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**EADAR CANAAN IS GARRABOST
(BETWEEN CANAAN AND GARRABOST):
RELIGION IN DERICK THOMSON'S LEWIS POETRY**

Petra Johana Poncarová

Since the Scottish Reformation of the sixteenth-century, the Protestant, Calvinist forms of Christianity have affected Scottish life and have become, in some attitudes, one of the “marks of Scottishness,” a “means of interpreting cultural and social realities in Scotland.”¹ However treacherous and limiting such an assertion of Calvinism as an essential component of Scottish national character may be, the experience with radical Presbyterian Christianity has undoubtedly been one of the important features of life in the Gaelic-speaking areas in the Highlands and Islands. This was true especially after the Disruption of 1843 and the formation of the Free Church of Scotland, when almost five hundred ministers resolved to break away from the Established Church to escape the system of patronage by means of which “local dignitaries could ‘intrude’ ministers into congregations against the wishes of the people and the judgement of presbyteries.”² As Roderick MacLeod points out, support in the Highlands for the break with the Establishment was almost absolute.³

¹ Christopher Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 15. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

² Roderick MacLeod, “Free Church of Scotland,” *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, ed. Derick Thomson (Glasgow: Gairm, 1983), 86-87. For a detailed account of the religious situation in the Gàidhealtachd, see Allan W. MacColl, *Land, Faith, and the Crofting Community: Christianity and Social Criticism in the Highlands of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

³ Roderick MacLeod, as in n. 2, 87. T. M. Murchison lists the following phenomena as possible causes of this success: “the effect of religious revivals; the increasing alienation between people and clergy, who too often seemed indifferent to the agrarian injustices of the time; an upsurge of enthusiasm for a cause after the century of repression (since 1746); rack-renting, evictions, clearances, emigration and abject poverty; a resurgence of the old spirit of loyalty to a leader (formerly a

Fifty years later, in 1893, the religious map of the Highlands and Islands became even more complex when there was a split within the Free Church, with the more resolutely Calvinist or Reformed side forming the Free Presbyterian Church.⁴ In John MacInnes's summary,

the Evangelical Movement swept through the Highlands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and wrought a fundamental transformation in the life of the tolerant, structurally Calvinist, spiritually lax Established Church of Scotland in the Gàidhealtachd. Those were the bitter years of the Clearances when the chaos that the break-up of every traditional society produces was intensified beyond endurance in the bewilderment of a people attacked by its own natural leaders. This broken community eagerly accepted the demands of a passionate and uncompromising faith. Here was a new dialectic, powerful enough to replace the deep loyalties of the traditional order. It was theology that now supplied an identity, and a world view of history, partly in millenarian terms.⁵

Since their establishment, the stricter congregations within Lewis Presbyterianism have aroused strong emotions. In popular consciousness, they are often seen negatively, as joy-killing institutions, opposed to the traditional Gaelic culture and arts, forcing all life to freeze on Sundays by demanding strict observance of the Sabbath, and, by focusing on the afterlife, allegedly undermining resistance to injustices committed against the Gaelic communities. At the same time, because preaching was in Gaelic, it was the churches that ensured the continuity of Gaelic prose; for some time the Church was the only institution where Gaelic was treated “not as if it were a dialect but as a language, and used as a medium of exposition on a par with any other language in that context.”⁶

When one recalls modern Gaelic poets addressing the issues of religion in their native communities, one would probably think first of Iain Crichton Smith (Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn) and his analysis of his Free Church upbringing in Lewis and its disturbing psychological effects, or of Sorley MacLean (Somhairle MacGill-Eain), raised in the Free Presbyterian

chief, now a popular preacher”): T. M. Murchison, “The Disruption,” in *The Companion to Gaelic Scotland*, 63.

⁴ On the cultural and ethnic as well as theological factors in this split, see James Lachlan Macleod, *The Second Disruption: The Free Church in Victorian Scotland and the Origins of the Free Presbyterian Church* [Scottish Historical Monographs Series] (Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

⁵ John MacInnes, “A Radically Traditional Voice: Sorley MacLean and the Evangelical Background,” *Cenrastus*, 7 (1981-82), 14-17; reprinted in *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal: Selected Essays of John MacInnes*, ed. Michael Newton (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2010).

