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SORLEY MACLEAN'S OTHER CLEARANCE POEMS

Petra Johana Poncarová

Sorley MacLean's interest in the Highland Clearances, especially in those events which affected his native Raasay and the neighbouring Skye, is well-known. His essay "The Poetry of the Clearances," first delivered as a paper to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in February 1939, was one of the first attempts to comment on literary responses to this period of Scottish history.¹ As Hugh Cheape notes, MacLean's "survey and consideration of the poetry of the Clearances was the first of its kind in Scottish historical studies."² MacLean's deep emotional engagement with the subject shows also in several subsequent articles and interviews.³

Among MacLean's own literary treatments of the Clearances, his poem "Hallaig" is undoubtedly the best-known example.⁴ First published

¹ Sorley MacLean, "Introduction," *Ris a' Bhruthaich: Criticism and Prose Writings of Sorley MacLean*, ed. William Gillies (Stornoway: Acair, 1985), 3. This essay is an outcome of Project no. 2915, "Modern Scottish Gaelic Literature," generously supported by the Charles University Grant Agency.

² Hugh Cheape, "'A mind restless seeking': Sorley MacLean's Historical Research and the Poet as Historian," in *Ainmeil thar cheudan: Presentations to the 2011 Sorley MacLean Conference*, ed. Ronald W. Renton and Ian MacDonald (Sleat: Clò Ostaig, 2016), 125.

³ Sorley MacLean, "My Relationship with the Muse," in *Ris a' Bhruthaich*, 6-14; Donald Archie MacDonald, "Some Aspects of Family and Local Background," in *Sorley MacLean: Critical Essays*, ed. Raymond Ross and Joy Hendry (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986), 211-222; "Poetry, Passion and Political Consciousness," an interview with Sorley MacLean, John MacInnes, Hamish Henderson, Donald MacAulay and Iain Crichton Smith, *Scottish International*, 10 (May, 1970): 10-16.

⁴ "Hallaig," *Gairm*, 8 (Summer 1954): 360-361; republished in *Lines Review*, 7 (January 1955): 12-16 (and again in 1992), and in *Calgacus*, 1:2 (Summer 1974), 29-32, with commentary by John MacInnes. It was included in the collection *Four Points of a Saltire* (Edinburgh: Reprographia, 1970), 146-149, and in the anthology *Nua-bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig* (Edinburgh: Southside, 1976; repr. 1995), 84-89. It was translated into English by Seamus Heaney (Sleat: Urras Shomhairle, 2002), and the

in 1954 the eighth issue of the Gaelic quarterly magazine *Gairm*, it has become one of the most famous pieces of Gaelic writing of the twentieth century.⁵ Given the iconic status of “Hallaig” in MacLean’s oeuvre and in modern Gaelic literature in general, his other Clearance poems seem to live in its shadow and have so far attracted comparatively little critical attention. This category of “other Clearance poems” includes parts of the long poem “An Cuilithionn” (The Cuillin), which has been rehabilitated only recently in Christopher Whyte’s critical edition *An Cuilithionn 1939: The Cuillin 1939 & Unpublished Poems* (2011).⁶ The subject is also addressed in two previously unpublished poems, “Am Putan Airgid” (“The Silver Button”) and “Tha na beanntan gun bhruidhinn” (“The mountains are speechless”), which have been preserved in manuscript in the Scottish National Library and appeared for the first time in Whyte’s already mentioned publication and several months later also in the collected volume of MacLean’s poetry *Caoir Gheal Leumraich / White Leaping Flame* (2011). Last but not least, there is the poem “Sgreapadal” (“Screapadal”), a composition which is in its premise closely related to “Hallaig” but which is markedly different from its famous predecessor in tone, focus, and argument. This essay opens with short commentary on “An Cuilithionn”, “Am Putan Airgid” and “Tha na beanntan gun bhruidhinn,” in order to indicate their main preoccupations, and then moves to a close reading and interpretation of “Sgreapadal.”

