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Colin Nicholson

Poetry of Displacement: Sorley MacLean and his Writing



For a poetry reading in the winter of 1973, Sorley MacLean, then Writer in Residence at Edinburgh University, introduced his guest Geoffrey Hill by describing him as a difficult writer whose verse was moved by an intellectual passion. Visibly pleased, the Englishman expressed his delight at being so described by a poet of MacLean's stature. It seemed then to be a telling moment of mutual recognition, and for those of us who can only enjoy MacLean's work in English (though with the sound of his native readings echoing in our ears)¹ it remains a provocative memory. A passionate intellect invigorates almost everything the Gaelic poet has written, with powerful emotion characteristically driving a wedge into intellectual conviction.

Two years before Hill's visit, Iain Crichton Smith's translations of *Poems to Eimhir* had appeared, and in the intervening decade, helped by the dual-language appearance of the poet's own *Selected Poems*² in 1977,

¹In a review for *The Scotsman* (Feb. 15, 1975), George Campbell Hay eloquently characterizes the aural impact of MacLean's reading: "It is an impressive experience to listen to Sorley MacLean as he performs....He is gifted with what the Welsh call *Hwyl*, the power of elevated declamation, and his declamation is full of feeling."

²*Spring tide and Neap tide: Selected Poems 1932-72* (Edinburgh, 1977). All references to the poems are from this edition and are given in parenthesis in the text.

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MacLean's reputation in the English-speaking world has grown spectacularly. An English-language edition of his poems is in preparation in the United States, and the Stornoway publisher Acair has now brought out *Ris á Bhruthaich: The Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*,³ much of it, too, in English.

Though Gaelic scholars will find a variety of their own preoccupations stimulated by these critical writings, for the rest of us they are of considerable value for the light they shed upon the author's own poetic preferences and predilections. They are also evidence of the indefatigable energy with which the poet promoted the language and poetry of his people. A corresponding intensity of relationship between poet and place becomes a natural attribute of MacLean's art.

One remark in his Introduction to this collection of essays and prose pieces reminds us of the unprecedented pressures which helped to shape his poetry. "In 1938 the continuing existence of Gaelic as a spoken language seemed a forlorn hope and Europe itself appeared about to be delivered into the hands of Teutonic racist fascism" (p.3). And a comment from the essay "Realism in Gaelic Poetry" helps us to focus upon this gathering of feeling and circumstance. "The great poem is always in some way realistic in that, however transfigured it is by passion, emotion or fusion of emotion and intellectuality, it has its roots in reality, not in a dream world" (p. 17). A unique triangulation of perceived cultural decline, the personal anguish of frustrated loves and a world at war led to the creation of a body of writing recognized as being among the finest of its time.

At the end of the nineteen-thirties, while contending forces of fascism and democracy, then fascism and communism, tore Europe and then the world apart, Sorley MacLean's involvement with two women collapsed painfully amid complicated intensities, uncertainty and doubt. For a year or two in the early thirties, MacLean loved a woman he had first met at the very beginning of the decade. Then, in August 1937, he met an Irish woman to whom he was irresistibly drawn, but to whom he could never make any kind of advances. The insoluble difficulty lay in the fact that MacLean was under the mistaken impression that one of his greatest friends, who was responsible for the poet first meeting the woman in question, wanted to marry her himself. Under such circumstances, MacLean saw no choice but to hold off.

In December 1937, he left Skye for Mull. This was for him a traumatic time anyway, since evidence of The Clearances was much more pressingly felt there than on his native island, and MacLean is the best known of all Mull names. "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." He was

³(Stornoway, 1985).

already deeply affected by the Spanish Civil War which in one of its aspects also appeared to him like *The Clearances*. It took, after all, no great leap of the imagination to perceive in Franco and his landlord, big capitalist and Roman Catholic support, a Hispanic version of the landlords of *The Clearances* and the Church of Scotland at that earlier time. But there was more to it than that.

