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A REVISION OF POWER: RELIGION AND COMMUNITY IN FIONN MAC COLLA'S *AND THE COCK CREW*

Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell

Fionn Mac Colla's novel *As the Cock Crew* (1945), centred on a Highland minister teaching his parishioners to submit to the will of God during the Clearances, might seem one of the clearest examples of Crawford Gribben's thesis. Alan Bold, while alert to Mac Colla's literary ability, nonetheless sees him as sacrificing "splendid gifts for narrative and character-creation on the altar of his anti-Calvinist concerns."¹ The novel's harrowing account of the Clearances and scathing indictment of those in charge of evictions also includes sardonic character-sketches of the protagonist's fellow ministers colluding in the evictions from corrupt self-interest. Through the middle part of the novel, and the evictions, Mac Colla's central character, the parish minister Maighstir Sachairi, his initial protests seeming powerless, is grimly determined to persuade his parishioners, and himself, that their suffering is a Divine judgement, requiring not just submission, but ever stricter adherence to the injunctions of the kirk, and clearer rejection of an older Gaelic-speaking, though not explicitly Catholic, culture of poetry and song and kinship.

In the opening of the novel, however, unlike his fellow ministers, Sachairi is an eloquent and prophetic voice when the factor and military threaten to start firing into the assembled crofters:

My brethren yonder profess to see in this the avenging hand of God.... It is no' my place to be putting my brethren right, ao I will say therefore that it *may* be the judgment of God. But I will say further and on the other hand that it may *not*. And if it is no' the judgment of God, Maister Byars, then it can be nothing more not the oppressions of men....

Maister Byars! There is one God abune us.... He has bestowed a flock into my keeping. And if wolves break through the fold, I

¹ Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London: Longman, 1983), 200. Cf. also Bold's "And the Cock Crew," in *Essays on Fionn Mac Colla*, ed. David Morrison (Thurso: Caithness Books, [1973]), 38-45.

am Saichairi Wiseman, the servant of Jesus Christ—not of men.
He has given into my care the orphan and defenceless. In the day
of bloody men I will be their protector!²

On that day, he is indeed successful in preventing bloodshed. Moreover, as the novel proceeds Sachairi comes to believe he has sinned in his acceptance of the Clearances, and that he has failed his flock, and Mac Colla's portrayal of his repentance draws strongly on protestant, even Calvinist, ways of thinking that repay closer attention. The story Mac Colla tells is not of an irredeemably-wicked Calvinist ogre, but, in Isobel Murray and Bob Tait's phrase, of "a good man genuinely in terrible doubt."³ That doubt is not just about the response needed to the Clearances, but about his own salvation. The novel is in many ways a conversion narrative, the struggle of someone who has repressed his conscience and sinned against the light he has been given.

Despite its historical reference, *And the Cock Crew* treats history more as myth and parable than as documentary. When Mac Colla wrote the novel in the 1930s, he was writing not a literal account of the Kirk's role in one historical tragedy but a composite of successive historical periods. His portrait of the Highland minister certainly draws upon the role of the established kirk during the Sutherland Clearances of 1814-1820, but also in its underlying emotional structure on the exodus of ministers from the Establishment and their manses during the Disruption in the 1840s, on the Free Kirk's role in the Crofters' Wars of 1881-1886, on Mac Colla's own experience in the mid-1920s, in his first teaching post, at Laide, Wester Ross, aged just nineteen, and on social despair and the seeming irrelevance of the Kirk in 1930's Scotland. When he wrote it, he was himself homeless: he wrote the novel "in snatches," initially while living rough, and when he stayed with a schoolteacher-friend friend in Inversadil, and wrote at night in the schoolroom, the suspicion of the Wee Frees forced him to move on.⁴ The result is quite a complex layering of history and personal experience.

Nor was Mac Colla himself as orthodox, politically or religiously, as one might assume from a Catholic, a Gaelic speaker, and an early protégé of Hugh MacDiamid. Though his father Donald MacDonald, was a Gaelic speaker from Inverness, Tom MacDonald had been born in Montrose, his

² Fionn Mac Colla, *And the Cock Crew* (orig. Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1945; Edinburgh: Canongate, 1995).

³ Isobel Murray and Bob Tait, *Ten Modern Scottish Novels* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), 57.