The genesis of “An Cuilithionn”, the long poem intended as a comment on the human condition radiating from Skye to the rest of the world, was

title was used both for Timothy Neat’s 1984 documentary film about MacLean and Neil Kemsell’s 1984 musical video with Martyn Bennett’s music.

⁵ Peter Mackay, *Sorley MacLean* (Aberdeen: AHRC Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, 2010), 137.

⁶ Until June 2011, the poem had never been published in the original 1939 version. When parts had appeared in magazines, including *Lines Review*, 7 (January 1955): 7-12; *Gairm*, 40 (Summer 1962): 326-327; and *Chapman*, nos 50-57 (Summer 1987-Summer 1989): 158-163, 36-49, 68-74, 58-69, 152-163, 30-39, and as part of MacLean’s collected poems *O Choille gu Bearradh* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989; repr. Manchester: Carcanet/Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999), 64-133, the poem was much shorter, as the poet decided to cut out some passages, mostly those with political content: see Ian MacDonald, “Editing MacLean: an Interview with Christopher Whyte,” in *Ainmeil thar cheudan*, ed. Renton and MacDonald (Sleat: Clò Ostaig, 2016) 160-163. Whyte’s edition of the poem (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011) includes extended commentary, and cf. also his “Sorley MacLean’s ‘An Cuilithionn’: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 35-36 (2007 [2008]): 508-525; Emma Dymock, “The Quest for Identity in Sorley MacLean’s *An Cuilithionn*: Journeying into Politics and Beyond” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2008); and Dymock, *The Poetry of Sorley MacLean* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2011).

influenced by the poet's stay on the Isle of Mull where he felt he was "living with the Clearances" every day.⁷ On one level, "An Cuilithionn" is an account of historical injustices committed against the common people, in Scotland and abroad, especially with the Clearances, which MacLean relates to contemporary events such as the Spanish Civil War and which he sees as a manifestation of a more general problem. The poem also comments on how the evictions transformed the physical and social realities of the Highlands and Islands: when the speaker stands on the slope of the Cuillin, he sees below him a landscape scarred by the absence of people. Particular peaks of Skye become populated with historical figures, among them the lairds of Dunvegan and George Rainy,⁸ the chief perpetrator of the Raasay clearances, as the speaker summons a ghostly Sabbath of those who were once connected to the places and have left their appalling mark on them through clearance or other acts of oppression.

In "Tha na beanntan gun bhruidhinn," MacLean connects the Clearances, the loss of people, and the loss of Gaelic, a frequent theme in nineteenth-century Clearance poetry. In a sweeping tour across the Highlands and Islands, various places from Sutherland to Cruachan are imagined as becoming dumb if there are no Gaelic-speaking people living in them and if the knowledge of traditional Gaelic culture does not survive. The eloquent poem in regular quatrains linked by assonance, which is a display of sound qualities of Gaelic and of MacLean's craft, envisions a landscape which becomes silent and unintelligible. MacLean also mentions the vital link between poems and places: Ben Doran is dumb if no one understands Duncan Bàn MacIntyre's famous eulogy of the mountain, and the corpses on Culloden Moor would turn from white to black without the lament about the battle composed by John Roy (Iain Ruadh Stiùbhart). The poem is one of MacLean's few explicit literary responses to the decline of

⁷ "Poetry, Passion and Political Consciousness," 10.

⁸ As Ray Burnett points out, George Rainy was originally from "a staunchly Hanoverian family in Aberdeenshire; Rainy's father had been a minister of Creich in Sutherland. In such a location and with such a background, Rainy grew up with more than a passing familiarity with the process of Improvement and Clearance which was sweeping the north in the cataclysmic decades at the turn of the century": Burnett, "Sorley MacLean's 'Hallaig'", *Lines Review*, 92 (March 1985): 13-22 (17). Moreover, Rainy had made his fortune on the sugar plantations of Demerara in the British Guyana as a partner in Sandbach, Tinne & Co, where his business activities included slave ownership: see *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*, ed. T.M. Devine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 118, 180.