For serious economic and domestic reasons, MacLean was prevented from volunteering to fight in Spain. In his poem "Prayer," though, these things are dealt with differently. Here, the speaker is suffering agonies of spirit

because I would not cut away the love of you,
and that I preferred a woman to crescent History. (p. 22)

The question which haunts this poem, and which came to undermine many of MacLean's subsequent self-reflections, soon follows:

But who will call my white love
Surrender, faintness or shadow? (p.24)

Today, Sorley MacLean's tenacious memory recalls the corrosive effects of that abiding conflict between love, politics and history. "It was not a case of an actual choice between the woman and Spain. I was prevented from going to Spain by family circumstances. But I realised that if it were a pure choice between the woman and Spain, I'm afraid I would have chosen the woman. I knew, I knew that would have been my choice." The imaginative sense of being so divided against himself wrought distinctive effects in his poetry, as the claims and counter-claims of love and political commitment took their toll. "The Turmoil" ends:

And her beauty cast a cloud
over poverty and a bitter wound
and over the world of Lenin's intellect,
over his patience and his anger. (p.8)

In other ways his tragic predicament arose from the fact that in his conception, the woman he had loved could not fail to hold in contempt what "The Selling of a Soul" terms his "little, weak, base spirit." Its last stanza speaks the withering self-perception that remains, as well as the continuing self-deception of unreasoning love:

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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 (p.18)

Worse was to come. The Irish woman got married in December 1939; nor did she marry MacLean's friend. It subsequently transpired that there had never been any question of that marriage taking place. In that same December, MacLean was led to believe that the woman he had loved much earlier for a year or two, "had been desperately unfortunate in a personal relationship and had suffered a very great disability in consequence." Also in that fateful December the wife of MacLean's brother John began her last illness. She was to die in January, 1940. "Her last illness coincided with me finding out about this terrible misfortune of this other woman; and the point is that I was so touched by the revelation that this woman had made to me, about her own condition, that I became madly devoted."

There now began a time of blackest and most wretched melancholy. References in several of the poems about this time to a woman's wounded and mutilated body are to be taken literally:

Dead stream of neap in your tortured body,
which will not flow at new moon or full,
in which the great springtide of love will not come—
but a double subsidence to lowest ebb. (p.40)

"I was completely wrong about this, too, but I had no way at all, as far as I can see, of finding out, because between one thing and another, I saw her only once between December 1939 and late July or early August 1941." The emotional cataclysm which he experienced stopped the writing of "The Cuillin," the long poem on which he had been working, and "The Blue Rampart" charts aspects of this disturbance:

But for you the Cuillin would be
an exact and serrated blue rampart
girdling with its march-wall
all that is in my fierce heart (p. 42)

Here as throughout the poetry, metaphors of topographical place and displacement express psychic dislocation:

And the brown brindled moorland
and my reason would co-extend—
but you imposed on them an edict
above my own pain. (p. 44)

In “The Woods of Raasay” this experience of displacement receives answering configuration as the poet metaphorically re-populates the Island of Skye. In a sense this poem stands as something of a corrective to the pervasive tenor of blight and division in the writing which was to follow. On native ground, MacLean discovers the image of endurance and perseverance sufficient to his needs:

It is that they rise
from the miserable torn depths
that puts their burden on mountains. (p.100)

So this was, as MacLean acknowledges, an immensely creative anguish.

Quite a few of the poems were not published at all in 1943 because they would have been too explicit. There were some in which I actually represented myself almost as a rejected lover, which I wasn't by any manner of means—as far as I thought then! The part of the *Selected Poems* called “The Haunted Ebb” was written during this period, but “The Woods of Raasay” was written during the summer of 1940 before I went away to the army. A lot of people think that my very best stuff is “The Woods of Raasay”—you know, everything else was accelerated by going away to the war. Those poems which are grouped together under the sub-headings “The Grey Crop” and “The Broken Image” are a commentary on my state of mind between December 1939 and August 1941, and they were written after September 1941 and before the end of 1943.

By the spring of 1941, then, MacLean was on draft to go abroad; still nothing was resolved by the time he left Britain for active service.

