated in 1306 by John Mac-Dougall of Lorne) and others in which the Highland clans win heroic victories over various enemies: the poems of drink and love by Burns which he chose to translate clearly appealed to a side which emerged but rarely in his original work.

The versions of "Whistle and I'll Come tae ye, my Lad" and "Auld Lang Syne," and also one of "Gae Bring to Me a Pint of Wine" which Jacks does not mention, are from a remarkable collection called *The Celtic Garland* by Henry Whyte,¹³ a native of Easdale who latterly worked as a journalist in Glasgow, writing under the pen-name "Fionn" (i.e. "white"), and who, according to the tribute to him printed as an introduction to the third (posthumous) edition of his book, displayed not only a wide-ranging knowledge of Gaelic and its literature but a boundless enthusiasm for writing and promoting it, and a memorable talent as a performer. This is a bilingual collection of poems and prose passages for recitation, including a generous sampling of traditional Gaelic songs and poems with English translations, a selection of original poems by Whyte, again with translations, a set of Gaelic prose passages for reading, and—most interesting for our purposes—a set of poems in English and Scots with spirited and accomplished Gaelic renderings. Besides the three Burns poems, this section includes works by Scott, Hogg, Tannahill and numerous less renowned poets, well-known songs such as "Bonnie Mary of Argyle," "Wae's Me for Prince Charlie" and "Scotland Yet," and a number of familiar hymns. On the evidence of this, Whyte was making a vigorous and committed attempt to build a bridge between Gall and Gael by the attractive means of translating some of the most warmly appealing, and most patriotically Scottish, of Lowland poems into Gaelic: a project clearly springing from a mind-set diametrically opposed to the stern Highland nationalism of Livingstone.

Fionn was a regular contributor to the English-language periodical *The Celtic Monthly*; and it is in this context that the next translations appeared. In the issue for October 1894, "Oran Òil" ("drinking song"—i.e., "Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut") and "Màiri am Pàrras" ("Mary in Heaven"), translated by a minor poet from Jura called Angus MacKechnie, were introduced by Fionn in the following words:

¹²Hugh MacDiarmid's *Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (London, 1948) includes translations of two of his poems: "Ireland Weeping" (pp. 63-5) and "Message to the Bard" (pp. 327-31).

¹³First edition 1881. I have used the third, enlarged, edition (Glasgow, 1920).

The Celtic sympathies of our National Bard are well-known, and in no way are they more clearly demonstrated than by his partiality for Gaelic airs and measures. It is not astonishing, therefore, to find that many of his songs have lent themselves to Gaelic translation (*The Celtic Monthly*, III.1, 19).

He claims to own "about a score" of such translations, and requests readers to send him copies of any they may have. His intention was evidently to include Gaelic versions of Burns as a regular feature in the periodical: alas, this did not come to fruition, the only other such item being a rendering of "John Anderson my Jo" in the next issue, printed anonymously (the author being identified only as I. B. O.) and with no introduction.

The last translation mentioned by Jacks appeared in 1895, in an anthology entitled *Filidh nam Beann* (*The Mountain Bard*, subtitled *The Choicest Collection of Original and Selected Gaelic Songs now Known*.) The great eighteenth-century bards Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir and Uilleam Ros are among the poets included in this collection; which among many original poems, Jacobite songs and laments for the downfall of the cause being well represented, also contains a few translations, the only one from Burns being a most fitting one for its company: "Brosnachadh Bhruce" ("Bruce's War-song"—i.e. "Scots! wha hae wi' Wallace bled"). The author is the Rev. Angus MacIntyre from Mull: confusingly, the earlier Angus MacIntyre, "Abrach," is also represented in the book.

In 1903, a small collection called *Dàin Eadar-Theangaichte* ("Translated Poems") by T. D. MacDhomhnuill was published.¹⁴ Like *The Celtic Garland*, this is a pleasant selection of poems by Lowland Scottish writers (and one by an Englishman: Wordsworth's "Sweet Highland Girl"), including several by Burns. However, a striking difference is visible between MacDhomhnuill's translations and those of not only Fionn but all his other predecessors. Whereas the previous translations had uniformly been Gaelic poems in rhymed and metrical verse, conforming to the canons of Gaelic poetic style, MacDhomhnuill's are literal renderings, translating the originals more or less line by line and with fair verbal accuracy but making only inconsistent and partial attempts to render the results poetical. On any showing this is translation of a lesser order; and though MacDhomhnuill's work alone is scarcely evidence of any general tendency, it is tempting to see his failure to venture like his predecessors on true poetic translation as symptomatic of the loss of confidence in the language and its associated culture which had undoubtedly begun to affect the Gaelic communities, both Highland and Lowland, by the turn of the century.