Gaelic, although he of course did much in his career as a schoolmaster to strengthen the language in the Highland communities.⁹

In contrast to the wide geographical scope of “‘Tha na beanntan gun bhruidhinn,’” “Am Putan Airgid” focuses on MacLean’s two islands, Raasay and Skye. The poem opens with a statement of the speaker that the plight of the people burns his flesh and bones like hot iron: the suffering of his kin in the nineteenth century is still felt as acute physical pain. MacLean indicates the scope of the evictions by naming specific locations affected by them and mentions historical details, such as the fact that many of the evicted Raasay families had no other option but to scrape a living among the rocks of Rona, one of the smaller islands north of Raasay which is not suitable for cultivation. A notable aspect of the poem is MacLean’s passionate defence of John, the 13th and last MacLeod chief of Raasay (Iain MacGhille Chaluim), as he claims he was a far better landlord than the MacDonalds of Sleat or the MacLeods of Dunvegan. The title of the poem derives from oral tradition, according to which, when John MacLeod was leaving the island forever, he had to reward the man who rowed him across the Sound of Raasay to Applecross with a silver button from his coat because he had no other means of paying him. While it is true that most of the Clearances took place after John MacLeod’s departure, some of the first Clearances were indeed carried out under the MacLeods.¹⁰ The poem shows how, in spite of his impressive knowledge of Raasay history and culture, MacLean’s ardent engagement with his topics and his dialectic way of thinking might at times lead to over-generalization.

“Sgreapadal,” MacLean’s composition named after a cleared village on the east coast of Raasay, was published for the first time in 1982 in the magazine *Cencrastus*. It has not often been reprinted in magazines and anthologies, and although a recording of MacLean reading the poem features in Timothy Neat’s well-known documentary film *Hallaig: The*

9 MacLean was deeply involved in the campaign for a Higher Leaving Certificate examination paper designed particularly for Gaelic learners, the “Learner’s Paper”: “Sorley MacLean—Biography: Plockton 1956-1969,” *Sorley MacLean Online / Somhairle MacGill-Eain air loidhne*

<<http://www.sorleymaclean.org/english/plockton.htm>> 21 February 2017.

¹⁰ As both Calum MacLeod and Richard Sharpe make clear in their histories of Raasay, the first clearances happened at the time of the MacLeod chiefs. See Richard Sharpe, *Raasay: A Study in Island History*, (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd, 1982), 61-62; and Calum MacLeod, *Fàsachadh An-Iochdmhor Ratharsair / The Cruel Clearance of Raasay* (Dùn Phàrlain: Clò Àrnais, 2007), 7. However, as Sharpe mentions, it was George Rainy who became the main villain associated with the clearances on the island, which was also MacLean’s understanding (Sharpe, 71). Whyte also notes this erroneous conclusion in his note on the poem in *An Cuilithionn 1939*, 305.

Poetry and Landscape of Sorley MacLean (1984), it seems it has never reached as much of an audience as the poet's iconic rendition of "Hallaig." Apart from Ray Burnett's comments in *Lines Review* in 1985, "Sgreapadal" has also been mostly ignored by critics.¹¹

Screapadal is situated on a steep slope on the east coast of Raasay, between Hallaig and the Brochel Castle, looking over to the Applecross Peninsula, and is divided into North Screapadal (Sgreapadal a Tuath) and South Screapadal (Screapadal a Deas). According to the 1841 census, the township had a population of seventeen families (101 people).¹² Between 1852 and 1854, it was cleared together with eleven other settlements on Raasay,¹³ and the 1861 census records no human habitation in either of the Screapadals.¹⁴

