

2007

## Sorley MacLean's "An Cuilithionn": A Critical Assessment

Christopher Whyte

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Whyte, Christopher (2007) "Sorley MacLean's "An Cuilithionn": A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 35: Iss. 1, 508–525.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/40>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Christopher Whyte*

## Sorley MacLean's "An Cuilithionn": A Critical Assessment

The long poem Sorley MacLean wrote between spring and the end of 1939, taking its title from the mountain range on the Isle of Skye that constitutes its central image, has not so far been the focus of sustained critical attention. The fact that a wide range of manuscript and typed materials relating to the poem, divided between the University libraries of Aberdeen and St Andrews and the National Library of Scotland, has now come into the public domain, makes initial reconnoitering and assessment of the poem particularly urgent. In a separate essay on the emergence of the text, I argue that it is useful to posit three different versions or states of "An Cuilithionn."<sup>1</sup> The earliest is the Gaelic text in MacLean's hand lodged in Aberdeen, containing a small but significant number of lines not preserved elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The middle version

---

<sup>1</sup>See Christopher Whyte, "Sorley MacLean's 'An Cuilithionn': The Emergence of the Text," in Wilson McLeod, James E. Fraser & Anja Gunderloch, eds. *Cànan & Cùltar: Language and Culture: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig*, 3 (2006), 111-27. Preparatory research for both essays benefited from an award by the Advanced Humanities Research Board.

<sup>2</sup>See the small black loose-leaf notebook in MS 2864 in Special Collections at Aberdeen University Library. For a fuller account of the Aberdeen materials, see Christopher Whyte, "Sorley MacLean's *Dàin do Eimhir*: New Light from the Aberdeen Holdings," in Michel Byrne, Thomas Owen Clancy & Sheila Kidd, eds. *Litreachas & Eachdraidh: Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 2 Glaschu 2002 / Literature & History: Papers from the Second Conference of Scottish Gaelic Studies Glasgow 2002* (Glasgow, 2006), pp. 183-99.

never reached definitive form, given that plans to publish the poem in the wake of MacLean's love sequence the *Dàin do Eimhir* failed to materialize. It would embrace the materials lodged in Edinburgh,<sup>3</sup> with passages marked for deletion, corrections and substitutions, as well as the fair copy of both the Gaelic text and MacLean's English translation which was bound on Douglas Young's orders and lodged in St Andrews.<sup>4</sup> Detailed comments by Dugald McColl on an early draft of MacLean's English translation, along with marginal observations in Robin Lorimer's hand on the typed fair copy of this translation, offer fascinating insights into the reception of the poem when it was still in this fluctuating state of becoming.<sup>5</sup> The third version is that which appeared in five successive issues of the literary magazine *Chapman* where, with the benefit of nearly half a century's hindsight, MacLean allowed "what I think tolerable of it" to be published between 1987 and 1989. For the purposes of the present essay, the poem will be identified with this third version,<sup>6</sup> though towards the close I will have something to say about how far this initial, tentative assessment holds, or requires modification, when set against the earlier versions.

Because it is natural and reassuring to proceed from the known to the unknown, there is a temptation to view "An Cuilithionn" against the background of *Dàin do Eimhir*, the greater part of which was written between September 1939 and April 1940. It would however be wise to resist such a temptation, given the extraordinary originality of MacLean's project in "An Cuilithionn." One of the pleasures the love sequence offers its readers is the rich intertextuality it sets in motion. MacLean was able to channel into his own poetic creations a vast range of reading, from the Latin poets of the Augustan era through the Provençal troubadours, the Italians of the *dolce stil nuovo* and the English metaphysicals (all three mediated to a certain extent by their rediscovery at the hands of the Modernists), to Baudelaire and European Symbolism, not forgetting the fundamental role ascribed to Shakespeare's sonnets and to the poetry of Yeats. A deliberate effect of this intertextuality was to "re-enfranchise" Gaelic lyrical poetry within the wider European context. Readers are constantly surprised to experience this kind of centrality in a sequence written in a language which had been relegated to a marginal position at least since the

---

<sup>3</sup>MSS 29558, 29559, 29560.

<sup>4</sup>St Andrews University Library Muniments Dep 17.

<sup>5</sup>These materials can be consulted in the National Library of Scotland MS 29559.

<sup>6</sup>The text is quoted from the collected volume *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/Sorley MacLean O Chaille gu Bearradh / From Wood to Ridge* (Manchester and Edinburgh, 1999). MacLean's remark is on p. 63. Line numbers, absent from the printed text, are here preceded by a Roman numeral indicating which Part or "Earrann" of the poem the passage comes from.

time of the Renaissance.”<sup>7</sup> “An Cuilithionn,” on the other hand, taken as a whole, never quite sounds like anything else. If MacLean’s passionate devotion to traditional Gaelic song is evident throughout the love sequence, then in “An Cuilithionn” Gaelic material is frequently refracted through a kind of nostalgic parody. When one recognizes deliberate echoes, as in the monologue of the Gesto girl kidnapped and transported to America on the Slave Ship,<sup>8</sup> the implicit tenderness is accompanied by a sense of something irrevocably lost, making MacLean’s approach not dissimilar to that of European Decadent poets such as Laforgue or Corbière, with their distorted, barrel-organ like “remembered harmonies.”<sup>9</sup>