¹⁴Struidhla (i. e. Stirling). Among the poems translated by MacDhomhnuill are "Cam' ye by Atholl," "The Auld Hoose," "Bonny Dundee," "Lochnagar" and "Loch Lomond."

Thereafter, the slow trickle of Gaelic translations from Burns appears to have dried up entirely until the appearance of MacPhater's collection. This venture was, on the author's own evidence, a labor of love engaged in as a relaxation from his "busy commercial life": that he has left no memorial as a Gaelic scholar or poet in his own right is suggested by the frustrating fact that none of the standard works in the field makes any mention of him, and none of the authorities whom I have consulted has been able to tell me anything more about him than can be deduced from the preface to his book. And though his translations are far less distinguished than those of most of his predecessors (as will be shown), he appears to have placed a damper on all subsequent ventures in the field for several decades.

The distinctive tradition of Scottish Gaelic poetry in the modern language had emerged around 1640, with the decline and disappearance (for a variety of social and historical reasons far beyond the scope of this paper) of the ancient classical tradition, common to Scotland and Ireland, of poetry in a highly conservative literary language which concealed the mutual divergence of spoken Gaelic in the two countries. It came to maturity with extraordinary rapidity, and enjoyed a truly brilliant efflorescence that lasted till the second quarter of the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Thereafter a decline is visible,¹⁶ reversed only when Gaelic took its part alongside Scots in the twentieth-century Renaissance; but the Gaelic poets who produced most of our Burns translations prior to MacPhater had a splendidly developed poetic tradition, with not only a wide range of stylistic possibilities (albeit defined by strict rules) but an abundant range of possible influences and models within which to incorporate their translations.

Gaelic is a stress-timed language, and its poetry requires a fixed number of stresses, but often also of syllables, per line. Rhyme has always been an integral part of Gaelic verse, but the concept is decidedly different from the corresponding one in other languages. In classical Gaelic poetry rhyme did not require that the final consonants must be identical, but only that they must belong to the same phonetic class: e.g., any of the three pre-aspirated plosives (the class corresponding to voiceless plosives in English, associated in spelling with the letters *p*, *t*, *c*) could rhyme with any other. Not all the classes were phonetically as self-explanatory as this, and in some cases sound-changes occurring relatively recently in the long history of Gaelic have obscured resemblances

¹⁵Cf. William J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig: Specimens of Gaelic Poetry 1550-1900*, 3rd edn. (Stirling, 1959). "There has never, perhaps, been a finer manifestation of national genius than was given by Gaelic Scotland in those two centuries" (Introduction, p. xix. Henceforth Watson); and Derick Thomson, *An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry* (London, 1974). "Gaelic poetry breathes a new air in the eighteenth century, and shows a new vigour" (p. 156).

¹⁶This, at any rate, has been the generally accepted critical opinion; but ongoing work by Donald Meek will call it into question.

that once existed.¹⁷ In the post-classical tradition these rules were less strictly observed, and the practice of planned rhyme involving final consonants as well as vowels virtually disappeared.

Not only end-rhyme but also internal rhyme was regularly used, and assonance, consonance and figures involving patterning of vowels of different quality but the same length were an essential part of a Gaelic poet's technique: whereas in Scots or English poetry (after the period of alliterative verse) devices of sound patterning other than end-rhyme have been regarded as optional decorations, in Gaelic they were a normal feature of all poetry. Alliteration, curiously enough,¹⁸ has not been regarded as a figure in its own right in the post-classical period, and has occurred, if at all, fortuitously rather than by design; as will be seen, however, the nineteenth-century Burns translations show several examples of what looks like deliberate alliterative patterning. As the nineteenth century wore on, Gaelic poets became more prone to adopt the stanza patterns of their English- and Scots-writing colleagues—a relatively easy transition, since the fundamental feature of stress timing and the conventions of end-rhymes and syllable counting were common to both—while still maintaining the much greater elaboration of sound patterning characteristic of the native tradition.