The poem begins in a deceitfully idyllic manner: "Sgreapadal a tha cho bòidheach / a cheart cho bòidheach ri Hallaig. / Cha chuirear briathran air bòidheche, / cha dèanar dealbh no ceòl no dàn dhi" (Screapadal that is so beautiful, / quite as beautiful as Hallaig. / No words can be put on beauty / no picture, music or poem made for it).¹⁵ The opening scene is set in May when the lush young bracken is growing. Nettles and fern are plants frequently associated with the Clearances – the formerly inhabited and cultivated places became overgrown with bracken after the evictions. The stone walls of Screapadal are mentioned in the third stanza and the next one reveals that the township is nothing but ruins. It is precisely the initial reference to bracken that may be read as the first sign that the beautiful image scene will soon be disrupted.

Whilst "Hallaig" refers to the Clearances and related political issues only covertly¹⁶ and does not mention any details as to why the people no

¹¹ Burnett, as in n. 8 above, 17, 18, 21-22.

¹² Roger Hutchinson, *Calum's Road* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), 9; David Paterson and David Craig, *Glens of Silence the Landscapes of the Scottish Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2004), 115.

¹³ Eighre, Suidhisnis, Na Feàrnaibh Iarach, Na Feàrnaibh Uarach, Leac, Hallaig Uarach, Hallaig Iarach, An Caisteal, Sgreapadail a Tuath, Sgreapadail a Deas, Manish, and Doiredomhain: see Richard Sharpe, *Raasay: A Study in Island History. Documents and Sources—People and Places* (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd, 1978), 102.

¹⁴ Hutchinson, 9; Paterson and Craig, 115.

¹⁵ "Sgreapadal," in Sorley MacLean, *Caoir Gheal Leumraich=White Leaping Flame: Collected Poems in Gaelic with English Translation*, ed. Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), 320-328. Both the original and the translation are quoted from this edition.

¹⁶ There are certain elements which may be read as covert political comments, such as the proud pine trees which have supplanted the native forests and stand for the

longer live in Hallaig and in the other townships he lists, "Sgreapadal" is a distinctly political poem and seems to be much more in tune with MacLean's usual commitment to name and condemn what he perceived as acts of oppression and social injustice. MacLean mentions an exact number of the cleared townships, fourteen,¹⁷ and the fact that the clearances were executed for the financial benefit of Rainy and Royston Mackenzie who started to build a vast sheep farm on Raasay.¹⁸

He also employs specific historical details, such as the fact that the financial troubles of Raasay were to be blamed mainly on the 12th MacLeod chief, James MacLeod (Seumas MacGhille Chaluim) who spent a fortune on the improvements of the Big House of Raasay according to contemporary European fashion, including the commission of the two unfortunate giant mermaids which proved too heavy for their intended position on the façade and now adorn the ferry landing on the island.¹⁹ When his son, the already mentioned John MacLeod, became unable to cope with the inherited debts and emigrated to Australia, Raasay was put on the market by his creditors in 1843 and purchased by Rainy in 1846 who is perceived as the main agent of the devastation of the island's native community in the poem:

Taigh Mòr a' Chlachain 's na fiachan
a thug e air Mac Ghille Chaluim
trom air tuath gach baile;
agus Rèanaidh diadhaidh,
ged nach robh esan anns na fiachan
leis na chuir an fhearas-mhòr
sac air Seumas Mac Ghille Chaluim
agus fògairt air a mhac
aig a' mhiad is aig an loinn
a chuir iad ris an Taigh Mhòr.

*The Big House of Clachan and the debts
that it brought on Mac Gille Chaluim
heavy on the tenantry of each township;
and godly Rainy,
though he was not in such a debt
as the social climbing put
with its burden on James Mac Gille
Chaluim
and brought exile on his son,
with the largeness and the beauty
that they added to the Big House.*

new management of the island, and the deer, as the creation of a hunting estate was one of the reasons behind the Raasay clearances.