⁶ MacInnes, “Religion in Gaelic Society,” *Dùthchas nan Gàidheal*, 426.

Church on Raasay, and his uncompromising statements on the church's hypocritical approach to the suffering of the common people in his poem "Ban-Ghàidheal" ("A Highland Woman") and his rejection of the doctrine of predestination in "Tìodhlacadh sa Chlachan" ("Funeral in Clachan").

Derick Thomson (Ruaraidh MacThòmais, 1921-2012) is not as commonly associated with writing about religion, and yet the topic surfaces frequently in his work and is especially prominent in his unjustly neglected, magnificent late sequence "Àirc a' Choimhcheangail" (The Ark of the Covenant), where religion in Lewis is the main focus.

Thomson was born in Lewis into a family that adhered to the established Church of Scotland. When Thomson was growing up, Presbyterians on Lewis might be Free Church, Free Presbyterian, or Church of Scotland. All were protestant and, in the broad sense, evangelical, though they differed in the rigour of their Calvinist orthodoxy and of the lifestyle they required of church members and expected in the wider community. His father James Thomson (Seumas MacThòmais, 1888-1971), himself an acclaimed Gaelic writer and activist, even served as Elder and Presbytery clerk, but those offices did not prevent him from attending ceilidhs and enjoying a respected position in the part of the community more inclined towards the traditional folk culture.⁷ According to Thomson, his parents were comfortable in their faith and valued it, but there was apparently no oppressive atmosphere.⁸ Thomson commented on the religious aspect of his upbringing in an interview:

I remember as a teenager, probably as a fairly young teenager, becoming sceptical of religious attitudes, particularly of the narrower religious attitudes. In a place like Lewis, where you have several Presbyterian sects, some are particularly narrow, indeed almost vicious, and that aspect of things struck me as preposterous at a fairly early age. I remember arguing with some of my relatives.⁹

In the same interview, he adds jokingly that, as a young boy, he had a vision of becoming a minister, inspired by the profession of a favourite uncle who was a clergyman, but that calling was soon supplanted by an urge to become a bus driver.¹⁰ While studying at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, during a period of religious revivals in Lewis, Thomson faked

⁷ Christopher Whyte, "Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais", *Glaschu: Baile Mòr nan Gàidheal / Glasgow: City of the Gaels*, ed. Sheila Kidd (Glasgow: Department of Celtic, University of Glasgow, 2007), 248.

⁸ Derick Thomson, "A Man Reared in Lewis," *As I Remember: Ten Scottish Authors Recall How Writing Began for Them*, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London: Robert Hale, 1979), 125.

⁹ Christopher Whyte, "Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais," 247.

¹⁰ Whyte, "Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais," 247.

such a revival and pretended to have “seen the light” in order to frighten a classmate. When he was asked in a Religious Instruction class to recite a psalm, he requested permission to do so in Gaelic, reciting instead an extract from Duncan Bàn MacIntyre’s famous poem “Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain” (“Praise of Ben Dorn”) which has no religious agenda whatsoever and extols the beauties of Highland landscape.¹¹

As Thomson was not himself raised in one of the stricter churches, but in the relatively moderate Church of Scotland, and was not a believer, he writes about Calvinist religion from a distance, as an observer, and focuses on it as a social and historical, rather than theological, force. In an interview with John Blackburn, he sums up his contradictory feelings towards the evangelical religion in the Gàidhealtachd:

Throughout my life I’ve been critical of certain aspects of the teaching, and of the character of the churches in the Highlands, and in the Islands especially. But I have been powerfully drawn to some features of the religious culture. There’s no doubt at all in my mind that, at its best, that culture helps to mould a strong and thoughtful and caring character among people. I look back with the greatest of affection on some of the church people that I knew. But certainly some of the activity of the churches seemed to me to be totally destructive, and this was particularly true of the “Free” churches—less so of the Church of Scotland. I’m thinking of their condemnation of the local culture, poetry and song and music and dance and all kinds of secular activities, most of which were perfectly harmless.... The evangelical religion arrived somewhat late in Lewis, but we have accounts from the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century of evangelical ministers stamping as hard as they could on the local culture. Ordering people to break their fiddles and break their pipes and stop singing vain songs.¹²