⁴ Fionn Mac Colla, "Mein Bumpf," in *Essays on Fionn Mac Colla*, ed. David Morrison (Thurso: Caithness Books, 1973), 11-30 (25).

parents were Plymouth Brethren, he taught for several years in the United Free Church College in Palestine, and it was not till the 1930s that he converted to Catholicism. Later in life he wrote that “the key question, ... whether or not I *am* a Catholic” is “not at all as easy to answer as it seems.”⁵ He had always been an outsider to conventional or institutional religion, commenting in his autobiography:

I sometimes regard myself as fortunate to have been brought up a Plymouth Brother: because in that way while being enlightened as to what Evangelical Protestantism was, through having to suffer all its rigours, I at the same time grew up outside the Kirk and indeed in a sort of contempt for it, as a sort of Congregation of the Partially Enlightened.⁶

Mac Colla had strong views and strong commitments: in Robert Crawford’s phrase, he “wrote with a convert’s fervour.”⁷ Yet the breadth of his religious background added a complexity to his novel that does not always get adequate attention.

In many ways, the protagonist Maighstir Sachairi represents the Kirk as a repressive influence, not only in the time of the Clearances, but into MacColla’s own, in line with MacColla’s other writings. In other ways, however, the novel significantly departs from this trope, creating a sympathetic character who will eventually undergo a religious transformation. This self-understanding comes about most crucially through his exchange with the poet Fearchar, non-clerical representative of Gaelic culture, whose authority had been minimized by the arrival of Sachairi decades before. Mac Colla patterns the exchange between the two men, not in general conversation, but on a paradigm of religious authority and instruction, the question-and-answer of the catechism, to reverse the power structure, not just between two men but also between the two cultures that they represent.

Maighstir Sachairi is stern with the people whom he shepherds; his expectations are intense and unrelenting. The roots of this sternness are explained in a death vision near the novel’s end, a flashback to his boyhood. In this vision, the young Sachairi broke the Sabbath by playing with his dog. “He became afraid, with the fear not of earthly things, but of

⁵ Mein Bumpf,” 18: “To some Leon Bloy or G.K.C. I could reply with an enthusiastic affirmative. On the other hand to, say, a typical North of Ireland Protestant the only truthful reply would be, Not on your life! or words to that effect.”

⁶ Fionn Mac Colla, *Too Long in This Condition* (Thurso: Caithness Books, 1975), 33.

⁷ Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007; repr. 2009), 580.

one seeing Eye" (173-74). When he returned home to find everything the same, he experienced a wonderful fear, but the wonderful nature of it was short lived as still "no sudden awful thing" had taken place. He believed his father must know his wrongs, and "He went and stood right in front of his father, where he was BOUND to notice him. His father gave him no more than a half-glance, half-said his name, abstractedly, and went on reading . . ." (174). His fear continued to grow until he was alone in his bed at night: "Now it was the moment he had dreaded: —in the dark, alone with his sin—and that Eye!" (174). Because his father had not punished him, the child felt himself lost. This vision ends with "the thought":

Christ had come; while he was sleeping Christ had come into the air and all the household had risen up and flown to meet Him—He WAS alone—never to have a chance to be friends again with God—to make up for his sin by always pleasing Him, all his life—lost! . . . lost! . . . (174).⁸

In his young mind, if he had experienced human punishment, then his soul would have been prepared for the coming of Christ, and he would not have been left behind. Although he woke the next morning to find that the rest of the family had not journeyed to Heaven in the middle of the night, clearly he did not lose the fear of damnation. He continues to act with this principle as he guides his people; the severer their lives on earth, the more they are assured a place in Heaven.

Stern though he is, Sachairi's relationship to his people is rooted in love and responsibility. He begins the novel out-of-step with his fellow ministers. Early in the narrative, referring to the forced removal of the people, he says,

I had doubts about this business frae the start; and I wouldna be seeming to approve the affair afore my doubts were puttin at rest. I preferred to bide where ye might expect one of my calling to bide in a time of trouble ... among his people (15).

His attitude sets him in sharp contrast to his fellow ministers, who tell their own parishioners to submit to the clearings as the retribution of God for their sin: "What would you do, O people? Would you resist God's judgement? Submit! Submit! Before a worse thing befall you!" (5). Sachairi's people respect and trust him, and he is worthy of their devotion.