¹⁷ The Reverend Aonghas Galbraith mentions twelve townships that were cleared between 1852 and 1854: Eighre, Suidhisnis, Na Feàrnaibh Iarach, Na Feàrnaibh Uarach, Leac, Hallaig Uarach, Hallaig Iarach, An Caisteal, Sgreapadal a Tuath, Sgreapadal a Deas, Manish and Doiredomhain, and he states that 97 families left these places: see Sharpe, *Raasay, A Study* 102. MacInnes, "Hallaig: A Note", also mentions 12 townships, but 94 families; Calum MacLeod, in *Fàsachadh An-Iochdmhor Ratharsair*, 2, 13, mentions 14 townships, adding Satair, Ramasdal, Back Lands of the Castle, and counting the two Sreapadals as one.

¹⁸ Mackenzie was also from Sutherland, from Ardloch in Assynt (19): see Burnett, 19.

¹⁹ Calum MacLeod, 8.

MacLean mentions Rainy's well-known piety, which comes across as hypocritical when contrasted with his treatment of the people: in material terms, Rainy supported the Free Church, which the people of Raasay unanimously adhered to after the Disruption in 1843, but did not show much compassion for his peasant brothers and sisters.²⁰ Rainy's counterpart in the poem is Roderick MacLeod, the first Free Church minister on Raasay and a "champion of the common people" known affectionately as "Maighstir Ruaraidh."²¹

As if in tune with the specificity of historical information, the poem is also unusually detailed in the description of the landscape, to such an extent that it gives an impression of a hyperrealistic painting whose seductive surface distracts the attention from an inconspicuous menace. This threat is introduced in a stanza which begins in a manner echoing traditional Clearance poetry: "dh'fhàg Rèanaidh Sgreapadal gun daoine, / gun taighean, gun chrodh ach caoraich" (Rainy left Screapadal without people, / with no houses or cattle, only sheep). The next line, however, ushers in a startling new perspective: "ach dh'fhàg e Sgreapadal bòidheach; / ra linn cha b' urrainn dha a chaochladh" (but he left Screapadal beautiful; / in his time he could do nothing else). The poem was published in early 1980s, still at the time of the Cold War, and it performs another leap from the Hebrides to European and global issues so typical of MacLean's poetry. The threat of a greater and more final disaster than Rainy could manage with the means at his disposal creeps in:

Thogadh ròn a cheann
agus cearban a sheòl,
ach an-diugh anns an linnidh
togaidd long-fo-thuinn a turraid
agus a druim dubh sliom
a' maoidheadh an nì a dhèanadh
smùr de choille, de lèanagan 's de
chreagan,
a dh'fhàgadh Sgreapadal gun
bhòidhche
mar a dh'fhàgadh e gun daoine.

*A seal would lift its head
and a basking-shark its sail,
but today in the sea-sound
a submarine lifts its turret
and its black sleek back
threatening the thing that would make
dross of wood, of meadows and of
rocks,
that would leave Screapadal without
beauty
just as it was left without people.*

The Sound of Raasay, the deepest stretch of sheltered water around the British Isles, is used for testing of nuclear submarines, and a military base is located on the depopulated island of Rona, north of Raasay. Again, MacLean embarks from a very specific location in the Western Isles and

²⁰ Burnett 18.

²¹ MacLeod was a "great evangelist and champion of the common people," who "often preached in the Giant's Cave in Rona": see Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock, note on "Sgreapadal," in *Caoir Gheal Leumraich*, 477.

darts towards the broader world. The meditation on the Clearances and their consequences leads him to consideration of the present-day advanced technologies which give violent people in positions of power the means to do harm on a much greater scale. Further on, Brochel Castle on Raasay virtually meets Nagasaki:

Tha tùir eile air an linnidh
a' fanaid air an tùr a thuit
dhe mullach Creag a' Chaisteil,
tùir as miosa na gach tùr
a thog ainneart air an t-saoghal:
pearasgopan 's slios an slioma
dubha luingeas a' bhàis
a mharbh miltean Nagasaki