In Thomson’s poetry, religion as theme and source of vocabulary and imagery first surfaces in his second collection *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* (“Between Summer and Autumn,” 1967), in poems such as “Na Fir Bhèige” (“The Lying Ones”) and “Srath Nabhair” (“Strahnaver”). It becomes more prominent in his third collection, *An Rathad Cian* (“The Far Road,” 1970), which is at the same time Thomson’s love-song to his native island and his farewell to it, an attempt to be purged of the obsession with Lewis and also to record the experience of living there. The whole sequence is steeped in religious imagery, and not only Christian. The collection is dedicated to Lewis, “mar thiodhlac do eilean m’ àraich,

¹¹ Derick Thomson, “A Man Reared in Lewis,” 131-132.

¹² John Blackburn, interview with Derick Thomson, *Hardy to Heaney: Twentieth Century Poets: Introductions and Explanations*, ed. John Blackburn (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1986), 162.

Leòdhas” (“as an offering to the island of my upbringing, Lewis”), and in the first poem, “An Uilebheist” (“The Monster”), the island is hailed as a monster arising from the sea and there are various hints to pagan worship. The sequence also employs images related to the Middle and Far East, including a prayer wheel, a minaret, and the bank of the Ganges, in poems “Bha Do Shùilean Ciùin” (“Your Eyes Were Gentle, That Day”), “Stèidhichean Làidir” (“Lewis”), and “An Ceann Thall” (“The Far Side”). Throughout *An Rathad Cian*, Thomson both examines the strong association of Lewis with Presbyterianism and undermines this connection by suggesting that all varieties of Protestantism arrived relatively late in the islands history, and so may be perceived as something foreign and imposed.

For instance, in the poem “Na Freiceadain” (“The Watchmen”), the speaker names several specific places in Lewis, including Thomson’s native Bayble, Pabail, which brings to the speaker’s mind an image of local priests singing mass in Latin, for the place name in Old Norse means a priest’s dwelling. In the interview, Christopher Whyte asked Thomson whether he had enjoyed bringing specifically Catholic references into a Lewis poem, and the poet assured him that it gave him “great pleasure to call the Free Kirkers and what-not of Bayble sagart.”¹³ There is also a mention of a nun in relation to a place where there used to be a nunnery in Uig (in the poem “Obair na h-Iolaire”), and various other hints reminding the strictly Presbyterian island of its suppressed Catholic and even pagan past.

One of the most well-known and striking poems with a religious topic in the collection is “Am Bodach-Ròcais” (“The Scarecrow”). The poem describes a situation when a dark man, an evangelical minister or preacher, arrives to a ceilidh house where people are sitting round the fire and engaging in traditional community amusements. The image of the minister draws on the long tradition of portraying representatives of evangelical churches in the Highlands as sinister, ominous black figures who kill all joy.¹⁴ The poem uses a series of substitutions to describe the transformation of Lewis society under the influence of evangelical religion:

An oidhch’ ud
thàinig am bodach-ròcais dhan taigh-chèilidh:
fear caol àrd dubh
is aodach dubh air.
Shuidh e air an t-sèis

¹³ Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais,” 249; sagart, “priest.”

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of this established image, see Donald Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows: the Churches and Gaelic Culture in the Highlands since 1560,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 14 (1996): 3-22.

is thuit na cairtean às ar làmhan,
 bha fear a siud
 ag innse sgeulachd air Conall Gulban
 is reodh na faclan air a bhilean.
 Bha boireannach 'na suidh' air stòl
 ag òran, 's thug e 'n toradh às a' cheòl.¹⁵

That night

the scarecrow came into the ceilidh-house:

a tall, thin black-haired man

wearing black clothes.

He sat on the bench

and the cards fell from our hands.

One man

was telling a folktale about Conall Gulban

and the words froze on his lips.