However, first his attitude and then his actions shift, leading him also to see the Clearances as punishment from God. When a young girl who

⁸ This passage, echoing a Victorian eschatology that developed some time after the Sutherland clearances, suggests that the portrait of Sachairi's boyhood incorporates memories of Mac Colla's own upbringing.

was “the very aspect of purity and innocence” confesses she is pregnant (23), Sachairi is unable to see the community as he had before her revelation. After his conversation with the girl, he perceives his view of the community to be sinful. He now believes that the natural beauty and harmony of the community that he had loved had appeared beautiful only because he had an unregenerate mind that could not “help but be forever and unalterably in direct opposition to God, in whose eyes the beauty of earthly forms is by Sin turned into a loathing” (28). He had previously been able to defend his people against Byars and the other ministers because he had believed in his own righteousness and that of his people; now, he no longer has confidence in his earlier perceptions.

His new stance, however, does not go unchallenged, notably by the poet Fearchar, a community leader since before Saigari became minister. The extended exchange between the two men is recognized by critics to be central to the novel. It opens the second half of the novel, and, as F. R. Hart suggests, acts as a marker between two visions, one theological and the other pagan and poetic.⁹ The exchange echoes the format of the Scottish catechism, but with Fearchar catechizing the minister, rather than the other way round.¹⁰ While catechisms were used by Catholics and episcopalists as well as in the reformed tradition, in Scotland the Shorter Catechism was central to religious education and pastoral instruction across the Kirk, and it had become especially important in the 18th and early 19th centuries in church and government efforts to presbyterianize the Gaelic-speaking Highlands.¹¹ The word “catechism” denotes the specific question and answer form used to instruct Christians in their faith, with the catechizer posing a set question, and being answered with a principle of the Christian religion. For example, the opening of the Shorter

⁹ Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: from Smollett to Spark*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 331.

¹⁰ Alan Riach has suggested that the exchange between Sachairi and Fearchar recalls “The Interrogation of the Old Men,” in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, where the poets Oisín and Caolilte, on returning to Ireland after 300 years, are questioned by St Patrick about Gaelic lore, though in Mac Colla it is the bard who questions the religious leader, and about religion, not Gaelic tradition: see *The National* (November 17, 2017): <https://www.thenational.scot/news/15666454.alan-riach-focuses-on-the-work-of-fionn-maccolla-and-eric-linklater/>.

¹¹ For an older account, see H.S. Graham, *Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1899), II: 171-173, and 156-157; on the Kirk’s efforts in the Highlands, see e.g. Christopher Smout, *A History of the Scottish People* (orig. London: Collins, 1969; London: Fontana, 1972), 433-437; Marcus Tanner, *The Last of the Celts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

Catechism begins "What is the chief end of man?" which is to be answered with, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."¹² All ages took part in the catechism, but it was typically used in the teaching of the young and in judging readiness for admission to the sacrament. The catechism, therefore, was a means to gain entrance into the community of faith. However, for MacColla, the catechism functions not to admit Sachairi to good standing with the Kirk but to persuade him out of it into a renewed understanding of his community.

Fearchar begins his catechizing "in a meek voice," asking "Can the will of God be known for certain in particular circumstances?" (98). In the context of their conversation, clearly Fearchar is trying to do more than merely to establish the general tenets of Christianity. His goal is not really to understand the beliefs of the minister, but to question how he has applied them to the evictions, and Sachairi is aware that Fearchar has an ulterior motive. At first, recognizing the complexity of the question and the dangers of an answer, Sachairi resists: "He is trying to catch me, he thought. I won't speak another word to him; and if he speaks to me I will not answer" (98). If he answers "no," then he questions the revelations of God and his own actions. If he says "yes," then he offers a definitive answer to his own turmoil regarding the character of his people and his choices concerning them. Although he has defended seeing the clearances as the retribution of God, he is not entirely convinced that he is right. However, in spite of his resolution not to answer, Sachairi responds affirmatively to Fearchar's question: "Certainly it [the will of God in particular circumstances] can be known" (98), and he continues to answer Fearchar's further questions as well. He is afraid, yet the form seems to compel him to respond.