The writing of “An Cuilithionn” was dovetailed or interleaved with that of the sequence, in the course of what was undoubtedly an *annus mirabilis* for MacLean’s poetry. “An Cuilithionn,” he tells Douglas Young, was broken off about two thirds of the way through Part II, before the “Seo latha eile” sections.<sup>10</sup> The interruption was caused by MacLean’s renewing acquaintance with a Scottish woman he had known as a girl. She would become the dominating figure in the Eimhir sequence. Lyrics addressed to her, and to an Irish woman to whom he never declared his love, flowed from his pen starting in September, and it was only in November that he resumed work on “An Cuilithionn.” The pace of writing, while MacLean was teaching evacuated children in Hawick in the Scottish Borders, at the same time making frequent visits to Edinburgh, was impressive. He tells Young that “there was a short break between the end of Part II and the beginning of Part III and then again after the end of Part IV and again after [the] end of Part VI.” Despite these brief interruptions, the poem as a whole, running to more than 1600 lines, had been completed by December 20<sup>th</sup>, when MacLean received the fateful letter from the Scottish woman telling him their relationship could never reach fulfillment. The sole exception was the “C6 seo” sequence constituting the last 36 lines, “composed in bed in Raasay in the early hours of Jan[uary] 1<sup>st</sup> 1940.”

---

<sup>7</sup>The annotated edition published as one of its annual volumes by the Association of Scottish Literary Studies attempts to do justice to these aspects of the sequence. See Christopher Whyte ed. *Somhairle MacGill-Eain/ Sorley MacLean Dàin do Eimhir* (Glasgow, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>See VI, 1-70.

<sup>9</sup>This approach is developed in my essay “MacLean and Modernism: ‘Remembered Harmonies’” in John M. Kirk & Dónall P. Ó Baoill, eds., *Legislation, Literature and Sociolinguistics: Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland*. Belfast Studies in Language, Culture and Politics, 13 (2005), 86-102.

<sup>10</sup>See the “Dating Letter” quoted in *Dàin do Eimhir* pp. 138ff, where MacLean also discloses that “the ‘Ann an talla’ lyric: at I, 91 ff. had been “written in Mull in the spring of 1938” and was subsequently incorporated in the poem.

The incantatory, almost drugged quality of the peroration may owe something to the poet's feverish state at the time. He tells Young that he "had a bad throat" and had taken to bed "immediately the New Year was in."

But had "An Cuilithionn" really been completed? When he published the peroration in 1970, in Gaelic in the quarterly *Gairm* and in English in an issue of *Lines Review* specially devoted to his work,<sup>11</sup> MacLean presented it as the conclusion of a long poem which had been brusquely interrupted in December 1939. Nonetheless, the poet's pronouncements about his work deserve to be treated with a degree of caution. As will become evident, the peroration provides a suitable conclusion to what has gone before, and the poem as a whole, especially in the form in which it finally reached the public, shows clear signs of planning and of careful, consistent structuring.

In twelve prefatory lines, which may be described as a dedication, MacLean placed "An Cuilithionn" beneath the twin patronage of Hugh MacDiarmid and the eighteenth-century Gaelic master poet Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, also known as Alexander MacDonald. Linking the two in this fashion came quite naturally to him. In an interview with Aonghas MacNeacail published in 1979, MacLean recalled how

In *Cenchrastus* [MacDiarmid] had paid a great tribute to Alexander MacDonald. He had sensed something in Alexander MacDonald, he had sensed this tremendous energy, this verve in Alexander MacDonald, and I recognized that he was right in that. When I met him in 1934 I agreed to help him (I was a student in Moray House then) in translating MacDonald's "Birlinn" and Macintyre's "Ben Dorain" and a few other Gaelic poems, but especially the "Birlinn." I always felt that Hugh MacDiarmid did better with MacDonald than he did with Macintyre.<sup>12</sup>

MacLean and MacDiarmid had, then, worked together on translating MacDonald's poem, and MacLean discerned a clear affinity between the twentieth-century poet who strove so valiantly to reconcile communism and nationalism and his eighteenth-century predecessor, who took militancy in the Jacobite cause to the extent of converting to Catholicism. They had in common a political commitment pursued at great personal expense, poetic ambition and innovation, not least in the lexical field, and a vein of scurrilous invective directed at their opponents which can be traced in several passages present in the earlier two versions of "An Cuilithionn," but deleted in the third.

---

<sup>11</sup>See *Gairm*, 72 (Autumn 1970), 319-21 and *Lines Review*, 34 (Sept. 1970), 16-8, where the description of the passage as "extracts" only makes sense in terms of the earlier redaction of the poem.

<sup>12</sup>Angus Nicolson, "An Interview with Sorley MacLean," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, XIV (1979), 27.

MacLean returns to these patrons towards the end of Part III, once the heroic stallion which will lend such impetus to the central sections of the poem has been presented:

Saoil nan robh mi fhìn 'na dhìollaid  
nuair thàinig faramachd na bliadhna,  
an robh mi air beireachd air MacDhiarmaid,  
ge cruaidh a dhoineanachd thar iarmailt?  
An robh mi air beireachd air MacDhòmhnail,  
a dh'aindeoin beithir-theine a ghlòir-san?