*There are other towers on the Sound
mocking the tower that fell
from the top of Castle Rock,
towers worse than every tower
that violence raised in the world:
the periscopes and sleek black sides
of the ships²² of the death
that killed the thousands of Nagasaki*

The poem concludes with a destructive vision imagining the modern weapons of mass destruction threatening Raasay. Interestingly, at the very end, the landscape of the island itself is transformed in the apocalyptic future of MacLean's vision. The hunger and famine are compared to local rocks and the bracken, green and luxuriant at the beginning, turn poisonous:

'S e 'n sannt 's an fhearas-mhòr
a dh'fhàg Sgreapadal gun daoine
agus bann iarainn nan lagh
a chuir grèim-teanchrach air an t-sluagh,
a' bagairt togail os an cionn
Cùirn Mhòra dhubha 'n acrais
is Creagan Meircil na gorta
air am fàs an fhraineach phuinnsein
on cinn an rocaid mharbhteach,
bom idrigin is neodroin.

*Greed and social pride
left Screapadal without people,
and the iron band of laws
that put a vice-like grip on the people,
threatening to raise above them
the black Carn-Mors of hunger
and the Meircil rocks of famine
on which grow the poisonous bracken
from which come the deadly rocket,
hydrogen and neutron bombs.*

“Sgreapadal” also focuses on the historical dimension of the place and brings together Maol Rubha, a seventh-century Irish missionary who founded a monastic community in Applecross over the Sound of Raasay;²³ the Viking lords of Raasay, MacSweens and MacLeods; the perpetrators of the Clearances, Rainy and MacKenzie; and the Free Church champion of the common people Roderick MacLeod. In relation to them, the poem

²² In translation, the connection between “ships of death” and Nagasaki may seem slightly strained, but the original word “luingeas” (fleet, ships) also appears in the composite “loingeas-adhair,” i.e. airline, so “fleet of death” might be a better wording.

²³ A peninsula facing Raasay from the east. The Gaelic name, “A' Chomraich,” means “sanctuary”: “Comraich,” *Am Faclair Beag*, <<http://www.faclair.com>> 23 April 2014.

comments on the selective nature of historical memory: whilst the name of the medieval monk is merely half-forgotten, the names of those who were affected by the Clearances are dead beyond redemption. The sheer number of the people prevents the poem from mentioning them individually. The cleared people are thus remembered as an anonymous collective, which presents the Clearances as basically wiping out whole communities, their dwellings, their culture, and even their names:

Tha cuimhne leth-mharbh air Ma
Ruibhe,
gun ach ainmean sgrìobhte marbh
air a' chloinn 's na fìr 's na mnathan
a chuir Rèanaidh às an fhearann
eadar ceann a tuath na Creige
's an Caisteal a thogadh do MhacSwain
no do Mhac Ghille Chaluim
airson fòirneart agus dìon.

*There is a half-dead memory of Maol
Rubha
but only the dead written names
of the children, men and women
whom Rainy put off the land
between the north end of the Rock
and the Castle built for MacSwain
or for Mac Gille Chaluim
for violence and refuge.*

At some points, “Sgreapadal” follows the patterns and motifs of the nineteenth-century verse about the Clearances. Given MacLean’s erudition in the subject, these echoes cannot be but intentional. In its direct naming of the perpetrators of the Raasay clearances, the poem resembles Ewen Robertson’s “Mo Mhollachd aig na Caoraich Mhòr” (My Curse at the Big Sheep),²⁴ and the description of the beautiful sunlit landscape, seemingly untouched, and even, as MacLean implies, enhanced in appearance by the absence of people, echoes William Livingstone’s “Fios chun a’ Bhàird” (Message to the Poet) where the wounds in the Islay landscape are hidden under the skin of lush beauty.²⁵ The fierce indignation about injustices committed against the people is reminiscent of the Skye-born poet Mary MacPherson (Màiri Mhòr nan Òran) who took part in the campaigns of the Crofters’ War and Highland land struggle, a special favourite of MacLean and also a subject of one of his scholarly essays.²⁶

The beauty of Sgreapadal is an essential concern in the poem. Again, as in the elegy for MacLean’s brother, the well-known folklorist Calum John MacLean (“Cumha Chaluim Iain MhicGill-Eain”), nature does not respond

²⁴ Supplement in: Ian Grimble, *The Trial of Patrick Sellar* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 157-160.