A woman was sitting on a stool,

singing songs, and he took the goodness out of the music.

The poem has an almost filmic quality to it: the moment the black figure enters the cosy house, everything freezes, cards fall down, and the chatter dies out. In spite of the derogatory title of the scarecrow, the man's presence is powerful and transformative—the music loses its goodness, all the activities cease. Yet the dark man not only takes away, but also gives, and the gifts prove destructive:

Ach cha do dh'fhàg e falamh sinn:
 thug e òran nuadh dhuinn,
 is sgeulachdan na h-àird an Ear,
 is sprùilleach de dh'fheallsanachd Geneva,
 is sguab e 'n teine à meadhon an làir
 's chuir e tùrlach loisgeach nar broillichean.¹⁶

But he did not leave us empty-handed:

he gave us a new song,

and tales from the Middle East,

and fragments of philosophy from Geneva,

and he swept the fire from the centre of the floor

and set a searing bonfire in our breast.

The strength of the poem lies in the striking visual image it conveys and also in the ironic correlations between the traditional folk culture and the imported culture of evangelical Christianity: the richness of Gaelic songs is replaced by a new song, which is an echo of Psalm 40, the tales of ancient kings and heroes by Biblical stories, and the community and its solidarity

¹⁵ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, 140-141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

by fragments of Calvinist philosophy.¹⁷ The word “sprùilleach” (crumbs, fragments or refuse) indicates that what the scarecrow brings is not even a proper philosophical system which would replace the traditional mind-set but debris which could have been twisted and misinterpreted on the way.

The final image of the change from the homely fire in the middle of the ceilidh house which drew the people together and provided light and warmth for the assembled community to the searing bonfires of fear in the breast of each individual, a divisive flame of fanaticism, is an especially powerful one.¹⁸ As Meek puts it, “the scarecrow destroys the collective conscience of the community, and puts the weight of responsibility on the individual conscience,” and suggests that the bonfire evokes the well-established image of a fire used for burning musical instruments by converts seized by the evangelical zeal.¹⁹ The relation of Calvinism to the traditional culture also underpins another short poem “Ged a Thàinig Calvin” (“Although Calvin Came”).

Thomson's poem “Is Dubh a Choisich Thu Latha” (“Black You Walked Through the Day”) addresses Lewis in the guise of a pious woman mourning the deaths of the local men returning from the First World War who drowned on 1 January 1919 within the sight of home, when HMS *An Iolaire* was wrecked on a group of rocks (the Beasts of Holm). The title refers to the traditional song “Is Dubh a Choisich Mi 'n Oidhche” (“Black I Walked Through the Night”), a lament in which a man tells of coming to see the girl he loved, only to find that she is dead, and he pleads with God to prevent him from going mad with grief. A recording of Thomson's own rendition of the song survives, so the echo is surely intentional.²⁰

¹⁷ “Is òran nuadh do chuir am bheul,” Psalm 40, in *The Gaelic Psalms 1694* (Lochgilphead: James M. S. Annan, 1934) 68, noted in Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows,” 5. Meek comments (9-10) that traditional ceilidhs, which continued at least till the end of the nineteenth century, did not wither from church hostility but from such factors as clearance, famine, emigration, and spreading mass media.

¹⁸ Thomson himself commented on the poem: “warm and homely and natural and traditional things are being destroyed, or there are people who want to destroy them, looking at it from a different and, as I would see it, foreign, outside standpoint, and are quite prepared to sweep away that fire in the centre of the floor, taken as a symbol of that old society, the ceilidh-house society, are willing to sweep that away and to put a fire, but this time a destructive fire, right in people's breasts, the fire of Hell for example, Hellfire and the fear of it, loisgeach, a burning bonfire”: Whyte, “Interviews with Ruaraidh MacThòmais,” 277.

¹⁹ See Meek, “Saints and Scarecrows,” 5, 18 (discussing fiddle burning).

²⁰ Derick Thomson, “S Dubh a Choisich Mi 'n Oidhche,” recorded by Calum Iain Maclean, 13 December, 1949, now online at *Tobar an Dualchais*, track 21229: <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/21229/1>.