[Think, if I had been in his saddle  
when the clangour of the year had come,  
would I have caught up with MacDiarmid,  
though hard his tempest across the skies?  
Would I have caught up with MacDonald  
for all the lightning fire of his glory?] III, 90-91

This revised passage had been more aggressive in its 1939 formulation, which implies that MacLean would indeed have surpassed his models.<sup>13</sup> His place, he insists, is alongside a lesser bard, the Skye woman Mary Macpherson, strongly associated with the Land League Movement which eventually won a degree of security for crofter tenancies:

Ach chan fhaca mi a' mhórachd  
's feumar stad far am fógainn,  
Sgitheanach ri taobh Màiri Móire.

[But I did not see the greatness  
and I must stay where it suffices,  
a Skyeman by the side of the great Mary.] III, 90-91

She, then, is the third patron of “An Cuilithionn,” even though her invocation reeks of the kind of modesty topos that led Eliot to cite Pound as *il miglior fabbro* in *The Waste Land*. Her first appearance is early on in Part I, where the speaker shares her yearning vision of a “sàr-eilean 'na shiantan” [noble island in its storm-showers] (I, 66-7) which can only be Skye. Mention of her immediately introduces the preoccupation with the clearances and the tragic depopulation of the island which will dominate the first part of the poem.

---

<sup>13</sup>The earlier version reads “A Dhia, nach robh mi fhìn 'na dhìollaid...bha mi air beireachd air MacDhiarmaid... bha mi air beireachd air MacDhòmhnail...” See NLS Ms 29558 f51, translated in Ms 29559 f17 as “God, had I been in his saddle... I should have overtaken MacDiarmid... I should have caught MacDonald...”

Thankless as the task is, it will be useful at this point to attempt to summarize the progress of "An Cuilithionn." At the very least, this can serve to bring to the reader's attention signs of a plannedness too frequently overlooked in a work which has tended to be read as a medley, a haphazard sequence of disparate, poorly integrated elements.

After speculating about what he might achieve, were he possessed of a tiny share of the talent of MacDiarmid or MacDonald, the speaker describes in Part I the experience of climbing his favorite summit among the Cuillins, Sgurr nan Gillean. The panoramic view attained brings home the landscape's emptiness, and in a diabolical ceilidh dance the ghosts of its despoilers gather on Sgurr na Banachdaich. The din of their celebration cannot, however, drown out the cries of their victims, or dim the memory of those who have fallen in the cause of international socialism. The opening of Part II evokes the mountains in their more terrible aspect. The speaker is now on Sgurr Dubh, and he sets the suffering of the Skye men against the heroic resistance of the Asturian miners, which was a prelude to the outbreak of civil war in Spain. At the close of Part II, the bog of Maraulin north and west of the Cuillins is addressed as if it were a person. In Part III it spreads, threatening to engulf three continents and, with them, the most heroic achievements of socialist resistance. News is given that the Stallion of Vaternish, like the Cuillins a geological formation, but separate from them and single, has been castrated by the bourgeoisie and their hangers-on. The poet's love, however, has not been engulfed, and he predicts that the bog will recede and the Cuillin rise above it.

The briefly affirmative note struck here will be repeated, and gradually reinforced, throughout the remainder of "An Cuilithionn." The short Part IV returns dejectedly to the morass, but as Part V opens, the stallion is seen bounding across the peaks of the Cuillin. Socialist heroes are evoked and a translation of the lyric "If There Are Bounds to Any Man" from Hugh MacDiarmid's 1935 volume *Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems*<sup>14</sup> articulates the speaker's conviction that any limits set to men's activity can only be of their own making. Part VI begins with monologues from two forced emigrants, a girl captured while gathering shellfish and a man shipwrecked and drowned off Vatersay. Then word passes to a range of different embodiments of Clio, the muse of history. Radical action in Scotland and in London is foretold, with an echo of the MacDiarmid poem which concluded the previous part. In Part VII, a Promethean hero is depicted, drawing on both Aeschylus and Shelley, and the Bulgarian communist Dimitrov, who succeeded in defending himself against the charge of having set fire to the Reichstag in 1933, emerges as a contemporary embodiment of this ideal. In a mirroring and overcoming of the diabolical ceilidh from Part I, the ridges of the Cuillin are popu-

---

<sup>14</sup>See Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, eds., *Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems 1920-1976* (London, 1978) I, 555. Henceforth MacDiarmid.

lated by a range of such heroes, including Christ, and by personifications of events, such as the Paris Commune, or the Easter Rising in Dublin, which marked salient points in their struggle. The rising of the Cuillins over the horizon has become irresistible, and the whole poem culminates in the vision of a ghost, perceived rather than evoked by the speaker, with the ultimate triumph of the heroic mountains.

Summaries of this kind are ungrateful. Involving as they do a whole series of omissions, they themselves constitute a species of interpretation. One crucial element which will, however, have been evident above is the movement of the poem between what may be termed a microworld and a macroworld. If the movement were in one direction only, we could speak of an urge to internationalize the recent history of Skye and, more broadly, of Scotland's Gaelic speaking communities. But what matters is to set microworld and macroworld in relation to one another, to offer the larger as a context for the smaller without ever losing sight of the latter's specificity. Not until the Skye coordinates have been firmly established in the body of Part I is the voice of those forced into exile transmuted into that of Lenin, Marx or John MacLean. The technique is especially striking in the following lines:

's ged bhiodh Beul-àth nan Trì Allt  
mar a' Bholga làn is mall,  
leanadh sgriachail a' Chuilithinn  
ri mo chluasan 'na dhuilighinn.