I was in the Libyan desert first, and the Western desert for most of 1942. And it wasn't a very pleasant place. Well, the point is, after such an experience, and the fact that the business was not really properly resolved. It wasn't so much a tragedy now, but a kind of perplexity; not knowing what was what. It was the business of having to go away to the desert on top of all this; of having made a fool of myself, through what I can only describe as a kind of quixotic rashness. But then, I don't know in the circumstances what else I could have done except forgotten all about her.

Wounded in action in November, 1942, MacLean was in various military hospitals until late 1943.

I was in a battery command post, and went up on a landmine. The wheel of the battery command post was thrown about thirty yards, and it was mostly my bones in my feet broken; metatarsals and heelbones, by blast. I had superficial flesh-wounds on my legs, but it was my feet that took it. mind you, I was hit twice before that but I didn't become a casualty. I got wounded with a bit o' shell business in the thigh away back in May, '42. I was dressed for that. The second time,

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Oh Christ I was lucky! I was hit there (strikes his chest above the heart) by a bit of shell casing as big as that (his fist). But it had ricocheted so much....it would have torn me to bits. That was during the big retreat, which started on 15th June, '42. Then Rommel was stopped on the Alamein line, on the second of July, which was a hell of a day. He was stopped really by massed artillery.

In the creative stress of his poetic reconstruction, MacLean was living mythically—Eimhir was the loveliest of the heroes' women in the early Irish sagas—and torn reason, with other images of division, forms a continuing leitmotif in his verse, "just as the reason is torn/ to put beauty on poem or melody" (p. 100):

I do not feel kindly towards Nature,
which has given me the clear whole understanding,
the single brain and the split heart. (p.24)

Gaelic itself seemed about to disappear from the face of the earth, subjected to a kind of discursive clearance; so the imminent devastation of Europe projected the death of the language onto a world-historical stage:

I do not see the sense of my toil
putting thoughts in a dying tongue
now when the whoredom of Europe
is murder erect and agony. (p.56)

Imagery of personal despoliation is extended to register the impact of international events, and it is part of MacLean's achievement to have pushed language to the edge of emotional tolerance just when the territory of Gaelic discourse seemed destined for narrower confines. Such pressures of sensibility, time and circumstance lend a resonance to his verse as, out of the darkest hour of personal distress came his sequence of exquisite love-poems.

Beyond this, the desolate music of a poem like "The Island" elevates regret for the enforced migration of the people of Skye to an elegized possible future for many more besides. Displacement becomes the figure of the larger fate:

Pity the eye that sees on the ocean
the great dead bird of Scotland. (p. 74)

Remorse of an intensely personal kind finds fitting correlations in historical contexts, enabling the poet to "put the people's anguish/ in the steel of my lyric" (p. 38). As the closing stanza of "Humility" expresses it:

I have burst from the husk
which my life's condition imposed
and my spirit's blossom has come
out of distress an adamant. (p. 52)

For such a voice, continental developments composed an answerable environment of betrayal, deceit and agonized strife. What MacLean came later to call his "rash folly" is transmuted in his poems into a self-lacerating image of constancy become obsessive and of resolution disfigured by a kind of delirium. Political commitment and private passion are in open conflict, and MacLean's lyric grace expresses a soul in torment:

This is the ultimate place,
after the brave boast of your aspiration
the farther end whence there is no return
but broken heart and sharp pride. (p.134)

Clearly, his own anguish articulates with wartime desperation, intensifying an already overpowering sense of humiliation, loss and exposure. Isolated on the territorial fringe of beleaguered Gaeldom, MacLean saw on the Russo-German battlegrounds of the Eastern front a life and death struggle taking place for the defense of the West. At any rate, this is in some senses the measure of "The Haunting":

You see, I knew from the beginning, I think, that Hitler would attack Russia, and I considered Russia then the only thing that really stood between us and even a thousand years of fascist domination of Europe. You must remember that America was not yet in the war. "The Haunting" was written in July 1941. Hitler attacked Russia on the 22nd of June 1941 and his armies reached the Dnieper on the third of July, a hell of a rapid advance. I really thought the game was up. Good or bad, the behaviour of the Russian government, they saved us.