After establishing that God's will can be discerned through the Bible, Fearchar moves deeper into his subject—and closer to his point—by questioning how the Bible can be interpreted. He asks, "But there might be different interpretations of the Word?," to which Maighstir Sachairi responds, "But only one true one" (98). This answer still does not make sense to the poet, and he asks how the one true interpretation can be known. Maighstir Sachairi tries to explain the place of the Holy Spirit in the Elect. Throughout this discussion, Sachairi continues to treat Fearchar with suspicion, "saying in his own mind: What is he leading up to? I should know this! He is going to trap me he has laid his plans, and he is going to trap me" (99). Fearchar's questions cut to the root issues of Maighstir Sachairi's unrest, drawing Sachairi further in to his own psyche.

¹² *The Shorter Catechism of the Reverend Assembly of Divines with the Proofs Thereof out of the Scriptures* (Glasgow: John Robertson, 1764), unpaginated.

This portion of the “catechism” ends with a question that Sachairi seems to be unable to answer: “The important question then seems to be whether the Spirit can be withdrawn from one of the Elect *without his knowing*” (100).

This question is the closing of the trap Sachairi believes Fearchar has set for him. The implicit condemnation by Fearchar of Sachairi’s actions hangs in these words, pointing to the possibility that Sachairi has not been guided by God at all because he is no longer part of the fellowship with God. Although he has not explicitly stated it, this is the question that has preoccupied him. He thinks he is right in acknowledging the punishment of God on the people and no longer resisting it, but his previous actions, which he also believed were right, stand in contrast to those of his present. This question elicits an extended silence from Sachairi, one that is so long “that it must have seemed to the other that he would not answer” (100). By the time Sachairi comes out of his meditation, Fearchar has changed the subject, allowing for the possibility of no answer. This surprises Maighstir Sachairi because “It never occurred to him not to answer, that he need not answer” (100).

This unanswered question concludes the most strongly catechism-like portion of their conversation. It is a question that cannot be answered; Sachairi is still coming to a full understanding of it. This reprieve from answering does not last, for before their conversation ends, Fearchar returns to this topic. The last time Fearchar presses the issue, “I only ask in order to know—is it possible even for one of the Elect to make a mistake and suppose that event to be according to the will of God while in truth it is opposed and contrary to God’s will?” (107), the minister seems to have reached a breaking point: “When at last Maighstir Sachairi spoke his voice was hardly recognisable, and so low that it almost whispered. ‘It ... is ... possible...’” (107). Coming to this point takes a physical toll on Sachairi, and he begins to have trouble processing time, space, and words.

The “catechism” is brief, but it returns Fearchar and the system he represents to power. MacColla points to this authority first through his novel’s title and epigraph. The title refers to the denial of Christ by Peter after he was taken into custody. MacColla supports this in the epigraph to the novel, from Luke 22, where Christ foretells Peter’s coming denial. The clear application is to the clergy as betrayers and to the people as Christ figures. Then, in this conversation, MacColla amplifies Fearchar’s power by yielding to him the status he held twenty years earlier, before the minister’s power was established. Traditional expectations would position Sachairi as the religious authority, yet here it is Fearchar who asks the questions and maintains control of the topic. He has redefined the role of

minister and is forcing Sachairi to prove he knows the tenets of his faith, which presently is a rather shaky proposition for the Presbyterian minister.

The rest of the conversation continues the question and answer form, yet it becomes less like a catechism. Although Fearchar's questions are not overtly intimate, the topics that he raises are in fact deeply personal for Sachairi, who grows increasingly emotional in his responses. Of particular note is Fearchar's reference to "the songs, and the music—the pleasure that can be taken in them..." (101). Readers are not yet aware why Sachairi responds so forcefully and emotionally: "'Vanity!' Maighstir Sachairi interrupted, abruptly and angrily. 'Sin and vanity! Such are not to be talked about!'" (101). Fearchar's calm, unperturbed response contrasts with the exclamations of Sachairi. Near the end of the novel, we find that Sachairi, now so rigid in stamping out frivolous pleasures, was once himself a poet. Again, Fearchar in his "ignorance" assumes a role of power and forces Sachairi to examine his own behavior and beliefs.

The exchange between Sachairi and Fearchar has significant impact on the minister. Ultimately, the preacher defends the people and is mortally injured during the eviction of the village. As he lies dying, he has two visions that return him—and the reader—to Fearchar's questions. Given his vocation, we expect that they will be of his future glory with God. Instead, we see visions, first of his youth and then of his childhood, that explain Sachairi's vehement rejection of the traditional pleasures of the people and his sternness with them. The second of the two visions was referenced earlier, but the first merits more extended consideration.