[and though the Confluence-of-the-Three Burns were  
like the Volga full and slow,  
the screeching of the Cuillin would follow  
my ears with its anguish:] II, 74-5

Though the lens should broaden to include communist Russia, the realities of the depopulated Hebrides must not be forgotten. This is of course consistent with a shrewd political and historical vision. The clearances cannot be regarded as internal to the Gaelic language community and of relevance to it alone. They are an instance of how macropolitical events affected that community, of its interaction with the world beyond. And if, at II, 82-3, the speaker laments that, since the days of the Battle of the Braes, there has been no vigorous reaction on the part of Skye men to the injustices visited upon them, he carefully inserts the word "yet" ("fhathast"—"s na Sgitheanaich fhathast gun éirigh" II, 82-3 [and the men of Skye not yet risen]). The whole of "An Cuilithionn" asks to be read as a prognosis of that reaction, viewed within the context of similar movements spreading across three continents at least.



So MacLean is set aside Lenin, Marx and "the many Thaelmanns in Germany."<sup>15</sup> A different, but related broadening, an urge to bring together phenomena which might not otherwise be connected, can be seen at II, 80-81: "mar chunnaic Marlowe fuil Chrìosda/ agus Leonhardt fuil Liebknecht"<sup>16</sup> (though strictly speaking it is not Marlowe himself, but the character Faust at the end of Marlowe's play who sees Christ's blood flowing). Perhaps the poem's most striking juxtaposition is a failed one:

Ach ann an aon chan fhacas riamh ann  
tuigse Lenin is taobh dearg Chrìosda;  
chan fhaicear an dithis còmhla  
a dh'aindeoin farsaingeachd na mòintich;  
chan fhaicear ann an aon àit' iad  
ach air mullach lom nan àrd bheann.

[but in one there has never been seen  
the judgement of Lenin and the red side of Christ.  
The two may not be seen together  
for all the expanse of the morass;  
they are not to be seen in one place  
except on the bare tops of the high mountains.] III, 90-91

MacLean has no more hope of reconciling Marxism and Leninism with Christianity than MacDiarmid had of reconciling them with nationalism. As Part I draws to its close, the Red Army is directly evoked as the only remedy for the damage done by the clearances. At V 91ff, in the course of a lyric largely structured in terms of syntactical parallelism, the stallion is first "A dhòchais na h-Albann" and then "a spéis na h-Eòrpa" (III, 100-101). Some forty lines later, James Connolly in Ireland, hero and martyr of the Easter rising in 1916, is followed by John MacLean in Scotland, Liebknecht in Germany and Lenin in Russia.

The Aberdeen manuscript sheds fascinating light on the elaboration of the extended Clio's passage in VI. In the third version of "An Cuilithionn," the Skye Clio is followed by Lewis, Harris, Mull, the Hebrides and Inverness; next come the Lowlands of Scotland, then Ireland and England, followed by Spain, Germany, France, Italy and Greece, then India, China and the world, for a total

---

<sup>15</sup>"a liuthad Thaelmann anns a' Ghearmailt" (II, 74-5). John MacLean (1879-1923), Marxist agitator and pacifist, was appointed first Bolshevik consul for Britain in the aftermath of the October Revolution.

<sup>16</sup>"as Marlowe saw the blood of Christ/ and Leonhardt the blood of Liebknecht." One of the founders of the Spartacus League in Berlin, Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) was assassinated together with Rosa Luxemburg in the course of a revolutionary uprising. See also *Dàin do Eimhir* XXXII.

of eighteen. In this manuscript, there is a direct transition from Skye to Spain, with Lewis, Harris, Mull and the Hebrides added on the opposite page. China was inserted between Germany and Scotland ("na h-Albann," rather than "na Galldachd" [strictly non-Gaelic Scotland] of the third version), Ireland between India and Greece. MacLean's reordering of this passage suggests a wish to achieve a smooth and logical movement from the microworld of his own personal background to the macroworld for which he felt such passionate concern. It offers a striking instance of ordering within the poem in accordance with the principle discussed above.

Development through broadening and accumulation is a strategy to which the poem has frequent recourse. Part I is rich in Skye place-names, and when some of these recur at II, 78-79, the effect is of returning to a litany. Minginish and Bracadale are consistently paired (I, 68-9; II, 78-9; III, 84-5), so that when this happens again at VI, 108-9, the reader has come to expect it. The pairing acquires a familiar resonance as we are successfully inducted into the microworld of the poem.

At its crudest, the accumulation occurs in the form of lists, none the less effective for their bareness of presentation. The paragraph at III, 86-7 begins with the Paris Commune and culminates in Spain of the civil war years, calling in at eight different localities on its way. At III, 92-3 the morass has swallowed, first Scotland, then Spain, Italy, France, Germany and Britain. The octave at V, 96-7 offers a similar review. The reader by now will be familiar with this kind of movement, and this familiarity renders the poem more accessible and easier to follow. What matters most, however, is that the strategy serves at one and the same time to structure smaller and larger stretches of "An Cuilithionn" and to communicate MacLean's historical, cultural and political vision. If the macroworld comes to dominate in Part VII, that in turn heralds a return to the microworld at the poem's close, not so much in terms of precise historical or geographical reference, as through the overwhelming presence of its dominant symbol, the Cuillins themselves.