The disaster had a profound effect on the community, as it killed a substantial part of the male population in some areas of Lewis, and also presented a great challenge to the ideas of Calvinist theology:

Is thubairt thu gur h-e toil Dhè a bh' ann
 gun deach am bàta sin air na Biastan,
 a' diochuimhneachadh na chual' thu às a' chùbainn:
 gun robh Abharsair nan iomadh riochd a sàs unnad.²¹

*And you said it was God's will
 that the ship went on the Beasts,
 forgetting what you heard from the pulpit:
 that the Adversary of many guises was working on you.*

The woman might interpret the useless deaths of men who survived the world war only to perish on their native shore as God's decision, in order to make the terrible event more bearable, but this could, according to the speaker, actually be devil's talk.

A more humorous and tongue-in-cheek take on the island's religion is presented in the poem "A' Cluich air Football le Fàidh" ("Playing Football with a Prophet").

'Sann air fàidhean an Aonaidh a b' eòlaich mi,
 ach thuig mi, gu math tràth,
 gu robh fàidhean anns an Eaglais Shaoir cuideachd,
 fàidhean ann am Barraigh
 agus eadhon anns an Eilean Sgitheanach,
 agus beag air bheag thuig mi
 nach robh tròcair an Tighearna air a' cuingealachadh
 ri creud no ceàrnaidh
 no eadhon cànan.
 'S e 'm peacadh as motha
 a bhith càrnadh a' ghràis gu lèir 'na do chliabh fhèin.²²

*I was better acquainted with Church of Scotland prophets,
 but understood, quite young,
 that there were prophets in the Free Church too,
 prophets in Barra,
 and even in Skye,
 and bit by bit I came to know
 that the Lord's mercy is not confined
 by creed or region,
 or even language.
 The greatest sin
 is to pile all of the Grace in your own creel.*

²¹ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* 136-137.

²² *Ibid.*, 134-137.

The surprising discovery that there are prophets in other churches than the established one (even among the Catholic clergy), and in other places than Lewis, is a satirical hint at the sectarian strains in Highland religion and also to the rivalry between the individual islands.²³ The final conviction that the range and reach of divine grace are unlimited, expressed through the particular and very day-to-day image of the creel, as if mercy arrived into the world in the form of peat turfs, is at the same time amusing and poetically convincing.

Religious imagery and vocabulary is very strong also in Thomson's next collection, the dark and obscure volume of poems *Saorsa agus an Iolaire* ("Freedom and the Eagle," 1977), and it is strikingly used in connection to the nationalist struggle, for instance in the poems "Fuil" ("Blood") and "An Iolaire" ("The Eagle"). This volume contains the accomplished short poem "Leòdhas as t-Samhradh" ("Lewis in Summer"), that imagines the Creator sitting "aig a' bhuntàt 's a sgadan" ("at potatoes and herring") and notes that philosophy is superfluous in a small community where one pair of binoculars provides enough insight.

In terms of humour and distinctly Lewissian images associated with religion, that poem sets the scene for the great sequence "Àirc a' Choimhcheangail" ("The Ark of the Covenant"), which appeared five years later, as part of Thomson's collected poems *Creachadh na Clàrsaich* ("Plundering the Harp," 1982). The sequence consists of seventeen poems, all examining religion in Lewis, and although little known and overlooked by scholars, it arguably marks one of the peaks of Thomson's career as a poet. A "sequel" to the sequence, "Trì a' Fhuair a-mach às an Àirc" ("Three that Escaped from the Ark"), appeared in *Smeur an Dòchais / Bramble of Hope* (1991).