Some of the first translations of Burns provide fine illustrations of this stage in nineteenth-century Gaelic poetry.

Ye banks, and braes, and streams around
 The castle o' Montgomery,
 Green be your woods, and fair your flowers,
 Your waters never drumlie!
 There Simmer first unfald her robes,
 And there the langest tarry:
 For there I took the last Fareweel
 O' my sweet Highland Mary.¹⁹

¹⁷Colm Ó Baoill in "Rhyming Vowels before Long Liquids in Scottish Gaelic" (*Eigse*, 24 (1990), 131-46,) discusses, among other things, several cases of apparently false rhymes which are in fact historically true ones obscured by sound changes.

¹⁸Curiously, because the presence of alliteration as a structural feature from the earliest days of Germanic poetry is often explained by the suggestion that alliteration would naturally arise in languages with a tendency to give prominence, by stress and/or intonation, to the *initial* syllable of words, as rhyme would in languages (like French) which favored the *final* syllable. The former tendency is a feature of the Celtic languages equally with the Germanic.

¹⁹*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 660. Henceforth Burns.

A bhruachan, uilld 's a thulaichean,
 Mu chaisteal Ionar-lòchaidh!
 Gur taitneach leam ur sruthanan,
 'S ur bruthaichean fo neòinean!
 Mu 'r cuairt biodh samhradh luiseanach
 A' tuineachadh 'an conaigh!
 Oir's ann a ghabh mi cead gu bràth
 De m' Mhàiri àluinn bhòidhich!

Ye banks, burns and knowes around the castle of Inverlochy, pleasant to me are your streams and your gowany banks! Round about you may fertile summer always abide, for it is there that I took my last farewell of my lovely, beautiful Mary.

The translation which virtually sets the scene, Angus MacIntyre's version of "Highland Mary," is clearly the work of a skillful poet. The first line of this stanza shows a repetition of the short *u* in *uilld* and *thulaichean* (not *bhruachan*, where the *ua* represents a diphthong); the second of these words initiating a sequence of trisyllabic words with *u* in the first (stressed) syllable which continues throughout the stanza. One such, used as a rhyme word, is particularly potent: *luiseanach* means "abounding in herbs," from the root *lus* (herb) which occurs in the Gaelic names of literally dozens of wild flowers (the list in Dwelly's *Dictionary* extends over eight pages!). The first, third and fifth lines end in words of this structure; the breaking of the pattern in line 7, by the first occasion in the stanza of a stressed monosyllable to end a line, dramatically introduces a vowel which has not hitherto appeared, the long *à* immediately to reappear in the key words *Mhàiri* and *àluinn*. The word itself, too, is powerful: though long used simply as a conventional expression for "for ever," *gu bràth* is literally "until the Judgment". Gaelic has phonemic vowel-length distinctions, and the difference in duration between long and short vowels is very marked: the preceding use of the corresponding short vowel in *ghabh* probably highlights that of *bràth* by contrast rather than resemblance. A partial internal rhyme occurs in lines 2 and 3, with *chaisteal* and *taitneach*: the final consonants do not rhyme, but the short *a* in the stressed syllable and the medial palatalized consonants form a definite symmetry. The even-numbered lines end in disyllables with the recurring vowel *ò* (MacIntyre's spelling *conaigh* is less accurate than the more customary *còmhnuidh*), contrasting in both quality and duration with the *u* in the rhyme-words of the other lines.

It is interesting to contrast this carefully wrought poem with the translation of the same original by T. D. MacDhomhnuill over seventy years later.

Gach bruach, 's gach sruth, a tha mu'n cuairt
 Do chaisteal àrd Mhontgomerie,
 O, guidheam dhuibh gach crann fo bhlàth,
 'S 'ur n-uisgeachan gu glan a ruith;
 'N 'ur measg-sa 's tràth ni 'n Samhradh taoghal,

'S 'n 'ur measg-sa 's fhad a chéilidh,
Oir 'sann ri'r taobh ghabh mis' gu caomh
Mo chead le Màiridh Ghàidhealach.

Each bank and each burn that is around the tall castle of Montgomerie, O, let me pray for you that each tree be in flower and that your waters run clean; among you summer visits early and among you it long abides, for it was beside you that I fondly took my farewell of Highland Mary.