The breathtaking originality of MacLean's project in this poem, one for which no real antecedent can be found in the work of either MacDiarmid or MacDonald, in Gaelic tradition generally or in the work of similarly leftist inclined poets of the 1930s, deserves emphasizing at this stage. Organizing such an undertaking was a major challenge, and it is one MacLean met with a degree not just of dexterity but of mastery.

"An Cuilithionn" displays a clear choreography, a series of carefully orchestrated interlocking and contrasting movements. The paragraph which opens Part I details the wrestling of the speaker's body with the mountains as he ascends. It is as if he derives the energy needed for continued upwards movement from the doggedness of the stone's resistance. At I 18ff the orography of the ridge is likened explicitly to the violent wave movement of a stormy sea:

muir mhòr chiar nan tonn gàbro,  
roinn nan dromannan caola àrda,  
an crios-onfhaidh dorcha stàilinn:  
cuan 's a luasgan teann an creagan,  
a chraosan maireann an caoil eagan,  
a spùtadh siorraidh anns gach turraid,  
a bhàrcadh biothbhuan anns gach sgorra.

[the great dim sea of gabbro waves,  
knife-edge of high narrow ridges,  
belt of the dark steel surge:  
an ocean whose welter is tight in rocks,  
its yawning mouths permanent in narrow chasms,  
its spouting everlasting in each turret] I, 64-5

The ghoulish dancing of the ghosts of the despoilers across these same pinnacles, chanting their mocking slogans about the peasants they have evicted (I, 72-73) may have been suggested to MacLean by the mention, earlier on in the same section, of a ceilidh "Ann an talla mor an Lunnainn" where "bùrdeasaich Shìol Leòid" [In a big hall in London, the bourgeois of Clan Leod] were assembled (I, 68-9). It is a further example of the poem's tendency not to present the Cuillins as static, but rather to view them as caught up in choreographies of different kinds, either moving themselves or acting as the backdrop to others' movement.

Though it may sound banal, it is worth stressing how increasingly, as the poem progresses, the mountains are engaged in an irresistible upwards thrusting, which might just be suggested by the climber's experience of them as he completed his ascent but which can in no way be limited to this. This is the fundamental action of the poem, against which the dancing of the ghosts must be unmasked as the pitiful parody it in fact is. There is not space to itemize each occurrence of the notion of rising in "An Cuilithionn." All the same, "trianaid an Sgùmain air èirigh" [the trinity of the Sguman risen] at II, 78-9 must function as a trace, introducing the notion almost unawares into the reader's consciousness, so that "trianaid Cuilithinn a' taomadh" [a Cuillin trinity pouring] and "trianaid Cuilithinn ag èirigh" [a Cuillin trinity rising] at VII, 126-7 and 120 will come as the affirmation of a powerful impulse skillfully prepared for.

The prophecy which closes III, "èiridh latha air a' Chuilithionn," (III, 92-3) [day will rise on the Cuillin], though here it is day that rises above the mountains, marks, as has been said, a significant brightening in the mood of the poem. It is preceded and followed, however, by the insidious and repulsive encroachment of the marshes of Maraulin. Upward and downward movement (sinking into the morass) is carefully balanced—"Cas agam anns a' bhoglaich/ agus cas air a' Chuilithionn" [I have a foot in the morass / and a foot on the

Cuillin]—and the speaker expresses little hope of ever reaching the mountains and the stars:

Cha dan mi gleachd no carachd ònrachd  
ris a' mhòintich ud gu bràth;  
chèa thàrr mi as a crithich uabhais  
leis na tha annam de spàirn

[I shall make no struggle nor lonely wrestling  
ever with that morass;  
nor shall I escape from its fearsome quagmire  
with what is in me of great effort.] IV, 94-5

In the second paragraph of Part V it is “an t-Aigeach,” the Stallion of Vaternish which engages in a dance, leaping and bounding not just along the ridge of the Cuillins but to detached summits like Blaven and Garsbheinn, and treading the morass beneath his hooves. The exultant passage addressed to the Stallion which comes next, imitating pibroch meter, evokes “port à beul” or mouth music intended to serve for vigorous dancing. Presumably the Stallion’s antics would arouse marvel in us if we could witness them, and the passage is highly virtuosic in terms of verse technique. In each stanza of eight double stressed lines (nine stanzas in the third version, but fourteen in the Aberdeen manuscript), the fourth rhymes with the eighth, while the others rhyme in groups of three, echoed by an internal rhyme or “aicill” in the line immediately following:

Eich mhòir ghaolaich  
na muinne craobhaich,  
chual thusa faochadh  
a' Chaogaich chais:  
eich mhóir nan tonn,  
a mharcachd shonn,  
chual thu fonn  
Maol Duinn nan gath.

[Great loved horse  
of the mantling mane,  
you heard the respite  
of the angry Caogach;  
great horse of the waves,  
mount of heroes,  
you heard the melody  
of the piercing Maol Donn] V, 98-9

Here, for once, MacLean’s evocation of Gaelic tradition has not a hint of parody about it.