In "Àirc a' Choimhcheangail," Thomson develops themes suggested in his earlier poems about religion in Lewis, but he had never previously produced so complex, intimate and balanced a statement on the subject. In this sequence, he distances himself from Calvinist and evangelical religion, in accord with his conviction that this was something foreign and imposed, but at the same time he stresses the closeness between the Biblical characters and the worshippers in Lewis and the way Christian concepts

²³ Cf. Thomson's anecdote when interviewed: "The Lewis people regarded the inhabitants of any other island as strange and different... I remember many years ago, I was teaching in Aberdeen, and we had a Swiss student with us for a session, and I was telling, partly with my tongue in my cheek, but you know he was asking about conditions in the island, and was exaggerating this difference between Lewis and Harris, and he asked me quite seriously ...: 'And when did the wheel come to Harris?' So that was in the spirit of the kind of banter that used to go on." Whyte, "Interviews," 267.

and ideas have entered people's everyday life and way of thinking. Christianity in "Àirc a' Choimhcheangail" assumes a distinctly a Lewissian form and flavour and becomes simultaneously foreign and intensely homely.

Most of the poems address someone intimately; they are not a distanced commentary, but a dialogue with individual people, some of whom are named, some of whom remain anonymous. Other poems capture childhood memories and snapshots from religious life in Lewis. In its use of smells, sounds and images, the sequence exhibits the delicate sensuousness for which Thomson's best poetry is noted, especially the mature Lewis verse from *Eadar Samhradh is Foghar* and *An Rathad Cian*. The overall tone of the sequence is calm and affectionate, although at points Thomson's characteristic measured criticism and mischief surface. The poems show a deep appreciation of people who follow a creed that the speaker cannot or does not want to embrace for himself.

The poem "An Ceistear" ("The Catechist") is an example of how skilfully can Thomson set a convincing scene with just a few words and the situation, in all its seeming absurdity, comes across as very true, giving the impression of a real incident. The speaker meets another member of the community who starts to talk to him about religion.

"An dùil,"
 ars an duine caomh rium,
 "am bi sinn còmhla ri chèile
 anns an t-siorraidheachd?"
 Ceist fhuar ann am meadhon an t-samhraidh.²⁴

"Do you expect,"
said the kindly man to me,
"we shall be together
in eternity?"
A cold question in midsummer.

For the speaker, the question is a "cold" one, a sudden existential leap. He does not think about these matters often and does not feel certain about them, but the man who asks probably reflects on eternity every day; it is an essential part of his life.

Bha i na b' fhaisg aire-san,
 's bha e 'n geall oirr';
 bha an t-àit' ud
 dha mar dhachaidh nach do dh'fhidir e
 bho thùs òige,
 tlàth ann an suaineadh na cuimhne,
 seasgair ann am brù mac-meanmain,

²⁴ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, 270-271.

ach mireanach mar adhar earraich; (*ibid.*)

*It was closer to him
and he longed for it;
that place
was to him like a home he had not known
since early youth,
warm in the folds of memory,
sheltered in the imagination's womb,
but merry like a spring night-sky;*

Thomson associates the man's faith and his expectations of eternal life with warm and homely images, such as the fire and the hearth. The man does not live in dread of eternal damnation, but expects eternity as a lost home, a place of happiness and safety. Moreover, he does not question the right and ability of other people to reach it and does not try to convert them forcefully:

Bha e 'g iarraidh
gu lorgadh a chàirdean an t-slighe,
's gu ruigeadh iad air a socair fhèin;
cha robh e cur cabhaig orra,
chan eil dùil no cabhag anns an t-siorraidheachd (*ibid.*).

*He wanted
his friends to find the way,
and they would arrive in their own good time;
he did not hustle them,
there is neither expectation nor hustling in eternity.*

The last lines speak about tolerance and respect; there is no tendency to impose one's own belief on others, as is frequently associated with religion in Lewis. The poem ends with one of Thomson's great punch lines which combines gentle humour with depth of thought.

This double tendency, to make Christianity in Lewis seem strange and at the same time stress its deep rootedness, is also evident in the poem "Dòmhnall Rodaidh" ("Donald Roddy"), named after an acclaimed precentor who also appears in *An Rathad Cian* (poem "Anns an Eaglais").