Some measure of sound-patterning is certainly present: a vowel-harmony on *ua* (*bruach—cuairt*) in the first line, an internal rhyme on *taobh* and *caomh* in the penultimate, alliteration on *g* (including the stressed syllable of *Mhontgomerie*) in the first quatrain. On the other hand, except for the assonance in *taoghal* and *caomh* there is no trace of sound-linkage between words at the ends of lines, and line 6 is metrically defective with only three stresses. The repetition of *'n 'ur measg-sa* (for Burns's repeated there) seems like an excessive emphasis on a semantically weak phrase; *a tha mu'n cuairt* and *Oir 'sann ri'r taobh* squander precious syllables by taking half a line to give the sense of Burns's "around" and "For there"; and the use of *guidheam* ("Let me pray"), where Burns conveys the desired sense by a subjunctive, is open to the same charge. Undeniably the translation is verbally closer to the original than MacIntyre's, but the sacrifice of poetic quality is patent.

An equally fine translation is Angus MacKechnie's version of "Mary in Heaven."

Thou lingering Star with lessening ray
That lovest to greet the early morn,
Again thou usherest in the day
My Mary from my Soul was torn—
O Mary! dear, departed Shade!
Where is thy place of blissful rest?
Seest thou thy Lover lowly laid?
Hearest thou the groans that rend his breast? (Burns, I, 492)

O! thusa reul le d' dhealradh ciùin,
Le 'n rùn bhì fàilteachadh nan tràth;
Tha thus' a ris a' luaidh às ùr,
An sgeul a dh' fhàg mi tùirseadh cràit';
O! Mhàiri, 'm faileas gràidh chaidh 'dhith!
C' àit' a nis bheil t' ionad tàimh?
Am faic thu 'n tràth 's t' fhear-ghràidh gun chlith?
An cluinn thu osna 'chridhe sgáinnt'?

O thou star with gentle radiance that greets the early [mornings] with love, again you are telling anew the tale that left me sorrowful and afflicted. O Mary, dear departed

shade! Where now is your place of slumber? Do you now see your helpless lover?
Do you hear the sigh of his riven heart?

This translation, to a greater extent than MacIntyre's, remains close to the original in phrasing and imagery; the almost precisely literal rendering of "dear departed shade" is striking, as is the use of a phrase which means "without strength" to convey the sense of Burns's "lowly laid." The original "See'st thou" and "Hear'st thou" to open the last two lines is maintained in *Am faic thu* and *An cluinn thu*. However, it is far more successful than MacDhomhnuill's in adhering to the conventions of Gaelic poetic technique. Vowel harmony, and in some cases full rhyme, links the alternate lines, and the device known as *aicill* (explained by Watson, p. xxxvii, as meaning "anticipation") of using vowel harmony to link a word at the end of one line to one at the beginning of the next is seen in *ciùin—rùn*, keywords meaning "gentle" and "love." Assonance on *à* (the vowel in the name *Màiri*) pervades the stanza; and a preponderance of *l* sounds in the first quatrain could be said to contribute to the harmonious flow of the lines.

Sound-patterning is used to excellent effect in the last of the nineteenth-century translations, the later Angus MacIntyre's version of "Scots wha Hae."

Scots, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham BRUCE has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,—
Or to victorie.—

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud EDWARD's power,
Chains and Slaverie.—(Burns, II, 707)

'Threun', le *Wallace*, dh'fhuing creuchd!
'S le *Bruce* chaidh dàn gu àr nan euchd!
Nis iarraibh bàs am blàr nam beum,
No buaidh gu treun an strìth!

So latha 'chruais—an uair tha làth'ir!
Feuch feuchd fo'n cruaidh air cluan an àir!
A teachd le'n uaill gu buaireas blàir!
A dheanamh tràilleam dhìbh!

Warriors! who have suffered wounds with Wallace, and have gone boldly with Bruce to slaughter with daring feats! Choose now death with blows on the battlefield, or mighty victory in struggle! This is the day of trial, now is the hour! Look at the army in their steel on the field of slaughter, coming in their pride to the turmoil of the battlefield to make slaves of you!