When the notion of rising returns at V, 102-3, it has been carefully prepared for. The forlorn close of IV had lamented "'S fada, goirt fada,/ 's fada an latha nach tàinig" (IV, 96-7) [Distant, sore and distant/ the day that has not come]. The lament is taken up at V, 107 ("S fada, cian fada,/ 's fada an dìreadh" [Long, long and distant./ long the ascent] V, 102-3), but rather than speaking of a day that has failed to dawn, the complaint here is about the length of the ascent. Sixteen lines later, the same word announces a definitive turn for the better:

Fada, ach thig, i,  
's ann dhuinn thig an òr-ghrian;  
èiridh an Cuilithionn  
gu suilbhir 'na ghlòir geal

[Long, but come it will,  
the golden sun will come to us;  
the Cuillin will rise,  
genial in his white glory] V, 102-3

While these may appear to be mere details, their effect on the reader, though often unconscious, is not to be underestimated. They mark the resounding victory of one kind of movement and point, as has already been stated, to a high degree of planning, of skillful artifice, in a long poem which there are no grounds for dismissing as a chaotic or ineffective medley of disparate elements.

The upward movement is mirrored in the "uilebheist" or monster lifted from the sea to the summit of the Cuillins at VII, 122-3 (and the Stallion, too, had been described as an "uilebheist" at V, 96-7). It goes so far as to strike the face of heaven. At VII, 124-5 it is "Chlio mhòr" who is "sìor èirigh [the great Clio... ever rising], and three lines later she witnesses the Cuillin "ag èirigh air taobh eile duilghe" [rising on the other side of anguish]. Followed by a full stop and a break between paragraphs, that phrase has a sense of arrival, of culmination. It starts the paragraph at 112 and concludes the whole poem at 191. One is tempted to speak of it as the achieved, resounding major chord in the home key at the end of a symphony which has wandered, but never aimlessly or without planning, through a range of related and unrelated tonalities, before reaching the place it was always destined to rest. Given the skill with which different movements are orchestrated throughout "An Cuilithionn," one feels justified in speaking of a balletic, or even cinematic, quality which is a crucial element in the poem's unprecedented modernity. And indeed, in the preface to the book planned for publication by William Maclellan of Glasgow, where "An Cuilithionn" was to be accompanied, like the *Dàn do Eimhir*, by illustrations from Scottish artist William Crosbie, and by Young's own English "projection," Douglas Young concluded that

Book-form cannot present *The Coolin* adequately. Something might be done in the way of a talking-picture, given a sympathetic Scots musician and a sympathetic Scots expert in cinematic photography.<sup>17</sup>

The irresistible rising of the Cuillin inevitably calls to mind MacDiarmid's claim, in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, that "the thistle rises and forever will" (line 2232, see MacDiarmid, I, 152). The center symbol of MacLean's poem has an undeniably phallic quality. The gelding of the Stallion bewailed at III, 86-7 offers an image of wounded virility and, though the issue is not dealt with explicitly, its recovered, triumphant vigor in Part V suggests that the wound has healed and that castration was only temporary, never irrevocable. The poem's strongly male tonality is further evident in the fact that not one single woman participates in its roll call of socialist and humanitarian heroes. Both 1939 versions, in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, had mentioned Lenin's companion Krupskaya, but at the corresponding place in the third version she is replaced by isosyllabic, depersonalized "muillionan" ("millions") (VII, 122-3).

The serpent at VII, 122-3 is a no doubt deliberate tribute to MacDiarmid's poem *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, whose principal symbol was inspired by a serpentine climbing path in the vicinity of MacDiarmid's home town Langholm. A further symbolic presence of some importance in the Cuillin is the "ròs dearg ùrail" (V, 96-7) [fresh red rose] which emerges at the start of Part V. It is at one and the same time dawn breaking on the horizon, and a symbol for socialist organization and resistance along industrial Clydeside, embodied in its most celebrated leader, John MacLean. Apart from the shared surname, MacLean was a recent enough presence to suggest that all hope had not in fact been lost since the Battle of the Braes. He offered a species of continuity which could foreshadow the socialist victory adumbrated at the poem's end. And it is no accident that the army in whose campaigns the speaker of "An Cuilithionn" places such faith was known as the Red Army. Just as the Stallion, in the lyric devoted to it, represents first Skye, then Scotland, then Europe, multiplying from one to many like Clio the muse of history in Part VI, so too at VII, 126-7 the reader encounters no fewer than four different roses, black, dim, white and red, while nine lines earlier "chithear barrachd na aon Chuilithionn" (VII, 126-7) [more than one Cuillin is seen]. Such proliferations of one single device go a long way towards conferring unity on what can seem at first glance an alarmingly disparate, but is in fact a satisfyingly coherent, piece of writing.

What kinds of writing does "An Cuilithionn" offer us? Among its most striking modes is a rugged evocation of the peaks themselves, imbued with a sense of concentrated physical effort and even of alienation or horror. This is how Parts I and II begin, and the latter sections of Part VI have a similarly un-

---

<sup>17</sup>See National Library of Scotland MS 29561 f6.

yielding, almost hostile surface. While it is possible that MacLean may have been influenced, or indeed inspired, by the evocation of stony surfaces in MacDiarmid's long poem "On a Raised Beach,"<sup>18</sup> it would be unwise to push the parallel too far. That is a very different poem, whose apparently featureless monotony corresponds to the Shetland landscape it evokes, and where a marooned subjectivity which has practically abandoned any hope of collective action contemplates, and dissolves, the boundary between what is human and what is not, between the animate and the inanimate. "An Cuilithionn" moves in very different directions.