In this first vision, we learn not only that Sachairi once had good friends but also that he was once a poet, which engrossed him to the point of excluding other pursuits. The vision begins with Sachairi young and happy; he and his friend Jonathan are playing as young boys often do, taking risks and basking in the sun. Next, we see him as a youthful poet with his friend. The vision then changes a final time, and we see the death of Jonathan and the way his death changed Zachary:

At one sight of that shrouded form the horizon, which the Friendship of One had made boundless, rushed inward to his very feet. And all that he saw was a pool that slowly gathered there, and gathered, and began to run along the ground. Looking at it he heard again the sombre echoes of his footsteps in the street, and knew that they had been his own life, the old life, the life of his young youth, going backwards and away from him, forever. One man had been that youth, that life; he lay there; his setting was the night of lightsomeness. He had loved him more than his own soul, sinfully it seemed, not without idolatry; and how terribly the sin was punished: friendship might live henceforth, but no more the Friend—forever (172).

After the death of his friend, Zachary gives up his former life and those things in which he took pleasure: “One glimpse he had of that later scene—God’s hand accepted, the window opened and his trash of rhymes, the fruit of folly and vain years, blown by the wind among the roofs: then by a gesture that was final the window closed alike on youth and blithesomeness, and his turning away to duty” (172-73). Once, his life had been engrossed with poetry and personal relationships, both of which he has lost. One he lost to death and the other because he chose to turn his back on it. This new duty—religion—by its nature forces him to deny the value of his earlier life. The second vision, which was referenced earlier in this essay, couples with this one to explain his attitude and actions toward his people.

MacColla’s novel shows how the twentieth-century champions of Gaeldom reacted vehemently against the established Church of Scotland and what it represented to modern Scottish culture in their time by resurrecting its role in the Clearances. The accusations against the ministers of the Kirk in the 1810’s—squelching the local culture, damning the poor without offering any social salvation, abandoning the people while guarding their own social position—recurred against the establishment during the Disruption of the 1840s and against the churches’ class connections in the 1930s when Mac Colla was writing. Scott Lyall suggests that Sachairi’s “self-division” links to the historical theme as the psychic counterpart of “internal colonization.”¹³

But Sachairi’s religion seems more central to the novel than that. Because *And the Cock Crew* focuses on Sachairi’s personal struggle, the novel is not simplistically anti-Calvinist or anti-religious; indeed it is Sachairi’s religious commitment that makes him struggle. But religion in the novel seems more substantive than that. J.B. Caird, countering critics for whom “‘Calvinism’ is a convenient cliché, an Aunt Sally at which it is legitimate to hurl convenient abuse,” argued that Mac Colla’s novel provides “a profound and subtle analysis of the effects of Calvinism on a sensitive mind,” and even that it “ranks with Hogg’s very different *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* as one of the most searching treatments of Calvinism in fiction.”¹⁴

Mac Colla’s condemnation is directed not at God or Christian faith, but at institutions and their representatives that claim authority through God and faith but fail to lead with the tenets that should accompany this

¹³ Scott Lyall, “‘Hauntings of Celticism’: Fionn Mac Colla and the Myth of History,” *Literature and History*, 23.2 (Autumn 2014), 51-66.

¹⁴ J.B. Caird, “Fionn Mac Colla—The Twofold Heritage,” in *Essays on Fionn Mac Colla*, ed. Morrison, 31-37 (36).

authority. Mac Colla allows Fearchar to use the language and ritual of Sachairi's religion to restore ideological power to the oppressed. As Francis Russell Hart recognized, there is a paradox at the heart of the novel, in that "the powerfully-evoked theological vision is artistically dominant over the pagan, poetic vision in whose favor it is rejected."¹⁵ Such dualities invite reversal, and the rejection is less total than Hart took it to be. Through appropriating the role of catechist, Fearchar reclaims authority, but Sachairi goes through a transformation—or re-birth—of his own, acknowledging his failure and weakness and recovering belief in truth and beauty and by extension in the people he has served. Ultimately, he experiences his own restoration to the community and returns to a purer version of faith, one that falls outside the contamination of political and economic power. At his end, his death is a pure one, that of a life laid down for his friends.

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¹⁵ Hart, *The Scottish Novel*, 331.