The sacrifice of Burns's "Scots!" was unavoidable, since the corresponding Gaelic word has four syllables, but the potent word *treun* provides an equally arresting opening; and the vowel is echoed in the rhyme words of the first three lines. In every long line except the first, the second and third of the four stressed syllables contain the same vowel, sometimes repeated in successive lines or even throughout the stanza (*dàn'—àr, bàs—blàr, chruais—uair, cruaidh—cluan, uaill—buaireas*). This device is maintained in all six stanzas of the poem. As in the original, the last syllable in each stanza contains the vowel *i*: corresponding to "Let him follow me!" is *An gaisgeach leanadh mi* ("Let the hero follow me"), the Gaelic pronoun happening to be fortuitously homophonous with the Scots; and *strìth* (strife) concludes the first and the last stanzas, in what is perhaps an instance of the ancient device of *dùnadh* (closing), a verbal link between the beginning and the end of a poem. Alliteration is also conspicuous, besides the easily visible instances in the passage quoted, other striking examples as *Cò 'n càs an rìgh, a rìogh'chd 's a reachd* ("Who in the cause of the King, the kingdom and the law") and *'Sar sliochd an sàs na 'n traillibh truagh* ("And our children in the bonds of wretched slavery"). A notable detail is the recurrence of three alliterating keywords *bàs* (death), *blàr* (battlefield) and *buaidh* (victory) in various collocations throughout the poem. Rhythmically, with the difference that each line (after the first) begins with an iambic foot instead of a hammer-stroke stressed syllable as in Burns, the lines fit the familiar tune admirably, and most, though not quite all, of the stressed syllables contain long vowels or diphthongs, enhancing their auditory force.

Finally, to illustrate the changing approach to Gaelic translations of Burns in the twentieth century, I will attempt to compare three renderings of two poems; in each case those by a nineteenth-century translator, Charles MacPhater and Roderick MacDonald.

"John Anderson, my Jo"

John Anderson, my jo, John
 When we were first aquent;
 Your locks were like the raven,
 Your bony brow was brent;
 But now your brow is beld, John,
 Your locks are like the snaw;
 But blessings on your frosty pow,
 John Anderson my Jo (Burns, II, 528-9).

Iain Chaimbeul, tùs ar n-eòlais,
 Bu bhòidheach, deas, do chruth;
 Le d' aodann fathail, uasal,
 'S le d' chuailleann dualach, dubh;
 Ach 's maol an diugh do cheann,
 'S tha do chiabh mar chobhar tràigh';

Ach 's caomh le m' chridh' do bhathais mhìn,
Iain Chaimbeul, fhir mo ghràidh.

— I. O. B. 1894

John Campbell, at the beginning of our acquaintance your appearance was handsome and trim with your princely, noble face and your curly black locks; but today your head is bald and your hair like foam on the shore, but dear to my heart is your smooth forehead, John Campbell my beloved.

Ian Anderson, mo laoich fhéin,
Nuair bha sinn òg le chéil',
Bha t' fhalt mar chlò an fhithich dhubh,
'S clàr t-eudann liomh is geal;
Ach tha do cheann fas lom a rùn,
'S do ghruag sneachd liath is caol;
'S mo bheannachd air do phearsa ghrinn,
Ian Anderson, mo ghaoil.

— Charles MacPhater, 1910

John Anderson, my own lad, when we were young together your hair was like the plumage of the black raven and the surface of your face was smooth and fair; but your head is growing bald, my dear, and your hair snow-white and thin, but my blessing on your handsome form, John Anderson, my love.

'Ic Anndrais, 's tu mo ghràdh, Iain,
Nuair chuir mi eòlas ort
Do ghruag bha mar am fitheach,
'S gun chlais bha d' aghaidh shnog;
Ach nis nad cheann tha sgall, Iain,
'S do chamagan tha bàn;
Ach beannachd air do cheann mar shneachd,
'Ic Anndrais, 's tu mo ghràdh.

— Roderick MacDonald, 1990

Anderson, my love, John, when I got to know you your hair was like the raven and your nice face without a wrinkle; but now your head is bald, John, and your curls are white, but blessings on your snowy head, Anderson my love..