A second mode could be the itemized choreography, thronged with different figures, which characterizes the "talla mòr an Lunnainn" section of Part I. The two octaves beginning "Cruaidh càs na Sìne" in Part V, 102-3 and the passage rehearsing the different embodiments of Clio in Part VI have the same feeling of a film or theater director marshalling both principal actors and extras. Something similar occurs in the "Air Sgurr Dubh an Dà Bheinn" passage from Part II, though here the roll call is of place names and the associated locations.

By and large, much of what has been said hitherto about the 1989 version of the poem holds true for the earlier redactions. The use of symbols, the skillful orchestration of a range of different movements, the determination to connect microworld and macroworld and the predominantly masculine coloring are the same, though the effect on the poem's overall architecture, if one were to reinsert over 400 excised lines, including two sizeable passages in Part I, and an extended lyric of 112 lines in Part VII, demands careful consideration of a kind not feasible here. One mode, however, that disappeared in the third version was of powerful, not to say personalized, invective. This can only be recovered by reference to the earlier manuscripts of "An Cuilithionn." Not just Franco, Chamberlain and the Pope, but Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Glasgow capitalist Sir James Lithgow are named specifically, while a marginal annotation in the St Andrews copy of the poem claims that one of the hoodie-crows in Part I represents none other than the then headmaster of Portree High School.<sup>19</sup>

A particularly interesting example of MacLean's deployment of contrasting modes comes at the opening of Part VI. After the glimpse of hope at the close of Part III, the morass has returned in Part IV, only to be dispelled by the action of the Stallion in Part V, after which the almost hymn-like citation of MacDiarmid's solidly optimistic quatrains indicates an eventual victory for upward movement. Nonetheless, it is essential that that victory should not be too easily gained. A further downward movement is needed. MacLean introduces the monologues already mentioned, a mode so far unrepresented in "An

---

<sup>18</sup>See for example the opening and closing sections in MacDiarmid, I, 422-3, 433.

<sup>19</sup>See MS Dep 17 in the Muniments in the St Andrews University Library, p. 2.

Cuilithionn.” They come from victims of the clearances, a girl (offering some balance to the poem’s gender coloring) and a man. It is a truism that a new element should be introduced in the fourth act of a play, or before the culmination of an extended poem, but the gambit is effective notwithstanding. Again, there are signs of deliberate preparation. Ben Duagraich, the shieling the girl frequented in her youth, occurs in a “rhymed list of Skye names” for which “a girl, kidnapped from Gesto shore, was responsible,” as MacLean explains to Young in a letter of August 19, 1940.<sup>20</sup> The relevant two lines were murmured by a “guth fann tiamhaidh” [A faint eerie voice] upon which “Dh’èirich na cnàmhan loma fuara/ à luasgadh Caolas Bhatarsaigh” (I, 70-71) [the bare cold bones rose/ from the weltering of Kyle Vatersay]. The Kyle of Vatersay is, of course, where the *Annie Jane* went down, carrying with it the male speaker of VI, 108-109.

These two monologues are followed by a chorus of distinct but unrelated voices as the differing Clios speak out in turn, before reference to the abstract notion of History’s wheel (VI, 116-7), a subdued reference to Marxist theory, heralds a return to the vaguely personalized “I-narration” familiar from the beginning of the poem.

The texture of echoes in the Gesto girl’s monologues is complex and delicate and merits further attention. She bemoans the fact that she is now prevented from seeing “an Cuilithionn cràcach/ *ag èirigh thar Minginis*” (my italics). *Minginish* is defined as “mo shàth-ghaoil” [rising above *Minginish* of my full love], and a deft phonetic slippage allows MacLean to proceed directly to a different mode, evocative of Mary MacLeod’s (Màiri Nighean Alasdair Ruaidh) lament for Sir Norman MacLeod: “Mo shàth-ghal goirt/ mar a tha mi ‘n nochd” [My sore fullness of grief/ how I am tonight] (my italics—the original lament reads “Mo chràdhghal bochd/ Mar a thà mi nochd”.<sup>21</sup> A similar deft slippage between “fuaran” and “fiùran” had allowed MacLean, at I, 66-7 to move seamlessly from contemplation of the landscape, of what is present in it (mountain springs) to what it lacks (young men—the Gaelic word means both this and something like “tender saplings”).

Probably the most controversial mode in “An Cuilithionn” is the massed deployment of proper names, often from the world beyond the Gaelic language, with the use of minimal poetic mortar to bind together these bricks. The following example crops up at VI, 114-5:

---

<sup>20</sup>MacLean’s letters to Young may be consulted in the National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6419 Box 38b.

<sup>21</sup>“Sad and heart-sore my weeping”: see J. Carmichael Watson ed. *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod* (Edinburgh, 1965) pp. 96-7. MacLean probably had in mind the version taken down by Miss Tolmie, which indeed begins “Mo shàthghal goirt” (p. 141).



Lugh mi Plato is Rousseau,  
Voltaire, Condorcet is Cobbett,  
Kant, Schopenhauer, Hume, Fichte,  
Marx, Lenin, Blok, Nietzsche.

[I read Plato and Rousseau,  
Voltaire, Condorcet and Cobbett,  
Kant, Schopenhauer, Hume, Fichte,  
Marx, Lenin, Blok, Nietzsche.]