²⁵ Donald E. Meek, ed., *Tuath is Tighearna / Tenants and Landlords. An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation (1800-1890)* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995). See also Meek’s commentary on Livingstone at *Làrach nam Bàrd*: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/alba/foghlam/larachnambard/poets/uilleam_macdhunleibhe/cuspairean> 25 May 2014.

²⁶ Sorley MacLean, “Màiri Mhòr nan Òran,” in *Ris a’ Bhruthaich*, as in n. 1 above, 250-257.

to human tragedies and flourishes, until the very end, in spite of the people's suffering. MacLean points out clearly that the Clearances in a way "improved" the appearance of the places, as the uncultivated, wild landscape devoid of human presence fits better into the romantic perception of the Highlands and Islands than crofts and cottages. Yet, in MacLean's vision, the lush beauty of Screapadal is of course problematized by history which brings forward the question of the difficult relationship between the moral and the aesthetic. From the opening lines, the beauty of Screapadal is emphasized, but the poem makes it clear that the calm "inviolable" beauty of the place, like the beauty of the Big House, results from ugly deeds that complicate and prevent the enjoyment of it, just as the serene descriptive passages are constantly undermined by references to past and future catastrophes. As in "Dàn XXXVII." in *Dàin do Eimhir*, the physical beauty of a person or a place seems to be inseparable from ethical issues: and the ethical modifies the perception of the physical.

"Sgreapadal," in Burnett's words a "scathingly ironic contemporary poem," a pronouncedly political piece of writing, with direct claims about past iniquities and concerns about possible disasters that are yet to come.²⁷ The connection between the Clearances and nuclear war may seem implausible and strained, but this attempt to link the history of the Gàidhealtachd and the world, the past problems with the present ones, is a strategy characteristic of MacLean's writing in general. MacLean's second Clearance poem focused on a ruined Raasay township is a disquieting piece of writing: not as fortunate in execution as its famous predecessor, but ambitious, daring, and full of unexpected developments. Its uncompromising bleakness is arguably more difficult to like than the redemptive vision of "Hallaig" and definitely more difficult to romanticize, but seems to be more akin to MacLean's other works.

The small corpus of MacLean's Clearance poems shows both versatility of approach and some prevailing concerns. In "An Cuilithionn," the Skye and Raasay Clearances, symbolised by figures from regional history, selected events and places, serve as the starting point for a broad vision of a world-wide struggle for social justice, coloured by MacLean's then political sympathies. In "Hallaig," the focus is on personal memory and the power of subjective consciousness to reverse historical trauma by means of creative imagination. "'Tha na beanntann gun bhruidhinn'" takes in the whole of Gaelic Scotland and stresses the danger of immense culture loss brought about by the Clearances and their weakening of the Gaelic language. "Sgreapadal" makes daring parallels between the evictions and the threat of nuclear destruction on the basis of spatial connections and the

²⁷ Burnett, 18.

conviction that the same greed motivates both the nineteenth century evictions and the experiments in atomic weapons. Especially in “An Cuilithionn” and “Sgreapadal,” there is a pronounced effort to connect Highland history with Europe and the world. MacLean’s “other” Clearance poems will probably never reach the cult status of “Hallaig,” and, in terms of literary merit, that might be a just estimation. Nonetheless, remembering and analysing these other poems offers a more varied picture of MacLean’s engagement with Highland history and of modern Gaelic writing about historical memory and trauma.

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