Nuair a thogadh tu na sailm
bha sinn air ar giùlan
air na pongan slaodach sin
gu ionad eile:

*When you began the psalm
we were transported
on these leisurely notes
to another place:*

The first lines evoke the power of the unique unaccompanied Gaelic psalm singing: the precentor gives out the line and the congregation repeats it. They know the tune, but are able to embellish it and sing it any way they want, and the result is a startling and unique musical form indigenous to Gaelic Scotland. The precentor is able to transport the congregation to “another place” where religion is at the same time familiar and utterly alien:

leitheach slighe eadar Canaan is Garrabost,
 le craobhan iongantach a’ fàs às a riasg,
 gruth is òr-mheasan air a’ bhòrd,
 ainmean is àiteachan fad-às,
 daoine coigreach le plèid is currac orra,
 Rut ’s Naòmi am bun na lota,
 Iòseph a chaidh a dhìth air an Iolaire.²⁵

*half-way between Canaan and Garrabost,
 with marvellous trees growing in the peat,
 crowdie and oranges on the table,
 far-off names and places,
 foreign people wearing plaid and mutch,
 Ruth and Naomi at the foot of the croft,
 Joseph who was lost on the Iolaire.*

Thomson expresses this paradox by a series of paired images and a complex interplay between what is native and what is foreign: the people are taken half-way between Canaan, the Biblical promised land, and Garrabost, a township in the Point district of Lewis; marvellous trees, likely from the Middle East, grow out of the peat; there is local crowdie (fresh cheese) side by side with exotic imported oranges, a sort of fruit rarely to be had in Lewis when Thomson was young. Biblical characters are imagined as foreign people, but they wear typical Gaelic clothes such as plaids and mutches, and they are very much like neighbours on Lewis: Ruth and Naomi, the poor women who actually worked in the fields, stand at the foot of the croft; Joseph, the beloved lost son of Jacob, becomes one of the young men drowned during the wreck of *An Iolaire*. The poem also suggests that the lives, the joys and tragedies of the common Gaelic-speaking people in Lewis are nothing short of the Biblical stories.

In the poem “Iasgairian” (“They Themselves Were Fishermen”), the speaker makes a parallel between the apostles and the people whom they were trying to convert, and the Gaelic population in Lewis. The Gaels were, like the apostles, fishermen, and, like the first peasant converts to Christianity, were close to the earth, and acquainted with stones from their stony fields and blackhouses, and would naturally understand the power of

²⁵ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, 270-271.

someone who turns stones into bread and was able to move a big stone from his grave. "A' Bheatha Mhaireannach" ("The Everlasting Life") speaks about the title concept in connection with Gaelic history, listing causes that often shortened the life of the Gaels, such as illnesses common in the region, the Clearances, and the disproportionately high participation in the army, and painting a vision of the everlasting life is also thoroughly Gaelic, with fish and porridge, good company, and singing of psalms and hymns.

The closing poem in the sequence, "Ùrnaigh" ("Prayer"), expresses the paradox of the speaker's suspected need to believe, and his unwillingness to be caught doing so:

M' ùrnaigh
nach lorgar mi
là-eigin ann am èiginn
air mo ghlùinean ag ùrnaigh.²⁶

*My prayer
that I be not found,
one day, in extremity
on my knees, praying.*

The sequence does not, however, mark or chart Thomson's personal conversion. Rather, it shows an interesting combination of his critical approach to religion as a social phenomenon, and of its role in the history of Lewis, with his appreciation of and respect for the ordinary people who adhere to it, a dual perspective which is consistent with opinions Thomson expressed in interviews and essays. It also challenges the deeply rooted image of Evangelical Christianity as something innate to Lewis and the erroneous image of its people as bigoted, miserable, and intolerant. For Thomson, some of them are, some of them are not. His attempt to keep a balanced view of things, and his willingness to remain in doubt, are among the most important and characteristic aspects of Thomson's writing.

Engaging with Derick Thomson's poems on religion thus rewards the reader with several valuable new perspectives, on because preaching was in Gaelic, it was the churches that Thomson as a poet and thinker, on the cultural and spiritual climate in Lewis, and on the role of religion in Gaelic society, not to mention a number of unforgettable theological notions, including football-playing prophets and the Creator feasting on potatoes and herring.

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²⁶ Thomson, *Creachadh na Clàrsaich*, 282-283.