The phenomenon is still more pronounced in the earlier versions of the poem, where lines such as "Landauer, Liebknecht, Eisner, Toller" or "Lucretius, Beethoven, Crìosda,/ Lenin, Liebknecht a' triall air,/ an Connollach is MacGhillEathain" occur in Part VII.<sup>22</sup> What is, for example, a translator to do when confronted by such a passage? Can it be said to effectively defy translation? And what justification might be offered for a practice which, some readers might claim, epitomizes "An Cuilithionn" at its most overbearingly dogmatic?

One possible defense would be to consider the importance of proper names, and particularly of foreign words and names, in poetry more generally. Insofar as poetry aims to produce defamiliarization, to have us experience words not just as signs but as things in themselves, then any foreignization, by means of elements which are not immediately identifiable and which deny swift integration with their surroundings, elements whose materiality refuses to evaporate in favor of what they point towards, will be central to its purpose. A defense of this kind would, perhaps, wish to consider the role of Biblical personal names and toponyms throughout Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Seen against such a background, MacLean's practice in "An Cuilithionn" could appear highly poetical rather than, as may happen on a first acquaintance, unattractively dogmatic.

The issue of dogma leads naturally to consideration of a crucial yet troubling aspect of MacLean's achievement in the poem, one with which this essay can fittingly conclude. "An Cuilithionn" is at one and the same time a major poem and a leftist tract. That it can manage to be one side of this equation while at the same time embodying the other goes some way towards explaining the poem's intriguing, not to say, disturbing, effect. Bulgarian communist Dimitrov is mentioned three times and in three different parts (I, VI and VII) of the third redaction of the poem, while in the Aberdeen manuscript his name crops up no fewer than ten times (with one further cancelled mention) of which six are in Part VII. (An instance of MacLean's evident wish to depersonalize the tone of certain passages of "An Cuilithionn" in the course of revising the poem is his correction of VI, 252 from "a shàir Dhimitrov, bha t' aodann/

---

<sup>22</sup>Ms 29558 ff97 and 99.

geàrrt' an gnùis nam mullach aosda" to "A shàr-churaidh, 's ann bha t'aodann" [Greatest of heroes, your face / was carved in the shape of the ancient summits] in the published version (VI, 118-9). After a heroic defense against Nazi prosecution in Leipzig, Dimitrov found refuge in the Soviet Union, where the editor of his diaries comments that "Stalin...is unsurprisingly the most important character among the dramatis personae," adding that "were it not for a very rare portrait of Stalin's less admirable side," the diary "could be read as a private correspondence with Stalin."<sup>23</sup> Such a close association came at a time when the notorious purges reached their very height. Both references to Stalin in the earlier version have disappeared from "An Cuilithionn" as published. MacLean himself indicates, in his introduction to the third version, that the conduct of the Red Army at the time of the Warsaw Uprising made it impossible for him to continue writing in a similar vein.<sup>24</sup>

If the poet's altered, and chastened, political sympathies played their part in the abridgement and revision of the early typescripts, later readers may feel similarly detached or even skeptical, especially in a post-postmodernist age when the division of Europe into two opposing blocks is rapidly becoming a memory, and when major ideological narratives have lost their hold, however temporarily, on the imagination and on the day-to-day realities of both intellectuals and the masses.

Such considerations, however, rather than detracting from the value of "An Cuilithionn" as both aesthetic object and document, add to it. As I hope this essay has indicated, the poem's explicit and ultimately ineradicable political program cannot detract from its poetical quality, its combination of fondly yet critically remembered tradition with ruthless innovation, its skillfully planned architecture and its wonderfully orchestrated movement. On the larger front, it demands to be read within the context of the engagement with communism, with Marxism and Leninism, in those countries which never experienced an attempt to put them into practice, and therefore remained at some distance from the consequences of such experiments. It may, if one chooses, be seen in the context of the sad story of leftist blindness to and indeed collusion in the real and tragic abuses which counted, in the 1930s and in the post-war years, though not only then, among the long-term consequences of the 1917 Bolshevik takeover.<sup>25</sup> If Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* is a courageous

---

<sup>23</sup>Ivo Banac introd. & ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov 1933-1949* (New Haven and London, 2003), p. xxx.

<sup>24</sup>"The behaviour of the Russian Government to the Polish insurrection in 1944 made me politically as well as aesthetically disgusted with most of" the poem—*O Choille gu Bearradh*"/ "From Wood to Ridge," p. 63.

<sup>25</sup>See Paul Hollander *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York, 1981).

exception, the French writer had the advantage of firsthand experience of the nature of Soviet society, in the course of an extended official visit, during which he drew his own conclusions.<sup>26</sup> MacLean had no such opportunity. A paradox of "An Cuilithionn" is that the poem, while expressing passionate political engagement, is visionary and even oneiric in nature. It is, if you like, a dream poem about political commitment, though this does not mean readers should treat the views it expresses any the less seriously.

If "An Cuilithionn" does demand a reading characterized by both historical breadth and awareness of moral, as well as artistic, responsibility, one far beyond the potential of the present, exploratory essay, then it has to be conceded that MacLean's attempt to re-enfranchise Gaelic literature, to give it full rights once more on the European and indeed the world stage, was a resounding success.

### *Budapest*

---

<sup>26</sup>Alan Sheridan, *André Gide: A Life in the Present* (London, 2000), pp. 503-10.