It could be seen as a mark of confidence in the first translator, lacking in the others, that he ventures to change the hero's name (*metri causa* and, at least as far as the poem shows, for no other reason); and also that the description of the man in his youth suggests a Highland hero or chief described with the traditional epithets of Gaelic praise poetry rather than Burns's Ayrshire lad. The change in the simile, apparently for the sake of the alliteration (*chiabh—chobhar*) and rhyme (*tràigh—ghràidh*) is a further mark of an independent approach; and if snow connotes age and approaching death, sea-foam connotes evanescence, which in the context is equally appropriate. A translator who

departs radically from his original must restore the balance by producing a poem of equal merit in the target language; and this version indeed flows beautifully in Gaelic. Metrically it follows Burns's verse exactly (the 's *tha* of line 6 belonging prosodically to the previous line). The sound patterning is as elaborate as could be desired: as in the original, only the even-numbered lines rhyme, but the rhymes are perfect; *aicill* is visible in *eòlais—bhoidheach* and *uasal—chuailean*, this diphthong appearing a third time in *dualach*. Lines 5 and 6 are linked by alliteration on *ch*, and the same initial recurs in the last two lines, the final instance being on the hero's name. If this is a free translation, it is unmistakably an excellent one, naturalizing Burns's poem as a song fully deserving of a place in the Gaelic literary canon.

The same cannot be said for MacPhater's translation: indeed, the contrast is almost painfully evident. The literal relationship with Burns's original is closer (except for the apparent misunderstanding of "frosty pow"); but the end-rhymes are virtually gone: the only instance is, inappropriately, between the first and second lines (*fhéin—chéil—n* and *l* belonged to the same rhyming group in classical Gaelic), and apart from that sound linkage between line-final words is so sporadic as to suggest accident rather than design. *Caol—ghaoil* is a rhyme, though palatalized and non-palatalized versions of the same consonant could not rhyme together in the classical language; but such pairs as *geal—caol* or *rùn—ghrinn* do not qualify, since consonance alone is not recognized as a pattern in post-classical Gaelic. (And incidentally *n* and *nn* could not originally rhyme together, representing a simple and a geminate consonant clearly differentiated in pronunciation; though this is an example of a distinction lost in the modern language.) The meter lacks the steady rhythm of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables: whereas in the earlier version syllables that are rhythmically weak are uniformly semantically weak as well (the only exception being the name *Iain*—monosyllabic in Gaelic), MacPhater has several instances of demotion (*clàr, fas, sneachd*). Except for the extra syllable in the third line, the words could be sung to the familiar tune, but the fit is less comfortable. A clear error in the Gaelic appears once (I have been unable to ascertain whether MacPhater was a native speaker or not): *caol* means "thin" as applied, for example, to a human frame; thinning hair cannot be so described.

Roderick MacDonald's translation is both closer to Burns in actual sense than I. O. B's and metrically neater than MacPhater's. It can hardly be argued, however, that this makes it the best of the three as a Gaelic poem; indeed, the example provides a ready exposure of the traditional but fallacious notion that a translator's task is simply to find a balance between literal fidelity to the original text and exigencies of rhyme and meter in the target language. As a piece of Gaelic verse it shows a level of technical skill which is clearly midway between the two: the even-numbered lines show assonance but not full rhyme, and other instances of sound-patterning are so sporadic as to seem accidental. The vocabulary lacks the richness of the first translator's, and though the de-

vice of altering the normal Gaelic word order (*Do ghruag bha mar am fiteach* for *Bha do ghruag mar am fiteach*) has traditionally been permissible as an occasional means of emphasizing a word or phrase, its use in four successive lines is surely treading the boundaries of poetic license. MacDonald's method of incorporating the hero's name by leaving out the "John," though functionally sound, is emotionally dubious: would a long-married woman, speaking in tones of deep affection to her beloved husband, address him as "Anderson?" This poem is a workmanlike translation rather than an inspired transcreation; better, certainly, than a rendering which is not even workmanlike, but not representing the highest development of the art of literary translation.

"O whistle an' I'll come to ye, my Lad"

O WHISTLE, and I'll come to ye, my lad
O whistle, and I'll come to ye, my lad;
Tho' father, and mother, and a' should gae mad,
O whistle, and I'll come to ye, my lad.