"The Haunting" fuses meditations upon love for a woman with the seemingly imminent demise of Gaeldom. Its structure of syntax, characteristically, proposes a mode of utterance logically sequential in form, suasive in intent, but mined by a fatal certainty. The poem becomes as much a lament for the misdirection of its creator's own "newly lit consciousness" as it is for the absent woman. "The Haunting" thus laments a sense of personal and historical displacement, as a clear bardic duty to sing his people's fate came into conflict with his heart's desire:

Though the Red Army of humanity is
in the death-struggle beside the Dnieper,
it is not the deed of its heroism
that is nearest my heart,

but a face that is haunting me,
following me day and night,
the triumphant face of a girl
that is always speaking. (p.64)

It is difficult to read that last stanza, or lines like “my thought comes on you when you were young” from the marvellous “Spring Tide” without being put in mind of the preoccupations of Thomas Hardy. Indeed, there are moments when the rhythms and intonations of, say, Hardy’s “At Castle Boterel” seem to speak through the Gaelic poet’s English versions:

What was and is now of us,
though they would last forever,
how would a tale of them come
from distant shores?⁴ (p.62)

Both poets are haunted by the absence of a loved woman and, for all their acknowledged differences, in their singular combinations of elegiac historicism and passionate affection, there may well be something of a common inspiration. Both MacLean and Hardy, moreover, pressed their remarkable lyric gifts into the service of a profound cultural pessimism, and though he is diffident about accepting the comparison, Sorley MacLean talks eloquently of the religious environment which helped to shape his own perceptions. And a simple perusal of the history which his lifetime spans suggests its own formative influences upon his sense of time.

You see, I have a great admiration for Hardy’s poetry, and of course I have a very definite pessimism. I was brought up on an island where everybody was of a church which envisaged an eternity of physical and mental torture for practically everyone: where works did not matter unless you were Effectually Called, unless you saw the light and all that, and even the best people didn’t necessarily see the light; and that included not only people of other creeds, but the great majority of the adherents of that church itself. So that was bound to cause a pessimism. In any given congregation of the Free Presbyterians, about 5% of the adults took communion. The rest were just adherents. And although they didn’t say that all the adherents were going to hell, the assumption was that the great bulk of them would—unless they saw the light, unless they were Effectually Called and so on.

⁴MacLean refers to these versions as “line by line translations,” because “they’re hardly meant to be poetry in their own right. But they’re a kind of compromise.”

It is difficult to determine the line between sincerity and mischief when MacLean adds with a twinkle in his eye, "mind you, the Church of Scotland has not believed that for a hell of a long time."

The Free Presbyterians and the Free Church talked about the filthy rags of human righteousness. How it didn't signify, unless, unless... And they still believe that! D'you know, the most remarkable description of the Free Presbyterian hell I have ever read is the sermon in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Oh God that is a powerful thing! But still, although human righteousness may be filthy rags, they are by-products of a Saving Grace, and their non-existence is a very dangerous thing! The Roman Catholics had a safety-valve in purgatory, and also the fact that they did not throw the responsibility so much onto the individual. If you were alright in the eyes of the Church, there was at least some comfort in that. It was effectually milder, at least. But there was nothing like that Mass business in the strict Calvinist churches.

And then, of course, having been born just before the Great War, I remember being terribly affected by the miners' strike in 1926, although I'd only be fourteen then, I was in Portree school. When even a man like Sir John Reith could say to Churchill, "how would you like to live on 25 shillings a week?" Even Reith said that! And y'see, actually, though Edinburgh hadn't as many slums as Glasgow, it had some of the worst in Europe; it had some of the worst overcrowding in Europe, though the slums were not as extensive as in Glasgow! It was 1929 when I came to Edinburgh University, and that's when the Wall Street crash was, and the great Depression was at its height in 1931. And, of course, there came in this hellish National Government.

Just past his seventy-fifth birthday, Sorley MacLean finished our conversations with a question purely his own, and one which a cultural historian capable of such precise recall has every right to ask: "What is the time now, because I've got this damned watch which keeps stopping."

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