But warily tent, when ye come to court me,
And come nae unless the back-yett be a-jee;
Syne up the back-style and let naeboddy see,
And come as ye were na comin to me—
And come as ye were na comin to me—

At kirk, or at market whene'er ye meet me,
Gang by me as tho' that ye car'd nae a flie;
But steal me a blink o' your bonie black e'e,
Yet look as ye were na lookin at me—
Yet look as ye were na lookin at me—

Ay vow and protest that you care na for me,
And whyles ye may lightly my beauty a wee;
But court nae anither, tho' jokin ye be,
For fear that she wyle your fancy frae me—
For fear that she wyle your fancy frae me.—²⁰

Dean fead is thig mise ga d' ionnsaidh a luaidh,
Dean fead is thig mise ga d' ionnsaidh a luaidh,
Biodh m' athair 's mo mhathair 's na càirdean an gruaim
Dean fead is thig mise ga d' ionnsaidh a luaidh.

²⁰*The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-7), III, 5-6. The Gaelic translators used this version of the song, which differs substantially from the version published in Kinsley.

A' tarruing ga m' fhaicinn, bi faicilleadh, ciùin,
 'S na tig nuair a chì thu a' chachleith dùint',
 Gabh nìos am frith-rath'd is ceil air gach sùil
 Gu 'm bheil thu a' tighinn ga m' fhaicinn-sa 'rùin.

Aig feill no 's a chlachan ged chì thu mi ann,
 Na seas rium a bhruidhinn, 's na crom rium do cheann,
 Thoir sùil thar do ghualainn 's rach seachad le deann;
 'S na gabh ort gu'n d' aithnich thu idir co bh' ann.

Gur coma leat mise, sior àicheidh gu dlùth
 'S ma 's fheudar e, labhair gu tàireil mu m' ghnùis,
 Ach feuch ri té eile nach tog thu do shùil—
 Air eagal s' gu'n tàlaidh i thusa a rùin (Henry Whyte, 1881).

Whistle and I'll come to you, my dear...let my father and mother and friends be annoyed... When you come to see me, be cautious and quiet, and don't come when you see the garden gate shut; come up the short cut and hide from every eye [the fact] that you're coming to see me, love. At a fair or in the kirk if you see me there, don't stop to talk to me and don't nod your head to me, cast an eye over your shoulder and go quickly past, and don't let on at all that you know who it is. Always be quick to deny that you care for me, and if you like, speak contemptuously of my appearance, but see that you don't cast your eye at another girl for fear that she entice you, love!

Dean fead is thig mi a t-ionnsaidh a ghaoil,
 Dean fead is thig mi a t-ionnsaidh a ghaoil,
 Rachadh athair is màthair air chuthach gun dail,
 Dean fead is thig mi a t-ionnsaidh a ghaoil.

Ach thoir thus an aire nuair thig thu an àird,
 Gum bi 'n geata cùil leth-fhosgailte ceart;
 'N sin suas an staidhir chùil, 's na faiceadh aon beò,
 Is thig mar nach tigeadh tu idir fo m' chleith.

Aig eaglais no faidhir nuair thachras sinn clis,
 Gabh seachad mar nach biodh tu a smaoinich air mis';
 Ach seall orm le priobadh o d' shùilean dubh-geur,
 Is seall mar nach biodh tu a'g amharc fa'm chomhair.

Ach mionnach is àichidh nach tòigh leat fhein mi,
 Is thoir mar do bharrail gu bheil m' bhoidheachd an dith,
 'S na dean sùiridh an spòrs air eagal a rùn,
 Gun iompaich iad t-àire o bhi smuaineach orm fèin (Charles MacPhater, 1911).

Whistle and I'll come to you, my dear... Let father and mother go mad without delay... But take care when you come up that the back gate is really half-open, come up the back stair and let no living person see, and come as if you weren't coming

under my concealment at all. At kirk or fair if we should meet swiftly, pass as if you weren't thinking of me, but look at me with a wink of your keen black eye, and look as if you weren't looking in my direction. But swear and deny that you like me, and give it as your opinion that I lack beauty, and don't do any courting in fun, love, for fear they turn your attention from thinking of me.

Dèan fead, is ad ionnsaigh gun tig mi, a Luaidh,
Dèan fead, is ad ionnsaigh gun tig mi, a Luaidh,
Ged chailleadh mo mhàthair is m' athair an stuaim,
Dèan fead, is ad ionnsaigh gun tig mi, a Luaidh.

Ach feumaidh tu faiceall 'n àm tighinn gum thaobh,
Na tig idir a steach ma tha 'n geata beag dùint'
Thig thairis am feansa gun duine fod shùil,
Is saoilleadh gach duine nach mise do ghaol.

Aig eaglais neo fèill nuair a choinneachas sinn,
Gabh seachad gun diù mar nach d' aithnich thu mi,
Ach sealladh thoir dhomh de do shùil dhubb a chi,
Is seall mar nach robh tu a' sealltainn orm fhìn.

Gu duingeann thoir bòid nach e mise do ghràdh,
Is air uairean can riutha nach eil mi ach grànd'
Ach sùgradh na dean ri té eile gu bràth,
Air eagal gun goid i do chridhe 's do làmh (Roderick MacDonald, 1990)

Whistle and I'll come to you, my dear... Though father and mother should lose their temper... But you must be careful when you come to me, don't come in at all if the wee gate is shut, come over the fence if you don't see anybody, and let everybody think I'm not your beloved. At kirk or fair when we meet, pass carelessly as if you didn't know me, but give me a look from your black eye which sees, and look as if you weren't looking at me. Swear forcefully that I'm not your love, and sometimes tell them I'm just ugly, but never play with another girl for fear she steal your heart and your hand.

The same judgment must be passed on the relative merits of Fionn's, MacPhater's and MacDonald's versions of "Whistle and I'll come to ye, my lad." All three provide translations which are, on the whole, faithful to the original; some of the departures from literal accuracy are *metri causa* and well within the limits of translator's license (e.g., Fionn's loss of "bonnie black e'e" and "though jokin' ye be"); others suggest misunderstanding (e.g. MacPhater's rendering of "back-style" or MacDonald's of the penultimate line); none, however, amounts to a significant reinterpretation. None of the translators attempts to replicate Burns's trick—one of the things that gives this song its unique and irresistible charm—of ending the first and the last line of each stanza with the word "me," with rhyme-words to match, for the excellent reason that the combination of pronouns and prepositions in Gaelic would almost certainly make it

impossible; but a glance at the sequences of line-final words shows that Fionn has used vowel-harmony, and in the second stanza full rhyme, in all four lines of each stanza; MacPhater has been content with sporadic instances of rhyme (*clis—mis*) or consonance—not recognized, as already noted, as a sound pattern at all in modern Gaelic verse—(*ghaoil—dail, rùn—fèin*), and MacDonald has resorted to an ABBA pattern in the first two stanzas and a quadruple assonance, but not always full rhyme, in the last. Again, Fionn's and MacDonald's versions could easily be sung throughout to the original tune, some lines of MacPhater's only with a struggle or in places not at all: the difference between Fionn's opening line with *mise* and MacPhater's with *mi* is an example, and lines like *Gum bi 'n geata cùil leth-fhosgailte ceart* or *Is thoir mar do bharrail gu bheil m' bhoidheachd an dìth* hardly suggest verse lines at all. A curious point in which MacPhater is open to criticism is that some of his words seem at odds with the light-hearted tone of the original: in his rendering of Burns's "should gae mad" he has used a word which means "insane" rather than merely angry; and for "vow and protest" he has chosen vocabulary which appears in the New Testament scene of Peter's denial of Christ! The sense of *fo m' chleith* is doubtful: the word means "hiding" or by extension "place of concealment." *Air mis'*, too, instead of *orm-sa*, is a flagrant grammatical error. MacDonald makes no such slips, and produces again a straightforward, singable translation with no pretensions to being anything else.

Translation is not an integral part of the Gaelic literary tradition as it is of the Scots: in the twentieth century many of the great Scots makars made translation of poetry from a wide range of times and lands an important part of their poetic oeuvres, but this is true of only two of their Gaelic confrères, George Campbell Hay and (to a lesser extent) William Neill. Roderick MacDonald's individual place among modern Gaelic poets is therefore greatly enhanced by his Burns renderings, and assuredly if he is compared to the only other writer who has attempted to translate Burns's complete output, he emerges very favorably from the comparison. But in producing versions which conform to the prosody of the originals he is not innovating but harking back to the practice of most of his predecessors before MacPhater; and as Gaelic poems, it would be unrealistic to claim that his renderings fully match the best of theirs. As we salute Roderick MacDonald for the success which he has achieved, we may hope that the field of Gaelic translations from Burns will not be regarded as closed.

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